

Step 8 on Freedom From Anger and on Meekness.

by St. John Climacus

The sermon teaches that freedom from anger and meekness are essential virtues that can be achieved through the practice of humility, patience, and silence.

Scripture: Proverbs 15:1, Proverbs 16:32, Proverbs 29:11, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 4:31, Colossians 3:8, James 1:19, James 4:1

Topics: "Overcoming Anger", "Christian Humility"

Description

St. John Climacus preaches about the destructive nature of anger and the importance of cultivating meekness and patience to overcome this passion. He emphasizes the need for self-examination, humility, and the practice of silence to achieve freedom from anger. St. John Climacus also highlights the dangers of harboring resentment, the healing power of forgiveness, and the transformative effects of living in community and enduring hardships with grace and love.

Transcript

1. As the gradual pouring of water on a fire completely extinguishes the flame, so the tears of true mourning are able to quench every flame of anger and irritability. Therefore we place this next in order.
2. Freedom from anger, or placidity, is an insatiable appetite for dishonour, just as in the vainglorious there is an unbounded desire for praise. Freedom from anger is victory over nature and insensibility to insults, acquired by struggles and sweat.
3. Meekness is an immovable state of soul which remains unaffected whether in evil report or in good report, in dishonour or in praise.
4. The beginning of freedom from anger is silence of the lips when the heart is agitated; the middle is silence of the thoughts when there is a mere disturbance of soul; and the end is an imperturbable calm under the breath of unclean winds.
5. Anger is a reminder of hidden hatred, that is to say, remembrance of wrongs. Anger is a desire for the injury of the one who has provoked you. Irrascibility is the untimely blazing up of the heart. Bitterness is a movement of displeasure seated in the soul. Peevishness is a changeable movement of one's disposition and disorder of soul.

6. As with the appearance of light, darkness retreats, so at the fragrance of humility all anger and bitterness vanishes.

7. Some who are prone to anger are neglectful of the healing and cure of this passion. But these unhappy people do not give a thought to him who said: 'The moment of his anger is his fall.'¹

8. There is a quick movement of a millstone which in one moment grinds and does away with more spiritual grain and fruit than another crushes in a whole day. And so we must, with understanding, pay attention. It is possible to have such a blaze of flame, suddenly fanned by a strong wind, as will ruin the field of the heart more than a lingering flame.

9. And we ought not to forget, my friends, that the wicked demons sometimes suddenly leave us, so that we may neglect our strong passions as of little importance, and then become incurably sick.

10. As a hard stone with sharp corners has all its sharpness and hard formation crushed by knocking and rubbing against other stones, and is made round, and in the same way a sharp and curt soul, by living in community and mixing with hard, hot-tempered men, undergoes one of two things: either it cures its wound by its patience, or by retiring it will certainly discover its weakness, its cowardly flight making this clear to it as in a mirror.

11. An angry person is a wilful epileptic, who on a casual pretext keeps breaking out and falling down.

12. Nothing is so inappropriate to penitents as an agitated spirit, because conversion requires great humility, and anger is a sign of every kind of presumption.

13. If it is a mark of extreme meekness even in the presence of one's offender to be peacefully and lovingly disposed towards him in one's heart, then it is certainly a mark of hot temper when a person continues to quarrel and rage against his (absent) offender both by words and gestures, even when by himself.

1 Ecclesiasticus i, 22.

14. If the Holy Spirit is peace of soul, as He is said to be, and as He is in reality, and if anger is disturbance of heart, as it actually is and as it is said to be, then nothing so prevents His presence in us as anger.'¹

15. Though we know very many intolerable fruits of anger, we have only found one, its involuntary offspring, which, though illegitimate, is nevertheless useful. I have seen people flaring up madly and vomiting their long-stored malice, who by their very passion were delivered from passion, and who have obtained from their offender either penitence or an explanation of the long standing grievance. I have seen others who seemed to show a brute patience, but who were nourishing resentment within them under the cover of silence. And I considered them more pitiable than those given to raving, because they were driving away the holy white Dove with black gall. We need great care in dealing with this snake; for it too, like the snake of physical impurities, has nature collaborating with it.

16. I have seen angry people push away food, out of bitterness; and yet through their unreasonable abstinence they only added poison to poison. And I have seen others who on being disgruntled for some specious reason, gave themselves up to gluttony, and fell out of a pit headlong over a precipice.² But I have seen others who were sensible, who, by mixing both like good physicians, have gained from

moderate consolation very great profit.

17. Sometimes singing, in moderation, successfully relieves the temper. But sometimes, if untimely and immoderate, it lends itself to the lure of pleasure. Let us then appoint definite times for this, and so make good use of it.

18. When for some reason I was sitting outside a monastery, near the cells of those living in solitude, I heard them fighting by themselves in their cells like caged partridges from bitterness and anger, and leaping at the face of their offender as if he were actually present. And I devoutly advised them not to stay in solitude in case they should be changed from human beings into demons. And I have also observed that people who are sensual and corrupt in heart are sometimes meek, what you might call flatterers, familiar, fond of outward show. And I advised these to go and adopt the life of a solitary, using this as a cure for sensuality and corruption of heart, lest from rational beings they should be pitifully changed into irrational animals. But when some of them told me that they were the wretched victims of these two passions (i.e. anger and sensuality), I absolutely forbade them to live according to their own will, but in a friendly way I suggested to their superiors that they should allow them sometimes to live in one way, sometimes in the other way of life, but that they should be entirely subject to the superior. The sensual person is liable to harm himself and perhaps one other intimate friend of his as well. But the angry person, like a wolf, often disturbs the whole flock, and offends and discourages many souls.

