

Step 30 Concerning the Linking Together of the Supreme Trinity Among the Virtues

by St. John Climacus

St. John Climacus emphasizes the interconnectedness of faith, hope, and love, highlighting love as the greatest virtue that leads to spiritual ascent and union with God.

Scripture: Psalm 27:7, Proverbs 15:13, Romans 5:5, 1 Corinthians 13:13, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "Virtue And Love", "Divine Knowledge"

Description

St. John Climacus emphasizes the importance of faith, hope, and love as the pillars that bind and secure the union of all virtues, with love being the greatest as God Himself is called love. He describes love as a resemblance to God, an inebriation of the soul, a fountain of faith, an abyss of patience, and a sea of humility. St. John warns about the dangers of speaking about God without true understanding and the necessity of uniting one's feelings with God to gain divine knowledge.

Transcript

1. And now, finally, after all that we have said, there remain these three that bind and secure the union of all, faith, hope, love; and the greatest of these is love,¹⁰ for God Himself is so called.¹¹

2. And (as far as I can make out) I see the one as a ray, the second as a light, the third as a circle; and in all, one radiance and one splendour.

3. The first can make and create all things; the divine mercy surrounds the second and makes it immune to disappointment; the third does not fall, does not stop in its course and allows no respite to him who is wounded by its blessed rapture.

4. He who wishes to speak about divine love undertakes to speak about God. But it is precarious to expatiate on God, and may even be dangerous for the unwary.

9 I.e. faith, hope and love.

10 1 Corinthians xiii, 13.

11 1 John iv, 8, 16.

5. The angels know how to speak about love, and even they can only do this according to the degree of their enlightenment.
6. God is love. So he who wishes to define this, tries with bleary eyes to measure the sand in the ocean.
7. Love, by reason of its nature, is a resemblance to God, as far as that is possible for mortals; in its activity it is inebriation of the soul; and by its distinctive property it is a fountain of faith, an abyss of patience, a sea of humility.
8. Love is essentially the banishment of every kind of contrary thought for love thinks no evil.¹
9. Love, dispassion and adoption are distinguished as sons from one another by name, and name only. Just as light, fire and flame combine to form one power, it is the same with love, dispassion and adoption.
10. As love wanes, fear appears; because he who has no fear is either filled with love or dead in soul.
11. There is nothing wrong in representing desire, and fear, and care and zeal and service and love for God in images borrowed from human life. Blessed is he who has obtained such love and yearning for God as an enraptured lover has for his beloved. Blessed is he who fears the Lord as much as men under trial fear the judge. Blessed is he who is as zealous with true zeal as a well-disposed slave towards his master. Blessed is he who has become as jealous of the virtues as husbands who remain in unsleeping watch over their wives out of jealousy. Blessed is he who stands in prayer before the Lord as servants stand before a king. Blessed is he who unceasingly strives to please the Lord as others try to please men.
12. Even a mother does not so cling to the babe at her breast as a son of love clings to the Lord at all times.
13. He who truly loves ever keeps in his imagination the face of his beloved, and there embraces it tenderly. Such a man can get no relief from his strong desire even in sleep, even then he holds converse with his loved one. So it is with our bodily nature; and so it is in spirit. One who was wounded with love said of himself (I wonder at it): I sleep because nature requires this, but my heart is awake² in the abundance of my love.
14. You should notice, venerable brother, that the stag--the soul--having destroyed those reptiles,³ longs and faints⁴ for the Lord with the fire of love, as if struck by an arrow.
15. The effect of hunger is vague and indefinite; but the effect of thirst is intense and obvious to all, and indicative of blazing heat. So one who yearns for God says: My soul thirsts for God, the strong, the living God.⁵
16. If the face of a loved one clearly and completely changes us, and makes us cheerful, gay and carefree, what will the Face of the Lord not do when He makes His Presence felt invisibly in a pure soul?
17. Fear when it is an inner conviction of the soul destroys and devours impurity, for it is said: Nail down my flesh with the fear of Thee.⁶ And holy love consumes some, according to him who said: Thou hast ravished our heart, Thou hast ravished our heart.⁷ But sometimes it makes others bright and

1 1 Corinthians xiii, 5.

2 Song of Songs v, 2.

3 See above, p. 108, note 413. 4 Psalm lxxxiii, 2.

5 Psalm xli, 3.

6 Psalm cxviii, 120.

7 Song of Songs iv, 9.

joyful, for it is said: My heart trusted in Him and I have been helped; even my flesh has revived;¹ and: When the heart is happy the face is cheerful.² So when the whole man is in a manner commingled with the love of God, then even his outward appearance in the body, as in a kind of mirror, shows the splendour of

his soul. That is how Moses who had looked upon God was glorified.³

18. Those who have reached such an angelic state often forget about bodily food. I think that often they do not even feel any desire for it. And no wonder, for frequently a contrary desire knocks out the thought of food.

