

Apostolic Fathers

St. Ignatius of Antioch. Letter to the Magnesians. Chapter V.

Seeing, then, all things have an end, these two things are simultaneously set before us—death and life; and every one shall go unto his own place. For as there are two kinds of coins, the one of God, the other of the world, and each of these has its special character stamped upon it, [so is it also here.] The unbelieving are of this world; but the believing have, in love, the character of God the Father by Jesus Christ, by whom, if we are not in readiness to die into His passion, His life is not in us.

Seeing, then, all things have an end, and there is set before us life upon our observance [of God's precepts], but death as the result of disobedience, and every one, according to the choice he makes, shall go to his own place, let us flee from death, and make choice of life. For I remark, that two different characters are found among men—the one true coin, the other spurious. The truly devout man is the right kind of coin, stamped by God Himself. The ungodly man, again, is false coin, unlawful, spurious, counterfeit, wrought not by God, but by the devil. I do not mean to say that there are two different human natures, but that there is one humanity, sometimes belonging to God, and sometimes to the devil. If any one is truly religious, he is a man of God; but if he is irreligious, he is a man of the devil, made such, not by nature, but by his own choice. The unbelieving bear the image of the prince of wickedness. The believing possess the image of their Prince, God the Father, and Jesus Christ, through whom, if we are not in readiness to die for the truth into His passion, His life is not in us.

Desert Fathers

Sayings

Abba Agathon said, "There is no labor greater than prayer to God. For every time someone wants to pray, his enemies the demons want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath.

Abba Poemen said that the blessed Abba Anthony used to say, "The greatest thing a man can do is throw his faults before the Lord and to expect temptation to the last breath."

Abba Anthony said, "Our life and our death are with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained our God; but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ.

Abba Theonas said, 'When we turn our spirit from the contemplation of God, we become the slaves of carnal passions.'

It was said of an old man that when his thoughts said to him, 'Relax today, and tomorrow repent', he retorted, 'No, I am going to repent today, and may the will of God be done tomorrow'.

The old men used to say, 'The powers of Satan which go before all sin are three: forgetfulness, negligence, and desire. For, truly, every time forgetfulness comes, it engenders negligence; and from negligence, desire proceeds; and desire causes a man to fall. But if the spirit stands on guard against Satan, it does not give way to desire; if it does not desire, by the grace of Christ it does not fall.'

An old man said, 'Practice silence, be careful for nothing, give heed to your meditation, lie down and get up in the fear of God, and you will not need to fear the assaults of the impious.'

An old man said to a brother, 'The devil is the enemy and you yourself are the house. The enemy never stops throwing all that he finds into your house, pouring all sorts of impurities over it. It is your part not to neglect throwing them outside again. If you do not do this the house will be filled with all sorts of impurities and you will no longer be able to get inside. But all that the other begins to throw in, you should throw out again little by little, and by the grace of Christ your house will remain pure.'

Whenever his thoughts urged him to pass judgment on something which he saw, he would say to himself, 'Agathon, it is not your business to do that.' Thus his spirit was always recollected.

The same abba said, 'A man who is angry, even if he were to raise the dead, is not acceptable to God.'

Abba Theodore also said, 'If you are temperate, do not judge the fornicator, for you would then transgress the law just as much. And he who said, "Do not commit fornication," also said, "Do not judge."

He also said, 'If a monk can overcome two things, he can become free from the world.' The brother asked him what these two things were and he said, 'Bodily ease and vain-glory.'

Stories

Some thieves came one day to the dwelling of an old man and said to him, 'We have come to take everything that is in your cell.' He said to them, 'My children, take what seems good to you.' So they took what they found in the cell and went away. Now they forgot a purse which happened to be hanging there. The old man picked it up and ran after them, calling out, 'Take this which you have forgotten from the cell.' Filled with wonder at the old man's long-suffering, they put back every thing in its place in the cell and did penance, saying one to another, 'Truly this is a man of God!'

