

Step 4 on Blessed and Ever-Memorable Obedience - Part 1

by St. John Climacus

The sermon emphasizes the importance of obedience in our lives, highlighting its role in our spiritual growth and development.

Scripture: Proverbs 28:13, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Philippians 2:8, James 4:7, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Obedience"

Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the virtues of obedience, humility, and self-denial in the journey of spiritual growth. He emphasizes the importance of detaching from worldly desires and submitting to the guidance of spiritual leaders, even in the face of insults and challenges. St. John highlights the significance of sincere confession, genuine love for others, and the practice of silence and mental discipline in cultivating a deeper relationship with God. He shares inspiring stories of monks who demonstrated unwavering faith, patience, and obedience, even in the midst of trials and temptations.

Transcript

1. Our treatise now appropriately touches upon warriors¹ and athletes of Christ. As the flower precedes the fruit, so exiles² either of body or will always precedes obedience. For with the help of

1 Gk. puktai, 'prizefighters'.

2 Exile appears to be essentially equivalent to detachment.

these two virtues, the holy soul steadily ascends to heaven as upon golden wings. And perhaps it was about this that he who had received the Holy Spirit sang: Who will give me wings like a dove? And I will fly by activity, and be at rest by contemplation and humility.¹

2. But let us not fail, if you agree, to describe clearly in our treatise the weapons of these brave warriors: how they hold the shield of faith in God and their trainer,² and with it they ward off, so to speak, every thought of unbelief and vacillation; how they constantly raise the drawn sword of the Spirit and slay every wish of their own that approaches them; how, clad in the iron armour of meekness and patience, they avert every insult and injury and missile. And for a helmet of salvation they have their superior's protection through prayer. And they do not stand with their feet together, for one is stretched out in service and the

other is immovable in prayer.

3. Obedience is absolute renunciation of our own life, clearly expressed in our bodily actions. Or, conversely, obedience is the mortification of the limbs while the mind remains alive. Obedience is unquestioning movement, voluntary death, simple life, carefree danger, spontaneous defence by God, fearlessness of death, a safe voyage, a sleeper's progress. Obedience is the tomb of the will and the resurrection of humility. A corpse does not argue or reason as to what is good or what seems to be bad. For he who has devoutly put the soul of the novice to death will answer for everything. Obedience is an abandonment of discernment in a wealth of discernment.

4. The beginning of the mortification both of the soul's desire and of the bodily members involves much hard work. The middle sometimes means much hard work and is sometimes painless. But the end is insensibility and insusceptibility to toil and pain. Only when he sees himself doing his own will does this blessed living corpse feel sorry and sick at heart; and he fears the responsibility of using his own judgment.

5. You who have decided to strip for the arena of this spiritual confession, you who wish to take on your neck the yoke of Christ, you who are therefore trying to lay your own burden on Another's shoulders, you who are hastening to sign a pledge that you are voluntarily surrendering yourself to slavery, and in return want freedom written to your account, you who are being supported by the hands of others as you swim across this great sea--you should know that you have decided to travel by a short but rough way, from which there is only one deflection, and it is called singularity.³ But he who has renounced this entirely, even in things that seem to be good and spiritual and pleasing to God, has reached the end before setting out on his journey. For obedience is distrust of oneself in everything, however good it may be, right up to the end of one's life.

6. When motives of humility and real longing for salvation decide us to bend our neck and entrust ourselves to another in the Lord, before entering upon this life, if there is any vice and pride in us, we ought first to question and examine, and even, so to speak, test our helmsman, so as not to mistake the sailor for the pilot, a sick man for a doctor, a passionate for a dispassionate man, the sea for a harbour, and so bring about the speedy shipwreck of our soul. But when once we have entered the arena of religion and obedience we must no longer judge our good manager⁴ in any way at all, even though we may perhaps see in him some slight failings, since he is only human. Otherwise, by sitting in judgment we shall get no profit from our subjection.

