

Step 1 on Renunciation of the World

by St. John Climacus

St. John Climacus emphasizes the importance of renouncing worldly attachments to cultivate a deeper relationship with God through humility and virtue.

Scripture: Romans 1:18

Topics: "Spiritual Discernment", "Monastic Life"

Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the different classes of beings in relation to God, emphasizing the importance of being true servants of God who faithfully do His will. He highlights the distinction between those who are friends of God, true servants, worthless servants, those estranged from God, and His enemies. St. John Climacus also discusses the significance of renouncing the world for the sake of the future Kingdom, the multitude of sins, or love for God, and the necessity of seeking a spiritual guide for those on the path of asceticism and monastic life.

Transcript

1. Our God and King is good, ultra-good and all-good (it is best to begin with God in writing to the servants of God). Of the rational beings created by Him and honoured with the dignity of free-will, some are His friends, others are His true servants, some are worthless, some are completely estranged from God, and others, though feeble creatures are equally His opponents. By friends of God, dear and holy Father,¹ we simple people mean, properly speaking, those intellectual and incorporeal beings which surround God. By true servants of God we mean all those who tirelessly and unremittingly do and have done His will. By worthless servants we mean those who think of themselves as having been granted baptism, but have not faithfully kept the vows they made to God. By those estranged from God and alienated from Him, we mean those who are unbelievers or heretics. Finally, the enemies of God are those who have not only evaded and rejected the Lord's commandment themselves, but who also wage bitter war on those who are fulfilling it.

2. Each of the classes mentioned above might well have a special treatise devoted to it. But for simple folk like us it would not be profitable at this point to enter into such lengthy investigations. Come then, in unquestioning obedience let us stretch out our unworthy hand to the true servants of God who devoutly compel us and in their faith constrain us by their commands. Let us write this treatise with a pen taken from their knowledge and dipped in the ink of humility which is both subdued yet radiant. Then let us apply it to the smooth white paper of their hearts, or rather rest it on the tablets of the spirit, and let us inscribe

the divine words (or rather sow the seeds).² And let us begin like this.

3. God belongs to all free beings. He is the life of all, the salvation of all--faithful and unfaithful, just and unjust, pious and impious, passionate and dispassionate, monks and seculars, wise and simple, healthy and sick, young and old--just as the diffusion of light, the sight of the sun, and the changes of the weather are for all alike; 'for there is no respect of persons with God'.³

4. The irreligious man is a mortal being with a rational nature, who of his own free will turns his back on life and thinks of his own Maker, the ever-existent, as non-existent. The lawless man is one who holds the law of God after his own depraved fashion,⁴ and thinks to combine faith in God with heresy that is directly opposed to Him. The Christian is one who imitates Christ in thought, word and deed, as far as is possible for human beings, believing rightly and blamelessly in the Holy Trinity. The lover of God is he who lives in communion with all that is natural and sinless, and as far as he is able neglects nothing good. The continent man is he who in the midst of temptations, snares and turmoil, strives with all his might to imitate the ways of Him who is free from such. The monk is he who within his earthly and soiled body toils towards the rank and state of the incorporeal beings.⁵

1 Lit. 'head', Gk. kephale, commonly used as a term of endearment. 2 The words in parenthesis only occur in some texts.

3 Romans ii, 11

4 Cf. Romans i, 18.

5 Angels. Lit. 'bodiless ones'.

A monk is he who strictly controls his nature and unceasingly watches over his senses. A monk is he who keeps his body in chastity, his mouth pure and his mind illumined. A monk is a mourning soul that both asleep and awake is unceasingly occupied with the remembrance of death. Withdrawal from the world is voluntary hatred of vaunted material things and denial of nature for the attainment of what is above nature.

5. . All who have willingly left the things of the world, have certainly done so either for the sake of the future Kingdom, or because of the multitude of their sins, or for love of God. If they were not moved by any of these reasons their withdrawal from the world was unreasonable. But God who sets our contests waits to see what the end of our course will be.

6. The man who has withdrawn from the world in order to shake off his own burden of sins, should imitate those who sit outside the city amongst the tombs, and should not discontinue his hot and fiery streams of tears and voiceless heartfelt groanings until he, too, sees that Jesus has come to him and rolled away the stone of hardness¹ from his heart, and loosed Lazarus, that is to say, our mind, from the bands of sin, and ordered His attendant angels: Loose him² from passions, and let him go to blessed dispassion.³ Otherwise he will have gained nothing.

7. Those of us who wish to go out of Egypt and to fly from Pharaoh, certainly need some Moses as a mediator with God and from God, who, standing between action and contemplation, will raise hands of prayer for us to God, so that guided by Him we may cross the sea of sin and rout the Amalek of the passions.⁴ That is why those who have surrendered themselves to God, deceive themselves if they suppose that they have no need of a director. Those who came out of Egypt had Moses as their guide, and those who fled from Sodom had an angel.⁵ The former are like those who are healed of the passions

of the soul by the care of physicians: these are they who come out of Egypt. The latter are like those who long to put off the uncleanness of the wretched body. That is why they need a helper, an angel, so to speak, or at least one equal to an angel. For in proportion to the corruption of our wounds we need a director who is indeed an expert and a physician.