Two brothers went to market to sell the things they had made. The first fell into fornication as soon as he separated from his companion. He met his brother who said to him, 'My brother, let us go to our cell', but he replied, 'I am not going'. The other persisted, saying, 'My brother, why not?' He said, 'Because when you had left me, I fell into fornication.' His brother, wishing to win him over, said to him, 'The same thing happened to me, too, when you left me; come, let us go and do strict

penance and God will forgive us.' They went to tell the old men what had happened to them, and the old men gave them commandments for doing penance. Then one of the brothers did penance for the other as though he had sinned himself. But God, seeing the affliction he was giving himself for love's sake, made known to one of the old men, after some days, that because of the great love of the brother who had not sinned, he had forgiven the one who had sinned. See what it is to give one's soul for one's brother.

It was said of a brother who was neighbor to a great old man that when he went to his cell he robbed him. Now the old man saw it and did not reproach him but worked all the harder, saying, 'No doubt the brother needs it'. Now the old man was seriously inconvenienced and scarcely able to provide himself with bread. When he was at the point of death, the brothers were standing round him, and seeing the one who robbed him, he said, 'Come here', and he kissed his hands and said, 'I give thanks for these hands, for it is because of them that I am going to the kingdom of heaven.' The brother was filled with compunction and repented, and he became a tried monk because of what he had seen done by the great old man.

St. John Chrysostom--Commentary on Matthew Chapter 5

For in truth nothing so effectually gives entrance and root to all wickedness, as the taking away of love. Wherefore He also said, " When iniquity abounds, the love of the many shall wax cold." ...

Neither doth He stop at those precepts only which have been mentioned, but adds also others more than those: whereby He signifies how much account He makes there of. Namely, having threatened by "the council," by "the judgment," and by "hell," He added other sayings again in harmony with the former, saying thus:

"If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and; there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go away;² first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." ³

O goodness ! O exceeding love to man! He makes no account of the honor due unto Himself, for the sake of our love towards' our neighbor; implying that not at all from; any enmity, nor out of any desire to punish, had He uttered those former threatenings, but out of very tender affection. For what can be milder than these sayings? " Let my service," saith he, "be interrupted, that thy love may continue; since this also is a sacrifice, thy being reconciled to thy brother." Yea, for this cause He said not, "after the offering," or "before the offering;" but, while the very gift lies there, and when the sacrifice is already beginning, He sends thee to be reconciled to thy brother; and neither after removing that which lies before us," nor before presenting the gift, but while it lies in the midst, He bids thee hasten thither.

With what motive then doth He command so to do, and wherefore? First, as I have said, His will is to point out that He highly values charity,³ and considers it to be the greatest sacrifice: and that without it He doth not receive even that other; next, He is imposing such a necessity of reconciliation, as allows no excuse. For whoso hath been charged not to offer [sacrifice] before he be reconciled, will

hasten, if not for love of his neighbor, (yet, that this may not lie unconsecrated) to run unto him who hath been grieved, and do away the enmity. For this cause He hath also expressed it ... to alarm and thoroughly to awaken him. Thus, when He had said, "Leave thy gift," He stayed not at this, but added, "before the altar" (by the very place again causing him to shudder) ; " and go away." And He said not merely, "Go away," but He added, " first, and then come and offer thy gift." By all these things making it manifest, that his table receives not them that are at enmity with each other.

Let the initiated hear this, as many as draw nigh in enmity: and let the uninitiated hear too: ... For they too offer a gift and a sacrifice: prayer, I mean, and almsgiving. For as to this also being a sacrifice, learn what the prophet saith: "A sacrifice of praise will glorify me;"⁷ and again, " Sacrifice to God a sacrifice of praise; *¹⁸ and, "The lifting up of mine hands is an evening sacrifice." So that if it be but a prayer, which thou art offering in such a frame of mind, it were better to leave thy prayer, and become reconciled to thy brother, and then to offer thy prayer.

For to this end were all things done: to this end even God became man that He might set us at one.

And whereas in this place He is sending the wrong doer to the sufferer, in His prayer He leads the sufferer to the wrong doer, and reconciles them. For as there He saith, "Forgive men their debts;" so here, " If he hath ought against thee, go thy way unto him."