7. It is absolutely indispensable for those of us who wish to retain undoubting faith in our superiors to write their good deeds indelibly in our hearts and constantly remember them, so that when the demons sow among us distrust towards them, we may be able to silence them by what is preserved in our memory. For the more faith flourishes in the heart, the more alacrity the body has in service. But he

1 Psalm liv, 7.

2 Gk. *gymnastis*, the trainer of athletes. Here it refers to the spiritual director or superior

3 Or, 'self-rule', 'self-will', 'independence', 'setting your own pace'; Gk. *idiorrhymia*.

4 Lit. 'the one who arranges the contests or races, and sets the handicaps', hence, 'the president', 'umpire' or

'judge of the races'.

who has stumbled on distrust has already fallen; for all that does not spring from faith, is sin.¹ The moment any thought of judging or condemning your superior occurs to you, leap away from it as from fornication. Whatever you do, give that snake no licence, no place, no entry, no power; but say to that serpent: 'Listen, deceiver, I have no authority to judge of my superior, but he has been appointed to sit in judgment on me. It is not I who am to be his judge, but he is deputed to be mine.'

8. The Fathers have laid down that psalmody is a weapon, and prayer is a wall, and honest tears are a bath; but blessed obedience in their judgment is confession of faith, without which no one subject to passions will see the Lord.²

9. He who submits himself, passes sentence on himself. If his obedience for the Lord's sake is perfect, even if it does not seem perfect, he will escape judgment. But if he does his own will in some things, then although he considers himself obedient, he lays the burden on his own shoulders. It is good if the superior does not give up reproving him; but if he is silent, then I do not know what to say. Those who submit themselves in the Lord in simplicity run the good race without provoking the bile of the demons against themselves by their inquisitiveness.

10. First of all, let us make our confession to our good judge,³ and to him alone. But if he orders, then to all. Wounds displayed in public will not grow worse, but will be healed.

About a robber who repented

11. Terrible indeed was the judgment of a good judge and shepherd which I once saw in a monastery. For while I was there, it happened that a robber applied for admission to the monastic life. And that most excellent pastor and physician ordered him to take seven days of complete rest, just to see the kind of life in the place. When the week had passed, the pastor called him and asked him privately: 'Would you like to live with us?' And when he saw that he agreed to this with all sincerity, he then asked him what evil he had done in the world. And when he saw that he readily confessed everything, he tried him still further, and said: 'I want you to tell this in the presence of all the brethren.' But he really did hate his sin, and, scorning all shame, without the least hesitation he promised to do it. 'And if you like,' he said, 'I will tell it in the middle of the city of Alexandria.'

And so, the shepherd gathered all his sheep in the church, to the number of 230, and during Divine Service (for it was Sunday), after the reading of the Gospel, he introduced this irreproachable convict. He was dragged by several of the brethren, who gave him moderate blows. His hands were tied behind his back, he was dressed in a hair shirt, his head was sprinkled with ashes. All were astonished at the sight. And immediately a woeful cry rang out, for no one knew what was happening. Then, when the robber appeared at the doors of the church,⁴ that holy superior who had such love for souls, said to him in a loud voice: 'Stop! You are not worthy to enter here.'

Dumbfounded by the voice of the shepherd coming from the sanctuary (for he thought, as he afterwards assured us with oaths, that he had heard not a human voice, but thunder), he instantly fell on his face, trembling and shaking all over with fear. As he lay on the ground and moistened the floor with his tears, this wonderful physician, using all means for his salvation, and wishing to give to all an example of saving and effectual humility, again exhorted him, in the presence of all, to tell in detail what he had done. And with terror he confessed one after another all his sins, which revolted every ear, not only sins of the flesh,

natural and unnatural, with rational beings and with animals, but even

1 Romans xiv, 23.

2 Hebrews xii, 14.

3 I.e. priest-confessor.

4 Orthodox churches are divided into the narthex, the catholicon, and the sanctuary. In ancient times the unbaptized were admitted to the narthex but not to the catholicon. The robber was already in the narthex. He was halted not at the outer door but at the doors of the catholicon.

poisoning, murder and many other kinds which it is indecent to hear or commit to writing. And when he had finished his confession, the shepherd at once allowed him to be given the habit and numbered among the brethren.