8. Those who aim at ascending with the body to heaven, need violence indeed and constant suffering⁶ especially in the early stages of their renunciation, until our pleasure-loving dispositions and unfeeling hearts attain to love of God and chastity by visible sorrow. A great toil, very great indeed, with much unseen suffering, especially for those who live carelessly, until by simplicity, deep angerlessness and diligence, we make our mind, which is a greedy kitchen dog addicted to barking, a lover of chastity and watchfulness. But let us who are weak and passionate have the courage to offer our infirmity and natural weakness to Christ with unhesitating faith, and confess it to Him; and we shall be certain to obtain His help, even beyond our merit, if only we unceasingly go right down to the depth of humility.

9. All who enter upon the good fight, which is hard and narrow, but also easy, must realize that they must leap into the fire, if they really expect the celestial fire to dwell in them. But, let everyone examine himself, and so let him eat the bread of it with its bitter herbs, and let him drink the cup of it with its

1 I.e. blindness, obtuseness.

2 St. John xi, 44.

3 'Dispassion': Gk. *apatheia*, which is often misunderstood and mistranslated as 'apathy', 'indifference', or 'insensibility' in a Stoic sense. In ecclesiastical Greek, 'dispassion' means freedom from passion through being filled with the Holy Spirit of God as a fruit of divine love. It is a state of soul in which a burning love for God and men leaves no room for selfish and animal passions. How far it is from the cold Stoic conception may be seen from the fact that St. Diadochus can speak of 'the fire of dispassion'. Cf. Step 28: 27. Throughout this translation *apatheia* is usually given as 'dispassion'.

4 Exodus xvii.

5 Genesis xix.

6 Cf. St. Matthew xi, 12.

tears, lest his service lead to his own judgment. If everyone who has been baptized has not been saved--I shall be silent about what follows.¹

10. Those who enter this contest must renounce all things, despise all things, deride all things, and shake off all things, that they may lay a firm foundation. A good foundation of three layers and three pillars is innocence, fasting and temperance. Let all babes in Christ begin with these virtues, taking as their model the natural babes. For you never find in them anything sly or deceitful. They have no insatiate appetite, no insatiable stomach, no body on fire; but perhaps as they grow, in proportion as they take more food, their natural passions also increase.

11. To lag in the fight at the very outset of the struggle and thereby to furnish proof of our coming defeat² is a very hateful and dangerous thing. A firm beginning will certainly be useful for us when we later grow slack. A soul that is strong at first but then relaxes is spurred on by the memory of its former zeal. And in

this way new wings are often obtained.

12. When the soul betrays itself and loses the blessed and longed for fervour, let it carefully investigate the reason for losing this. And let it arm itself with all its longing and zeal against whatever has caused this. For the former fervour can return only through the same door through which it was lost.

13. The man who renounces the world from fear is like burning incense, that begins with fragrance but ends in smoke. He who leaves the world through hope of reward is like a millstone, that always moves in the same way.³ But he who withdraws from the world out of love for God has obtained fire at the very outset; and, like fire set to fuel, it soon kindles a larger fire.

14. Some build bricks upon stones. Others set pillars on the bare ground. And there are some who go a short distance and, having got their muscles and joints warm, go faster. Whoever can understand, let him understand this allegorical word.

15. Let us eagerly run our course as men called by our God and King, lest, since our time is short, we be found in the day of our death without fruit and perish of hunger. Let us please the Lord as soldiers please their king; because we are required to give an exact account of our service after the campaign. Let us fear the Lord not less than we fear beasts. For I have seen men who were going to steal and were not afraid of God, but, hearing the barking of dogs, they at once turned back; and what the fear of God could not achieve was done by the fear of animals. Let us love God at least as much as we respect our friends. For I have often seen people who had offended God and were not in the least perturbed about it. And I have seen how those same people provoked their friends in some trifling matter and then employed every artifice, every device, every sacrifice, every apology, both personally and through friends and relatives, not sparing gifts, in order to regain their former love.

16. In the very beginning of our renunciation, it is certainly with labour and grief that we practise the virtues. But when we have made progress in them, we no longer feel sorrow, or we feel little sorrow. But as soon as our mortal mind is consumed, and mastered by our alacrity, we practise them with all joy and eagerness, with love and with divine fire.

17. Those who at once from the very outset follow the virtues and fulfil the commandments with joy and alacrity certainly deserve praise. And in the same way those who spend a long time in asceticism⁴ and still find it a weariness to obey the commandments, if they obey them at all, certainly deserve pity.

18. Let us not even abhor or condemn the renunciation due merely to circumstances. I have seen men who had fled into exile meet the emperor by accident when he was on tour, and then join his company, enter his palace, and dine with him. I have seen seed casually fall on the earth and bear plenty of

1 This means: 'If every baptized person is not saved, so the same can be said about monks--not all who have made the vow are real monks and will be saved. But I prefer to pass over this matter in silence.'