Or rather, even here too He seems to me to be sending the injured person: and for some such reason He said not, "Reconcile thyself to thy brother," but, " Be thou reconciled."

Syriac Fathers

Ephraim the Syrian

Prayer of St Ephraim the Syrian

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, meddling, lust of power and idle talk (prostration).

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to thy servant, (prostration).

Yea, O Lord and King grant me to see my own sins, and not to judge my brother, for thou are blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.

Isaac of Nineveh

Endeavor to enter the treasury within you and you will see that treasury which is in heaven. The former and the latter are one and through a single entrance you will see both of them. The ladder of that kingdom is hidden within you, within your soul.

Dive away from sin into yourself and there you will find the steps by which you may ascend.

Be at peace with your soul and heaven and earth will be at peace with you.

Cherish the leisure of stillness more than satisfying the hungry of the world, or converting a multitude of peoples from error to the worship of God. Let it be more excellent in your eyes to free your soul from the bonds of sin than to liberate the oppressed from those who subject their bodies.

Love ignorance of speech together with the knowledge of experience from within, more than spouting forth a Gihon⁹² of teaching with keenness of mind and an accumulation of hearsay and writing.

Take care to awaken your soul from the deadness of passions, toward the movement of its impulses which are in God, rather than to raise from death those who have died a natural death.

The heart acquires greater freedom of speech with God during prayer than it does during the Office. But complete neglect of the Office causes pride, and it is out of pride that one falls away from God. You see, the very fact that someone forces himself to be subjected to a rule—when he is quite free in his way of life—keeps the soul humble, and offers no opportunity for the demon of pride to dangle before him some evil thought. By continually considering himself as insignificant and not capable of freedom, he humbles and brings low any haughtiness of thought. There is no more effective bridle than this to place in the mouth of the mind that exalts itself. This is why the holy Fathers—even though they possessed continual prayer, being filled with the Spirit and never ceasing for a moment from prayer—used to observe, not only in the matter of the Office, but also in that of prayer as well, all that was ordained in the matter of times set.

St Symeon The New Theologian--Homilies

As we have said, therefore, when we believe wholeheartedly and fervently repent, we conceive the Word of God in our hearts, like the Virgin—given, that is, that our souls, too, are virginal and pure. And just as the fire of divinity did not consume her who was all-undefiled, so neither will it burn us up who keep our hearts pure and clean. Instead, that fire comes to us as dew from heaven, and as springs of water unto everlasting life. For proof that we indeed receive ourselves the unbearable flame of divinity, we point to the Lord Who says: "I have come to cast fire upon the earth" [Lk 12:49]. What other fire can He mean than the Spirit co-essential in divinity with Him, together with Whom He enters within us and is beheld there in our heart with the Father?

But, since it was once and for all that the Word of God became flesh from the Virgin, and was born, bodily, in manner inexpressible and transcending thought, and, since it is not possible that He should take flesh once more and be born of each of us, what then are we talking about? This: that the same undefiled flesh which He accepted from the pure loins of Mary, the all-pure Theotokos, and with which He was given birth in the body, He gives to us as food. And when we eat of it, when we eat worthily of His flesh, each one of us receives within himself the entirety of God

made flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and son of the immaculate Virgin Mary, the very One Who sits at the right hand of God the Father. As He said: "Who eats My flesh and drinks My blood, abides in Me and I in him" [Jn 6:56]. Never does this proceed from us, neither is He born of our bodies and then separated from us. He is no longer among us as an infant, and so known only according to the flesh. Rather, He is present in the body bodilessly, mingled with our essence and nature, and deifying us who share His body, who are become flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone. This is the greater thing which is within us by virtue of His inexpressible economy. This is the mystery all full of holy terror which I hesitate even to write, and tremble in recounting.

St Gregory Palamas-- Homilies

On the Lord's Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee

Virtue remains unshaken by the various wicked devices prepared by the enemy, but it can also lift up and restore those fallen into the depths of evil, and easily lead them to God by repentance and humility...