12. Amazed by the wisdom of that holy man, I asked him when we were alone: 'Why did you make such an extraordinary show?' That true physician replied: 'For two reasons: firstly, in order to deliver the penitent himself from future shame by present shame; and it really did that, Brother John. For he did not rise from the floor until he was granted remission of all his sins. And do not doubt this, for one of the brethren who was there confided to me, saying: "I saw someone terrible holding a pen and writing-tablet, and as the prostrate man told each sin, he crossed it out with a pen." And this is likely, for it says: I said, I will confess against myself my sin to the Lord; and Thou hast forgiven the wickedness of my heart.¹ Secondly, because there are others in the brotherhood who have unconfessed sins, and I want to induce them to confess too, for without this no one will obtain forgiveness.'

13. I saw much else too that was admirable and worth remembering with that ever-memorable pastor and his flock. And a large part of it I shall try to bring to your knowledge also. For I stayed a considerable time with him, following their manner of life, and was greatly astonished to see how those earth-dwellers were imitating the heavenly beings.

14. In this flock they were united by the indissoluble bond of love; and what was still more wonderful, it was free from all familiarity and idle talk. More than anything else, they tried not to wound a brother's conscience in any way. And if anyone ever showed hatred to another, the shepherd put him in the isolation monastery, like a convict. And once when one of the brethren spoke ill of his neighbour to the shepherd, the holy man at once ordered him to be driven out, saying: 'I cannot allow a visible as well as an invisible devil in the monastery.'

15. I saw among these holy fathers things that were truly profitable and admirable. I saw a brotherhood gathered and united in the Lord, with a wonderful active and contemplative life. For they were so occupied with divine thoughts and they exercised themselves so much in good deeds that there was scarcely any need for the superior to remind them of anything, but of their own good will they aroused one another to divine vigilance. For they had certain holy and divine exercises that were defined, studied and fixed. If in the absence of the superior one of them began to use abusive language or criticize people or simply talk idly, some other brother by a secret nod reminded him of this, and quietly put a stop to it. But if, by chance, the brother did not notice, then the one who reminded him would make a prostration and retire. And the incessant and ceaseless topic of their conversation (when it was necessary to say anything) was the remembrance of death and the thought of eternal judgment.

16. I must not omit to tell you about the extraordinary achievement of the baker of that community. Seeing that he had attained to constant recollection² and tears during his service, I asked him to tell me how he came to be granted such a grace. And when I pressed him, he replied: 'I have never thought that I was serving men but God. And having judged myself unworthy of all rest,³ by this visible fire⁴ I am unceasingly reminded of the future flame.'

17. Let us hear about another surprising attainment of theirs. For not even in the refectory did they stop mental activity,⁵ but according to a certain custom, these blessed men reminded one another of interior prayer by secret signs and gestures. And they did this not only in the refectory, but at every encounter and gathering.

1 Psalm xxxi, 5.

2 Lit. consciousness; here it means God-consciousness.

3 **H**ēsychia, 'stillness', 'quiet', 'silence', 'peace'; also 'leisure', 'rest' (Latin otium). From this root is derived the

technical term 'hesychasm', the science and practice of contemplative prayer, and also 'hesychast', one who practises interior prayer.

4 'visible fire': i.e. the bakehouse fire.

5 'mental activity': Gk. noera ergasia, a common phrase for interior prayer.

18. And if one of them committed a fault, he would receive many requests from the brothers to allow them to take the case to the shepherd and bear the responsibility and the punishment. That is why this great man, on learning that his disciples did this, inflicted lighter punishments, knowing that the one punished was innocent. And he did not even inquire who had actually fallen into the blunder.

19. Could any hint of idle talk and joking exist among them? If one of them began a dispute with his neighbour, then another, passing by, assumed the role of penitent and so dissolved the anger. But if he noticed that the disputants were spiteful or revengeful, he would report the quarrel to the father occupying the second place after the superior, and prepare the ground for their mutual reconciliation before sundown. But if they continued obstinate, they would either be punished by being deprived of food until they were reconciled, or else be expelled from the monastery.

20. And it is not in vain that this laudable rigour is brought to perfection among them, for it bears and shows abundant fruit. And among these holy fathers many become proficient both in active life and spiritual insight, both in discernment and humility. And there was to be seen among them an awful and angelic sight: venerable and white-haired elders of holy beauty running about in obedience like children and taking a great delight in their humiliation. There I have seen men who had spent some fifty years in obedience. And when I asked them to tell me what consolation they had gained from so great a labour, some of them replied that they had attained to deep humility with which they had permanently repelled every assault. Others said that they had obtained complete insensibility and freedom from pain in calumnies and insults.