2 Lit. 'slaughter'.

3 That is, revolves round itself, is self-centred.

4 This might also be translated: 'dawdle over their training'.

thriving fruit. And I have seen the opposite, too. I have also seen a person come to a hospital with some other motive, but the courtesy and kindness of the physician overcame him, and on being treated with an astringent, he got rid of the darkness that lay on his eyes. Thus for some the unintentional was stronger and more sure than what was intentional in others.

19. Let no one, by appealing to the weight and multitude of his sins, say that he is unworthy of the monastic vow, and for love of pleasure disparage himself, excusing himself with excuses in his sins.¹ Where there is much corruption, considerable treatment is needed to draw out all the impurity. The healthy do not go to a hospital.

20. 20. If an earthly king were to call us and request us to serve in his presence, we should not delay for other orders, we should not make excuses, but we should leave everything and eagerly go to him. Let us then be on the alert, lest when the King of kings and Lord of lords and God of gods calls us to this heavenly office, we cry off out of sloth and cowardice and find ourselves without excuse at the Last Judgment. It is possible to walk, even when tied with the fetters of worldly affairs and iron cares, but only with difficulty. For even those who have iron chains on their feet can often walk; but they are continually stumbling and getting hurt. An unmarried man, who is only tied to the world by business affairs, is like one who has fetters on his hands; and therefore when he wishes to enter the monastic life he has nothing to hinder him. But the married man is like one who is bound hand and foot. (So when he wants to run he cannot.)²

21. Some people living carelessly in the world have asked me: 'We have wives and are beset with social cares, and how can we lead the solitary life?' I replied to them: 'Do all the good you can; do not speak evil of anyone; do not steal from anyone; do not lie to anyone; do not be arrogant towards anyone; do not hate any one; be sure you go to church; be compassionate to the needy; do not offend anyone; do not wreck another man's domestic happiness;³ and be content with what your own wives can give you. If you behave in this way you will not be far from the Kingdom of Heaven.'

22. Let us charge into the good fight with joy and love without being afraid of our enemies. Though unseen themselves, they can look at the face of our soul, and if they see it altered by fear, they take up arms against us all the more fiercely. For the cunning creatures have observed that we are scared. So let us take up arms against them courageously. No one will fight with a resolute fighter.

23. The Lord designedly makes easy the battles of beginners so that they should not immediately return to the world at the outset. And so rejoice in the Lord always, all servants of His, detecting in this the first sign of the Master's love for us, and a sign that He Himself has called us. But when God sees courageous souls, He has often been known to act in this way: He lets them have conflicts from the very beginning in order to crown them the sooner. But the Lord hides the difficulty⁴ of this contest from those in the world. For if they were to know, no one would renounce the world.

24. Offer to Christ the labours of your youth, and in your old age you will rejoice in the wealth of dispassion. What is gathered in youth nourishes and comforts those who are tired out in old age. In our youth let us labour ardently and let us run vigilantly, for the hour of death is unknown. We have very evil and dangerous, cunning, unscrupulous foes, who hold fire in their hands and try to burn the temple of God with the flame that is in it. These foes are strong; they never sleep; they are incorporeal and invisible. Let no one when he is young listen to his enemies, the demons, when they say to him: 'Do not wear out your flesh lest you make it sick and weak.' For you will scarcely find anyone, especially in the present

generation, who is determined to mortify his flesh, although he might deprive

1 Psalm cxi, 4. The meaning is that in the midst of his sins he makes excuses for not becoming a monk. The excuses are not for his sins, but his sins are his excuses.

2 The words in parenthesis are missing in some versions and may be an interpolation. 3 Lit. 'go near the bed of another'.

4 Some texts add: 'or rather, the easiness'.

himself of many pleasant dishes. The aim of this demon is to make the very outset of our spiritual life lax and negligent, and then make the end correspond to the beginning.

25. Those who have really determined to serve Christ, with the help of spiritual fathers and their own self-knowledge will strive before all else to choose a place, and a way of life, and a habitation, and exercises suitable for them. For community life is not for all, on account of greed; and not for all are places of solitude, on account of anger. But each will consider what is most suited to his needs.

26. The whole monastic state consists of three specific kinds of establishment: either the retirement and solitude of a spiritual athlete, or living in silence with one or two others, or settling patiently in a community. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left,¹ but follow the King's highway.² Of the three ways of life stated above, the second is suitable for many people, for it is said: 'Woe unto him who is alone when he falleth' into despondency or lethargy or laziness or despair, 'and hath not another among men to lift him up'. ³'For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them,' said the Lord.⁴

27. So who is a faithful and wise monk? He who has kept his fervour unabated, and to the end of his life has not ceased daily to add fire to fire, fervour to fervour, zeal to zeal, love to love.⁵

This is the first step. Let him who has set foot on it not turn back.

1 Proverbs iv, 28.

2 Numbers xx, 57.

3 Ecclesiastes iv, 10.

4 St. Matthew xviii, 20.

5 The order of these words varies in different MSS.

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