Here is an example and a clear proof. The Publican, as a publican, dwells in the depths of sin. All he has in common with those who live virtuously is one short utterance, but he finds relief, is lifted up and rises above every evil. He is numbered with the company of the righteous, justified by the impartial Judge Himself. If the Pharisee is condemned by his speech, it is because, as a Pharisee, he thinks himself somebody, although he is not really righteous, and utters many arrogant words which provoke God's anger with his every syllable.

Why does humility lead up to the heights of righteousness, whereas self-conceit leads down to the depths of sin? Because anybody who thinks he is something great, even before God, is rightly abandoned by God, as one who thinks that he does not need His help. Anybody who despises himself, on the other hand, and relies on mercy from above, wins God's sympathy, help and grace. As it says, "The Lord resisteth the proud: but he giveth grace unto the lowly" (Prov. 3:34 Sept.)

John Climacus-- The Ladder of Divine Ascent-- On Penitence

Once John outran Peter, and now obedience is placed before repentance. For the one who arrived first represents obedience, the other repentance.⁴¹

Repentance is the renewal of baptism and is a contract with God for a fresh start in life. Repentance goes shopping for humility and is ever distrustful of bodily comfort. Repentance is critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself. Repentance is the daughter of hope and the refusal to despair. (The penitent stands guilty—but undisgraced.) Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord by the performance of good deeds which are the opposites of the sins. It is the purification of conscience and the voluntary endurance of affliction. The penitent deals out his own punishment, for repentance is the fierce persecution of the stomach and the flogging of the soul into intense awareness.

Come, gather round, listen here and I will speak to all of you who have angered the Lord. Crowd around me and see what he has revealed to my soul for your edification.

Let us give first place to the story of the dishonored workers— who still earned respect. Let us listen, take heed, and act—we who may have suffered an unexpected fall. Rise up and be seated, all you who have been laid low by your sins. Hear what I have to say, my brothers. Listen, all you who long to be reconciled with God again in a true conversion.

Neptic Fathers (from the Philokalia)

St Hesychios the Priest—On Watchfulness and Holiness

Watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if sedulously practiced over a long period, completely frees us with God's help from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words and evil actions. It leads, in so far as this is possible, to a sure knowledge of the inapprehensible God, and helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries. It enables us to fulfill every divine commandment in the Old and New Testaments and bestows upon us every blessing of the age to come.

One type of watchfulness consists in closely scrutinizing every mental image or provocation; for only by means of a mental image can Satan fabricate an evil thought and insinuate this into the intellect in order to lead it astray.

A second type of watchfulness consists in freeing the heart from all thoughts, keeping it profoundly silent and still, and in praying.

A third type consists in continually and humbly calling upon the Lord Jesus Christ for help.

A fourth type is always to have the thought of death in one's mind.

These types of watchfulness, my child, act like doorkeepers and bar entry to evil thoughts. Elsewhere, if God gives me words, I shall deal more fully with a further type which, along with the others, is also effective: this is to fix one's gaze on heaven and to pay no attention to anything material.

St. Mark the Ascetic—On Those Who Think They Are Made Righteous by Works

Wishing to show that to fulfill every commandment is a duty, whereas sonship is a gift given to men through His own Blood, the Lord said: 'When you have done all that is commanded you, say: "We are useless servants: we have only done what was our duty" ' (Luke 17:10). Thus the kingdom of heaven is not a reward for works, but a gift of grace prepared by the Master for his faithful servants.

A slave does not demand his freedom as a reward; but he gives satisfaction as one who is in debt, and he receives freedom as a gift.

'Christ died on account of our sins in accordance with the Scriptures' (I Cor.); and to those who serve Him well He gives freedom. 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' He says, 'you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things: enter into the joy of your Lord' (Matt.).

He who relies on theoretical knowledge alone is not yet a faithful servant: a faithful servant is one who expresses his faith in Christ through obedience to His commandments.

Evagrius—On Prayer

If you long to pray, do nothing that is opposed to prayer, so that God may draw near and be with you.

The Holy Spirit, out of compassion for our weakness, comes even when we are impure. And if only He finds our intellect praying to Him, He enters it and puts to flight the whole array of thoughts and ideas circling within it, and He arouses it to a longing for spiritual prayer.