21. I have seen others of those ever-memorable fathers with their angelic white hair attain to the deepest innocence and to wise simplicity, spontaneous and God-guided. (Just as an evil man is somewhat double,

one thing outwardly and another inwardly, so a simple person is not something double, but something of a unity.)¹ Among them there are none who are fatuous and foolish, like old men in the world who are commonly called 'in their dotage'. On the contrary, outwardly they are utterly gentle and kindly, radiant and sincere, and they have nothing hypocritical, affected or false about them either in speech or character (a thing not found in many); and inwardly, in their soul, like innocent babes, they make God Himself and their superior their very breath, and the eye of their mind keeps a bold and strict watch for demons and passions.

22. The whole of my life, dear and reverend father and God-loving community, would be insufficient to describe the heavenly life and virtue of those blessed monks. But yet it is better to adorn our treatise and rouse you to zeal in the love of God by their most laborious struggles than by my own paltry counsels; for beyond all dispute the inferior is adorned by the superior.² Only this I ask, that you should not imagine that we are inventing what we write, for such a suspicion would detract from its value. But let us continue again what we were saying before.

About Isidore

23. A certain man called Isidore, of magistrate's rank, from the city of Alexandria, had recently renounced the world in the above-mentioned monastery, and I found him still there. That most holy shepherd, after accepting him, found that he was full of mischief, very cruel, sly, fierce and arrogant. But with human ingenuity that most wise man contrived to outwit the cunning of the devils, and said to Isidore: 'If you have decided to take upon yourself the yoke of Christ, then I want you first of all to learn obedience.' Isidore replied: 'As iron to the smith, so I surrender myself in submission to you, holy father.' The great father, making use of this comparison, at once gave exercise to the iron Isidore, and said: 'I want you, brother by nature, to stand at the gate of the monastery, and to make a prostration to

¹ The words in parenthesis are missing in some versions. ² Hebrews vii, 7.

everyone coming in or going out, and to say: "Pray for me, father; I am an epileptic." 'And he obeyed as an angel obeys the Lord.

When he had spent seven years there, he attained to deep humility and compunction. Then the glorious father, after the lawful seven years and the man's incomparable patience, judged him fully worthy to be numbered among the brethren and wanted to profess him and have him ordained. But Isidore through others and through my feeble intervention, implored the shepherd many times to let him finish his course as he was living before, vaguely hinting that his end and call were drawing near. And that was actually the case. For when his director had allowed him to remain as he was, ten days later in his lowliness he passed gloriously to the Lord. And on the seventh day after his own falling asleep, the porter of the monastery was also taken. For the blessed man had said to him: 'If I have found favour in the sight of the Lord, in a short time you also will be inseparably joined to me there.'¹ And that is what happened, in witness of his unashamed obedience and divine humility.

24. When he was still living, I asked this great Isidore what occupation his mind had found during his time at the gate. And the famous ascetic did not hide this from me, wishing to help me: 'In the beginning', he said, 'I judged that I had been sold into slavery for my sins; and so it was with bitterness, with a great effort, and as it were with blood that I made the prostration. But after a year had passed, my heart no longer felt sorrow, and I expected a reward for my obedience from God Himself. But when another year had gone by, I began to be deeply conscious of my unworthiness even to live in the monastery, and see

and meet the fathers, and partake of the Divine Mysteries. And I did not dare to look anyone in the face, but bending low with my eyes, and still lower with my thought, I sincerely asked for the prayers of those coming in and going out.'

About Laurence

25. Once as we were sitting together in the refectory, this great superior put his holy mouth to my ear and said: 'Do you want me to show you divine prudence in extreme old age?' And when I begged him to do so, the righteous man called from the second table one named Laurence, who had been about forty-eight years in the community and was second priest in the monastery. He came and made a prostration to the abbot, and took his blessing. But when he stood up, the abbot said nothing whatever to him, but left him standing by the table without eating. Breakfast had only just begun, and so he was standing for a good hour, or even two. I was ashamed to look this toiler in the face, for his hair was quite white and he was eighty years old. And when we got up, the saint sent him to the great Isidore whom we mentioned above to recite to him the beginning of the 39th Psalm.²

26. And I, like a most worthless person, did not miss the chance of tempting the old man. And when I asked him what he was thinking of when he was standing by the table, he said: 'I thought of the shepherd as the image of Christ, and I considered that I had not received the command from him at all, but from God. And so I stood praying, Father John, not as before a table of men, but as before the altar of God; and because of my faith and love for the shepherd, no evil thought of him entered my mind, for Love does not resent an injury.³ But know this, Father, that if anyone surrenders himself to simplicity and voluntary innocence, then he no longer gives the devil either time or place to attack him.'