19. It is bad to disturb the eye of the heart by anger, according to him who said: 'My eye is troubled from anger.'³ But it is still worse to show in words the turmoil of the soul. And to come to blows is utterly inimical and alien to the monastic, angelic and divine life.

20. If you want, or rather intend, to take a splinter out of another person, then do not hack at it with a stick instead of a lancet for you will only drive it deeper. And this is a stick--rude speech and rough gestures. And this is a lancet--tempered instruction and patient reprimand. 'Reprove,' says the Apostle, 'rebuke, exhort,'⁴ but he did not say 'beat'. And if even this is required, do it rarely, and not with your own hand (i.e. use the agency of another).⁵

1 Or, 'His coming to us'.

2 I.e. Out of the pit of anger into the precipice of gluttony.

3 Psalm vi, 8.

4 Timothy iv, 2.

5 The words in parenthesis occur only in the Russian version.

21. If we are observant we shall see that many irritable people are practising vigils, fasts and silence. For the aim of the demons is to suggest to them, under the pretext of penance and mourning, just what is likely to increase their passion.

22. If, as we said above, a single wolf with the help of a demon can trouble a flock, then certainly one most wise brother with the help of an angel can make the waves abate and the ship sail calmly, by pouring, as it were, a good skin full of oil on the waters.¹ And the condemnation of the former is indeed heavy, and equally great is the reward that the latter will receive from God, and he will become an edifying example for all.

23. The beginning of blessed patience is to accept dishonour with sorrow and bitterness of soul. The middle stage is to be free from pain in the midst of these things. But perfection (if it is possible) is to regard dishonour as praise. Let the first rejoice; let the second be strong; blessed is the third, for he exults in the Lord.

24. I have noticed what a sorry sight angry people presented due to their self-esteem, though they themselves were unaware of this. For they get into a state of anger and then they become still more angry at their defeat. And I was astonished to see how one fall was punished by another, and I pitied them as I saw them avenging sin by sin. I was horrified at the demons' trickery, and nearly despaired of my own life.

25. If anyone has noticed that he is easily overcome by conceit and sharp temper, malice and hypocrisy, and has thought of defending himself against them by drawing the two-edged sword of meekness and patience, then if he wishes to be completely freed from these vices he should go and live in a monastic community as in a fuller's shop of salvation. He should especially choose the most austere. Then he will be spiritually stretched and beaten by the insults, slights and surging rebuffs of the brethren, and perhaps even sometimes physically thrashed, trampled on and kicked, and so he may wash out the filth which is still in the perceptive part of his soul. You should believe the popular saying that reproof is the washtub for the passions of the soul. For when people in the world overwhelm someone to his face with indignities, and then boast of this before others, they say: 'I gave him a scrubbing.' And this is perfectly true.

26. Freedom from anger in novices as a result of mourning is one thing; the tranquillity that is found in the perfect is another. In the former, anger is held in by tears as by a bridle; but in the latter it has been mortified by dispassion, as a snake is killed by a sword.

27. I once saw three monks receive the same injury at the same time. One felt the sting of this, but kept silent; the second rejoiced at his injury for the reward it would bring him, but was sorry for the wrongdoer; and the third, thinking of the harm his erring neighbour was suffering, wept fervently. And fear, reward and love were to be seen at work.

28. Bodily fever is one thing, but the occasions of this are not one but many. So also the boiling up of anger and the movement of our other passions have many and various causes. That is why it is impossible to prescribe one identical rule for them. Instead I would rather suggest that each of those who are sick should most carefully seek out his own particular cure. The first step in the cure should be a diagnosis of the cause of each disease; for when this is discovered, the patients will get the right cure from God's care and from their spiritual physicians. And so, for instance, those who wish to join us in the Lord should enter the spiritual tribunal provided, and there we should test ourselves in a general way concerning the above-mentioned passions or their causes.

29. So let the tyrant anger be bound with the chains of meekness and be beaten by patience, and dragged out by holy love; and, being arraigned before this court of reason, let it be duly examined: 'Tell us, base idiot, what is the name of the father who begot you and the mother who brought you for evil

1 Our author is speaking allegorically. By 'skin' he means the body, by 'oil' he means meekness, and by 'waves', pride and anger. The 'ship' may mean the community, or brotherhood, or just a single person.

into the world, and the names of your foul sons and daughters. And not only that, but tell us the designations of those who wage war against you and kill you.' And anger tells us in reply: 'Many are my origins, and I have more than one father. My mothers are vainglory, love of money, greed, and sometimes

lust. My father is called conceit. My daughters are: remembrance of wrongs, hatred, enmity, and assertion of rights. But my opponents, who are now holding me captive, are the opposite virtues of freedom from anger and meekness. She who schemes against me is called humility. But as to who bore humility, ask her in due time her self.'

For the eighth step is appointed the crown of freedom from anger. He who wears it by nature will perhaps wear no other crown. But he who has won it by sweat has conquered all eight together.

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