When you are praying, do not shape within yourself any image of the Deity, and do not let your intellect be stamped with the impress of any form; but approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner, and then you will understand.

St Gregory of Sinai

People who have received grace are as if impregnated and with child by the Holy Spirit; but they may abort the divine seed through sinning, or divorce themselves from God through intercourse with the enemy lurking within them. It is the turbulence of the passions that aborts grace, while the act of sinning deprives us of it altogether. A passion- and sin-loving soul, shorn of grace and divorced from God, is the haunt of passions - not to say of demons — in this world and the next.

Many who practice the commandments think they are following the spiritual path. But they have not yet reached the city, and in fact remain outside it. For they travel foolishly, deviating unawares from the straight highway into side-roads, not realizing how close the vices are to the path of virtue. For the true fulfillment of the commandments demands that we do neither too little nor too much but simply pursue a course acceptable to God and in accordance with His will. Otherwise we labour in vain and do not make straight the paths of the Lord (cf. Isa. 40 : 3). For in everything we do we must be clear about the goal we are pursuing.

To be on the spiritual path means seeking the Lord in your heart through fulfilling the commandments.

Contemporary Fathers

St Theophan -- The Path to Salvation.

How the Christian Life Is Lived, Ripened, and Fortified and About the Order of a God-Pleasing Life. The Final Goal of Man-- A Living Unity with God

Let us recall that the person has just turned from darkness to light, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God; he just entered a new path, on which he has not yet made a single step. But he burns with zeal to do everything necessary in order to establish himself in the work he has begun and not to give in again to his former tyrants, who separated him from God and the Saviour, dragging him to destruction.

We might ask: where is he to go, and what should he do in order to arrive where he should, and to arrive surely, directly, quickly and successfully?

The goal towards which the convert should direct all his attention and labors is the final goal of man and the economy of salvation, namely: pleasing God, a living unity with God, becoming worthy of His kingdom. The searching, zealous spirit will only be at peace when he attains God, tastes Him and is filled. Therefore the first law for him is: *seek ye the Lord and be strengthened; seek ye His face at all times* (Ps. 104:4). The blessedness of this is incomprehensible to man. He himself could not even have conceived of such a height. But when it pleased God to give him this dignity, it was audacious for man to refuse it through his unbelief, inattentiveness, and neglect of it in his thoughts, even during his labors. *I will dwell in them* (II Cor. 6:16), says God, and this is all three Persons of the Most-Holy Trinity. The Lord says of God the Father and of Himself: *We will come unto him, (to him who believes in Him and loves Him) and make our abode with him* (Jn. 14:23). And about Himself Alone: *I will come in to him, and will sup with him* (Apoc. 3:20); and even more clearly: *I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you* (Jn. 14:20). The Apostle says about the Holy Spirit: *The Spirit of God dwelleth in you* (I Cor. 3:16), or: *that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith* (Gal. 3:14).

We should note that God's indwelling is not merely mental, as sometimes happens during divine contemplation to a man by God's good will, but it is a living, enlivening thing, to which contemplation should only be considered a means. Mental and heartfelt longing for God, that has come by God's good will, prepares a person to truly receive God. It is a kind of unity in which, without eradicating human strength and personality, God manifests Himself as one that *worketh* in him *both to will and to do* (Phil. 2:13); and the person, according to the Apostle, does not live but Christ lives in him (cf. Gal. 2:20). This is not only the person's goal, but also the goal of God Himself. All is created in God and endures in God. Free creatures are given over to their own volition, but not finally and not forever, so that they would give themselves to God All-powerful, not making any particular kingdom of themselves independent of God's kingdom.

It may seem strange that communion with God must be attained when it is already present, or is given through the Sacrament of Baptism or Confession, for it is said: *For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ* (Gal. 3:27); or: *For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God* (Col. 3:3). Indeed, according to a simple understanding God is everywhere: *That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us* (Acts. 17:27), and He is ready to abide in anyone who is ready to receive Him. Only lack of desire, coarseness and sinfulness keep us from Him. Now that the penitent has renounced everything and given himself to God, what hinders God from dwelling in him?