About a bursar

27. God sent that just saviour of spiritual sheep under God another exactly like himself to be the bursar of the monastery; for he was chaste and temperate as no one else, and meek as very few are. Once the

1 I.e. just as they were joined at the gate.

2 Psalm xxxix begins: 'I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined to me and heard my cry.' 3 1 Corinthians xiii, 15.

great elder, for the edification of the others, pretended to get angry with him in church, and ordered him to be sent out before the time. Knowing that he was innocent of what the pastor accused him, when we were alone I began to plead the cause of the bursar before the great man. But the wise director said: 'And I too know, Father, that he is not guilty, but just as it would be a pity and wrong to snatch bread from the mouth of a starving child, so too the director of souls does harm both to himself and to the ascetic if he does not give him frequent opportunities to obtain crowns such as the superior considers he merits at every hour by bearing insults, dishonour, contempt or mockery. For three very serious wrongs are done: first, the director himself is deprived of the rewards which he would receive for corrections and punishments; secondly, the director acts unjustly when by virtue of that one person he could have brought profit to others, but does not do so; and thirdly, the most serious harm is that often the very people who seem to be most hard-working and patient, if left for a time without blame or reproach from the superior as people confirmed in virtue, lose the meekness and patience they previously had. For even land that is good and fruitful and fertile, if left without the water of dishonour, can revert to forest and produce the thorns of vanity, cowardice and audacity. Knowing this, that great Apostle sent word to Timothy: 'Keep at it, reprove, rebuke them in

season and out of season.¹

28. I disputed the matter with that true director, and reminded him of the infirmity of our race, and that the undeserved, or perhaps not undeserved, punishment may make many break away from the flock. Again that temple of wisdom said: 'A soul attached to the shepherd with love and faith for Christ's sake will not leave him even if it were at the price of his blood, and especially if he has received through him the healing of his wounds, for he remembers him who says: Neither angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor any other creature can separate us from the love of Christ.² But if the soul is not attached, bound and devoted to the shepherd in this way, then I wonder if such a man is not living in this place in vain, for he is united to the shepherd by a hypocritical and false obedience.' And truly this great man is not deceived, but he has directed, led to perfection and offered to Christ unblemished sacrifices.

About Abbacyrus

29. Let us hear and wonder at the wisdom of God found in earthen vessels. When I was in the same monastery, I was amazed at the faith and patience of the novices, and how they bore rebukes and insults from the superior with invincible fortitude, and some times even expulsion; and endured this not only from the superior but even from those far below him. For my spiritual edification I questioned one of the brothers called Abbacyrus who had lived fifteen years in the monastery. For I saw that almost all greatly maltreated him, and those who served drove him out of the refectory almost every day because the brother was by nature just a little too talkative. And I said to him: 'Brother Abbacyrus, why do I see you being driven out of the refectory every day, and often going to bed without supper?' He replied: 'Believe me, Father, my fathers are testing me to see whether I am really a monk. But they are not doing this in real earnest. And knowing the great man's aim and theirs, I bear all this without getting depressed; and I have done so now for fifteen years. For on my entry into the monastery they themselves told me that those who renounce the world are tested for thirty years. And rightly, Father John, for without trial gold is not purified.'

30. This heroic Abbacyrus lived in the monastery for two years after my coming there, and then passed to the Lord. Just before his death he said to the Fathers: 'I am thankful, thankful to the Lord and to you. For having been tempted by you for my salvation, I have lived for seventeen years without temptations from devils.' The just shepherd duly rewarded him and ordered him, as a confessor, to be buried with the local saints.

¹ 2 Timothy iv, 2. ² Romans viii, 58.