19. I think that the body of those incorruptible men is not even subject to sickness any longer, because it has been rendered incorruptible; for they have purified the inflammable flesh in the flame of purity. I think that even the food that is set before them they accept without any pleasure. For there is an underground stream that nourishes the root of a plant, and their souls too are sustained by a celestial fire.

20. The growth of fear is the beginning of love, but a complete state of purity is the foundation of divine knowledge.⁴

21. He who has perfectly united his feeling to God is mystically led by Him to an understanding of His words. But without this union it is difficult to speak about God.

22. The engrafted Word⁵ perfects purity, and slays death by His presence; and after the slaying of death, the disciple of divine knowledge is illumined.

23. The Word of the Lord which is from God the Father is pure, and remains so eternally. But he who has not come to know God merely speculates.

24. Purity makes its disciple a theologian, who of himself grasps the dogmas of the Trinity.

25. He who loves the Lord has first loved his brother, because the second is a proof of the first.

26. One who loves his neighbour can never tolerate slanderers, but rather runs from them as from fire.

27. He who says that he loves the Lord but is angry with his brother is like a man who dreams that he is running.

28. The power of love is in hope, because by it we await the reward of love.

29. Hope is a wealth of hidden riches. Hope is a treasure of assurance of the treasure in store for us.

30. It is a rest from labours; it is the door of love; it is the superannuation of despair; it is an image of what is absent.

31. The failure of hope is the disappearance of love. Toils are bound by it. Labours depend on it. Mercy encircles it.

32. A monk of good hope is a slayer of despondency; with this sword he routs it.

33. Experience of the Lord's gift engenders hope; he who is without experience remains in doubt. 34. Anger destroys hope, because hope does not disappoint,⁶ but a passionate man has no grace.⁷

1 Psalm xxvii, 7.

2 Proverbs xv, 13.

3 Cf. Exodus xxxiv; 2 Corinthians iii, 14.

4 Lit. 'theology'.

5 Cf. James i, 21. Another reading is: 'the consubstantial Word'. 6 Romans v, 5.

7 Or, 'an angry man is not beautiful' (Proverbs xi, 25).

35. Love bestows prophecy; love yields miracles; love is an abyss of illumination; love is a fountain of fire--in the measure that it bubbles up, it inflames the thirsty soul. Love is the state of angels. Love is the progress of eternity.

36. Tell us, fairest of virtues, where thou feedest thy flock, where thou restest at noon.¹ Enlighten us, quench our thirst, guide us, take us by the hand; for we wish at last to soar to thee. Thou rulest over all. And now thou hast ravished my soul. I cannot contain thy flame. So I will go forward praising thee. Thou rulest the power of the sea, and stillest the surge of its waves and puttest it to death. Thou hast humbled the proud--the proud thought--like a wounded man. With the arm of thy power thou hast scattered thy enemies,² and thou hast made thy lovers invincible.

But I long to know how Jacob saw thee fixed above the ladder. Satisfy my desire, tell me, What are the means of such an ascent? What the manner, what the law that joins together the steps which thy lover sets as an ascent in his heart?³ I thirst to know the number of those steps, and the time needed for the ascent. He who knows the struggle and the vision has told us of the guides. But he would not, or rather, he could not, enlighten us any further.

And this queen (or I think I might more properly say king), as if appearing to me from heaven and as if speaking in the ear of my soul, said: Unless, beloved, you renounce your gross flesh, you cannot know my beauty. May this ladder teach you the spiritual combination of the virtues. On the top of it I have established myself, as my great initiate said: And now there remain faith, hope, love--these three; but the greatest of all is love.⁴

A BRIEF EXHORTATION SUMMARIZING ALL THAT HAS BEEN SAID AT LENGTH IN THIS BOOK

Ascend, brothers, ascend eagerly, and be resolved in your hearts to ascend⁵ and hear Him who says: Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of our God, who makes our feet like hind's feet, and sets us on high places,⁶ that we may be victorious with His song.

Run, I beseech you, with him who said: Let us hasten until we attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,⁷ who, when He was baptized in the thirtieth year of His visible age, attained the thirtieth step in the spiritual ladder; since God is indeed love, to whom be praise, dominion, power, in whom is and was and will be the cause of all goodness throughout infinite ages. Amen.

1 Song of Songs I, 6.

2 Psalm lxxxviii, 9--10.

3 Psalm lxxxiii, 4.

4 1 Corinthians xiii, 13.

5 Cf. Psalm lxxxiii, 6.

6 Isaiah ii, 3; Psalm xvii, 34. 7 Ephesians iv, 13.

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