About Macedonius the archdeacon

31. I should be quite unjust to all enthusiasts for perfection if I were to bury in the tomb of silence the achievement and reward of Macedonius, the first of the deacons there. This man, so consecrated to the Lord, just before the feast of the Holy Theophany,¹ actually two days before it, once asked the pastor for permission to go to Alexandria for a certain personal need of his, promising to return from the city as soon as possible for the approaching festival and the preparation for it. But the devil, the hater of good, hindered the archdeacon, and though released by the abbot, he did not return to the monastery for the holy feast at the time appointed by the superior. On his returning a day late, the pastor deposed him from the diaconate and put him in the rank of the lowest novices. But that good deacon of patience and archdeacon of endurance accepted the father's decision as calmly as if another had been punished and not himself. And when he had spent forty days in that state, the wise pastor raised him again to his own rank. But scarcely a day had passed before the archdeacon begged the pastor to leave him in his former discipline and

dishonour, saying: 'I committed an unforgivable sin in the city.' But knowing that Macedonius was telling him an untruth and that he sought punishment only for the sake of humility, the Saint yielded to the good wish of the ascetic. Then what a sight there was! An honoured elder with white hair spending his days as a novice and sincerely begging everyone to pray for him. 'For', said he, 'I fell into the fornication of disobedience.' But this great Macedonius in secret told me, lowly though I am, why he voluntarily pursued such a humiliating course of life. 'Never', he assured me, 'have I felt in myself such relief from every conflict and such sweetness of divine light as now. It is the property of angels,' he continued, 'not to fall, and even, as some say, it is quite impossible for them to fall. It is the property of men to fall, and to rise again as often as this may happen. But it is the property of devils, and devils alone, not to rise once they have fallen.'

About a certain other brother

32. A brother who was the bursar of the monastery confided this to me: 'When I was young', he said, 'and was looking after cattle, I once had a very serious spiritual fall. But as it was never my habit to hide a snake in a hole in my heart, I caught it by the tail (and by the tail I mean the end of the business) and at once showed it to the physician. But with a smiling face, he struck me lightly on the jaw, and said to me: "Go, child, and continue your work as before, without being afraid in the least." And accepting this with flaming faith, in the course of a few days I received the assurance of my healing, and continued my way with both joy and fear.'

33. Every kind of creature, as some say, has its differences which distinguish it from others. So, too, in the company of the brothers there were differences both in success and in disposition. When their physician noticed that some liked to display themselves before people of the world who were visiting the monastery, then in the presence of such visitors he subjected them to extreme insults and gave them the most humiliating task, so that they began to beat a hasty retreat, and the arrival of secular visitors proved to be their victory. Then an extraordinary spectacle presented itself: vanity chasing herself away and escaping from people.

About Saint Menas

34. As the Lord did not wish to deprive me of the prayer of a holy father in the same monastery, a week before my departure He took to Himself a wonderful man called Menas who occupied the second place after the superior, and had lived fifty-nine years in the community fulfilling all the various offices. On the third day after the falling asleep of this holy man, when we had performed the customary rites over him, suddenly the whole place where the saint was resting was filled with

1 I.e. the feast of the Baptism of Christ, corresponding to some extent to the Western Epiphany.

fragrance. Then the great man allowed us to uncover the coffin in which he had been placed, and when this was done we all saw that fragrant myrrh was flowing like two fountains from his precious feet. Then that teacher said to all: 'Look! The sweat of his toils and labours have been offered as myrrh to God and truly accepted.'

The fathers of that place told us of many triumphs of this most saintly Menas, and amongst others the following: 'Once the superior wanted to test his God-given patience. In the evening Menas came to the abbot's cell, and having prostrated before the abbot, asked him as usual to give him instruction. But the abbot left him lying on the ground till the hour of the Office, and only then blessed him; and having

rebuked him for being fond of self-display and for being impatient, he ordered him to get up. The holy man knew Menas would bear all this courageously, and therefore he made this scene for the edification of all.' A disciple of Saint Menas confirmed what was told us about his director, and added: 'I was inquisitive to know whether sleep overcame him while he lay prostrate before the abbot. But he assured me that while lying on the ground he had recited by heart the whole psalter.'

35. I must not fail to adorn the crown of this step with this emerald. Once I started a discussion on silence with some of the most experienced elders in the community. With a smile on their faces and in jovial mood they said to me in a friendly way: 'We, Father John, being material, live a material life, preferring to wage war according to the measure of our weakness, and considering it better to struggle with men, who are sometimes fierce and some times penitent, than with demons who are continually raging and up in arms against us!'

36. One of those ever-memorable fathers who had great love for me according to God and was very outspoken, once said to me kindly: 'If, wise man, you have within you the power of him who said, I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me;¹ if the Holy Spirit has descended upon you with the dew of purity, as upon the Holy Virgin; if the power of the Highest has over shadowed you with patience; then like the Man (Christ our God), gird your loins with the towel of obedience; and having risen from the supper of silence, wash the feet of the brethren in a spirit of contrition; or rather, roll yourself under the feet of the community in spiritual self-abasement. At the gate of your heart place strict and unsleeping guards. Control your wandering mind in your distracted body. Amidst the actions and movements of your limbs, practise mental quiet (hesychia). And, most paradoxical of all, in the midst of commotion be unmoved in soul. Curb your tongue which rages to leap into arguments. Seventy times seven in the day wrestle with this tyrant. Fix your mind to your soul as to the wood of a cross to be struck like an anvil with blow upon blow of the hammers, to be mocked, abused, ridiculed and wronged, without being in the least crushed or broken, but continuing to be quite calm and immovable. Shed your own will as a garment of shame, and thus stripped of it enter the practice ground. Array yourself in the rarely acquired breastplate of faith, not crushed or wounded by distrust towards your spiritual trainer. Check with the rein of temperance the sense of touch that leaps forward shamelessly. Bridle your eyes, which are ready to waste hour after hour looking at physical grandeur and beauty, by meditation on death. Gag your mind, overbusy with its private concerns, and thoughtlessly prone to criticize and condemn your brother, by the practical means of showing your neighbour all love and sympathy. By this will all men truly know, dearest father, that we are disciples of Christ, if, while living together, we have love one for another.'² 'Come, come,' said this good friend, 'come and settle down with us and for living water drink derision at every hour. For David, having tried every pleasure under heaven, last of all said in bewilderment: Behold, what is good, or what is beautiful? Nothing else but that brethren should dwell together in unity.'³ But if we have not yet been granted this good, that is, such patience and obedience, then it is best for us, having at least discovered our weakness, to live apart far from the athletic lists, and bless the combatants and pray they may be granted patience.' I was won over to the good arguments of this most excellent father and teacher, who

1 Philippians iv, 13. 2 St. John Xlii, 35.

3 Psalm cxxxii, x.

disputed with me in an evangelical and prophetic manner, or rather as a friend; and without hesitation I agreed to give the honours to blessed obedience.

37. And now, when I have noted yet another profitable virtue of these blessed fathers, which comes as it were from paradise, I shall then come back to my own unlovely and worthless bunch of thistles.¹ The pastor noticed that some repeatedly carried on conversation when we were standing in prayer. Such people he stood for a whole week by the church, and ordered them to make a prostration to everyone going in and out; and what was still more surprising, he did this even with the clergy, in fact, with the priests.

38. Noticing that one of the brothers stood during the psalm singing with more heartfelt feeling than many of the others, and that his movements and the changes of his face made it look as though he was talking to someone, especially at the beginning of the hymns, I asked him to explain what this habit of the blessed man meant. And knowing that it was for my benefit not to hide it, he told me: 'I have the habit, Father John, at the very beginning, of collecting my thoughts, my mind and my soul, and summoning them, I cry to them: O come, let us worship and fall down before Christ, our King and God.'²

39. Having earnestly observed the activities of the brother in charge of the refectory, I saw that he always had in his belt a small book, and I learnt that he wrote his thoughts in it each day and showed them all to the shepherd. And I saw that not only he, but also very many of the brethren there did the same. And this, as I heard, was by order of that great shepherd.

40. Once one of the brothers was expelled by him for slandering his neighbour to him and calling him a windbag and gossip. The expelled man did not leave the gates of the monastery for a whole week, begging to be granted entry and forgiveness. When that lover of souls learnt of this, and heard that this brother had had nothing to eat for six days, he told him: 'If you have a resolute desire to live in the monastery, I will degrade you to the rank of a penitent.' And when the penitent gladly accepted this, the pastor ordered him to be taken to the separate monastery for those who were mourning over their falls. And that was done. But since we have mentioned that monastery, I shall now speak about it briefly.

41. At a distance of a mile from the great monastery was a place called the prison, deprived of every comfort. There neither smoke, nor wine, nor oil in the food, nor anything else could ever be seen but only bread and light vegetables. Here the pastor shut up, without permission to go out, those who fell into sin after entering the brotherhood; and not all together, but each in a separate and special cell, or at most in pairs. And he kept them there until the Lord gave him assurance of the amendment of each one. Over them he placed the sub-prior, a great man called Isaac, who required of those entrusted to him almost unceasing prayer. And to prevent despondency they had a large quantity of palm leaves.³ Such is the life, such is the rule, such is the conduct of those who truly seek the face of the God of Jacob!⁴

42. To admire the labours of the saints is good; to emulate them wins salvation; but to wish suddenly to imitate their life in every point is unreasonable and impossible.

43. When we are bitten by remorse, let us remember our sins until the Lord, seeing the force of our efforts (the efforts of those who do violence to themselves for His sake), wipes out our sins and transforms the sorrow that is gnawing our heart into joy. For it is said: According to the multitude of my sorrows in my heart, thy consolations have gladdened my soul.⁵ At the right time let us not forget

1 Gk. akanthologmata; this might be rendered 'thistle gatherings' or 'bunch of weeds'. 2 Psalm xciv, 6 and Church Service Books.

3 Palm leaves were used for making baskets.

4 Psalm xxiii, 6.

5 Psalm xciii, 19.

him who said to the Lord: O how many troubles and evils hast Thou shown me! Yet Thou didst turn and revive me; and from the depths of the earth after I had fallen, again Thou broughtest me up. 1

44. Blessed is he who, though maligned and disparaged every day, masters himself for the Lord's sake. He will join the chorus of martyrs and boldly converse with the angels. Blessed is the monk who regards himself as hourly deserving every dishonour and disparagement. Blessed is he who mortifies his will to the end, and leaves the care of himself to his director in the Lord; for he will be placed at the right hand of the Crucified. He who will not accept a reproof, just or unjust, renounces his own salvation. But he who accepts it with an effort, or even without an effort, will soon receive the remission of his sins.

45. Show God in spirit your faith in your spiritual father and your sincere love for him. And God in unknown ways will suggest to him that he may be attached to you and kindly disposed towards you, just as you are well disposed towards him.

46. He who exposes every snake shows that he has real faith; but he who hides them will wander in trackless wastes.

47. A man will know his brotherly love and his genuine charity when he sees that he mourns for his brother's sins, and rejoices at his progress and graces.

48. He whose will and desire in conversation is to establish his own opinion, even though what he says is true, should recognize that he is sick with the devil's disease. And if he behaves like this only in conversation with his equals, then perhaps the rebuke of his superiors may heal him. But if he acts in this way even with those who are greater and wiser than he, then his malady is humanly incurable.

49. He who is not submissive in speech, clearly will not be so in act either. For he who is unfaithful in little is also unfaithful in much, and is intractable. He labours in vain, and he will get nothing from holy obedience but his own doom.

50. If anyone has his conscience in the utmost purity in the matter of obedience to his spiritual father, then he daily awaits death as if it were sleep, or rather life, and is not dismayed, knowing for certain that at the time of his departure, not he, but his director, will be called to account.

51. If anyone receives voluntarily some task from his father, and in doing it suffers a stumble, he should not ascribe the blame to the giver but to the receiver of the weapon. For he took the weapon for battle against the enemy, but has turned it against his own heart. But if he forced himself for the Lord's sake to accept the task, though he previously explained his weakness to him who gave it, let him take courage; for though he has fallen, he is not dead.

52. I have forgotten to set before you, my friends, this sweet bread of virtue. I saw there men obedient in the Lord who subjected themselves to insults and dishonour for God's sake, so that, having prepared themselves in this way, they might get used to not quailing before insults coming from others.

53. By resolving to make one's confession, the soul is thereby held from sinning as by a bridle. For what we do not confess, that we do fearlessly as though in the dark.

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