

**Who Is God?  
Who Am I?  
Who Are You?**

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## Introduction

# SOME PEOPLE REALLY UNDERSTAND YOU

In the immense treasure house of the early Christian Church are countless gems of holy wisdom which the world has not used much for some time now. Among them is a whole system of Christian psychology, a way to get full knowledge of yourself from God. The art of acquiring self-knowledge from God was already highly developed within the first few centuries of Christianity. It is described in what are generally called “the patristic writings”—writings by very holy people in the early Church. Many of those holy teachers took part in the great ecumenical councils, which established the Creed, the worship services, the theology, and the canon law of the Church. Many were courageous martyrs. Many were priests. And many were laymen. They are called “holy fathers,” because they helped people to be born in God, brought people to life spiritually. These holy fathers (and anyone in the modern world who is like them) are the good shepherds God promised he would send to guide and take care of us. God himself lives in the good shepherds and tells them what to do for us and what to teach us. We know from the Bible that “holy men speak as they are moved by the Holy Spirit” (II Pet. 1:21).

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we

might know the things that are freely given to us by God.

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches.—I Cor. 2:12,13

So holy people don't just give you fancy theories about God and men; they give you facts. The apostles who told us about God in the Bible said, "We speak to you about things which we have actually seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). The fathers in the early Church were like the apostles. They taught only what they really knew about God from personal experience. "What we know," said one of them named Hesychius, "we pass on by writings. And what we have seen on our journey, we testify to those who wish to accept our words." All the fathers were like that. They lived in constant communion with God day in and day out, and then wrote letters and books to tell us what life with God is like. When anyone talks to you honestly, out of his own experience like that, it's quite easy to believe him. As one of them, Saint Gregory of Sinai, said, "That man ministers the Gospels who, having participated in them himself, can also actively pass on to others the light of Christ. Like some divine planter, he sows the Word on the fields of his listeners' souls."

You can most easily recognize God's holy shepherds by how much they agree with one another. This is because they don't try to interpret God's Word by themselves; instead, they listen to how the Holy Spirit interprets it. Then when they get the message straight, they explain it to other people. There are hundreds of holy fathers whose writings have come down to us; and all their individual

experiences led them to identical discoveries about what God is like and what human beings are like, because they let the Holy Spirit interpret everything for them. That shows that God is in them and in their thinking—because "He is the God that makes men to be of one mind" (Ps. 68:6). Only God could give that many different people exactly the same answers to so many important questions in life.

Holy people experience this agreement with one another for the most amazing but truly simple reason. It's because they become so purified of all their sins and selfish urges that when they look out through themselves, they see the truth very clearly. Anything we look through, whether it's a pair of glasses or a telescope or a microscope, has to be clean if we're going to see something through it with perfect accuracy. If there are spots on a microscope lens, a scientist will get a distorted picture of whatever he's trying to look at. The same thing is true of us when we try to see truth, because we have to look through the lens of our own senses and thinking processes. If we have blobs of sins and selfish concerns on our lens, we're not going to get a really clear view of what truth is. It's not possible to see the truth clearly when you are spiritually unclean and all stirred up with uncontrolled emotions, any more than it's possible to see a fish perfectly through muddy water. The reason people have often disagreed so violently about the Christian faith is that they've tried to get at the answers without first becoming saints, and you can't do that. You've got to be a saint and actually live with God in order to understand what life is all about. Otherwise, even with the best I.Q. on earth, you're going to make a lot of mistakes. There were a few men in the early Church who were

awfully bright thinkers but weren't quite purified enough to see the truth as clearly as others did. So the fathers never refer to them (unless they have to correct some extremely serious error) and just quietly write in such a way as to counteract their mistakes without mentioning any names.

The reason that such great differences and mistakes have arisen among commentators is that most of them, paying no sort of attention towards purifying the mind, rush into the work of interpreting the Scriptures, and in proportion to the density of impurity of their hearts form opinions that are at variance with and contrary to each other's and to the Faith, and so are unable to take in the light of truth.—John Cassian

The most splendid witness of God's shepherds is not their personal holiness, not their incredible spiritual power (for they performed all sorts of miracles), nor even their glorious martyrdoms. It is their unity. Unity is the height of obedience to Christ, who said, "He that receives whom-ever I send receives me; and he that receives me receives him that sent me" (Jn. 13:20). The holy fathers, from so many various lands and different centuries, all receive one another with love. They are guided by one another and frequently study and quote each other's writings. They rejoice in their spiritual agreement and their unity in God. As one of them has said, "The words of the saints never disagree if they are carefully examined; all alike speak the truth, wisely changing their judgments on particular subjects when necessary." This beautiful unity, which is the reward for perfectly loving God and loving one another, is

an answer to Jesus' own prayer—"that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us" (Jn. 17:20,21).

Have you ever thought how odd it is that we seek so much guidance in other things and so little in how to live our lives? When you are thinking of entering a profession, like music or medicine or law, it seems very important to choose the best teachers you can find, doesn't it? You wouldn't run on hunches, or on your own natural talent, or on advice from people who don't know much about the subject you're interested in. But no worldly profession even begins to compare in seriousness with the profession of living your life successfully. When we stop to think about it, we all know that no profession is much help to a person who messes up his personal life and can't live happily with others. So can you see that no teachers will ever be so important to you as the ones you choose, either deliberately or accidentally, to guide you in living your life? What are most people doing today? They're letting themselves be guided through life by everything from infantile TV fantasies to confused friends. How can we be so choosy about all the other forms of education and training but never once think soberly about what kind of teachers we're going to get our knowledge of life from? That question came up centuries ago, and here's what a couple of the holy fathers have to say about it.

What then? If a man is unlikely to take an unexplored path without a true guide, if no man will undertake to learn a science or an art without an experienced teacher, who will dare to attempt a practical study of the art of arts and the science of sciences, to enter the mysterious

path leading to God—that is, Life—and venture to sail the boundless mental sea without a guide, a navigator, without true and experienced teachers? Whoever such a man may be, he is deceiving himself indeed, and has gone astray even before starting.—Callistus and Ignatius

Without even knowing us individually, the holy fathers understand us far better than we can understand ourselves, because they have been so close to our Creator that they have learned from him what we are really like. He has taught them marvelous details about human nature—what helps it and what harms it, what things are in its power and what things are not in its power, what experiences it needs to be happy and what experiences rob it of happiness, what thoughts reinforce it with sanity and what thoughts destroy it with insanity. Today their teaching can protect you from some pain, tomorrow lead you into a sudden joy, the next day throw open the door to a love so strong and beautiful you'll hardly be able to believe it.

Only a very small part of what the fathers have to say about human nature has been put into this book. But it's enough to help you discover quite a bit about what your real self is like. Young people who have already read these chapters say it did that for them. They feel that they know themselves better, and have much more confidence in themselves and where they're going, than they did before. I hope the same thing will happen to you, and that God will bless you through the pages you're about to read.

## 1

## HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT YOURSELF?

If someone were to ask you, you could probably give a number of impressions about what you feel you are like. Maybe you'd tell him that you are intelligent, good-looking, athletic, responsible, fairly popular, pretty much all right. Possibly you'd say you think you lack initiative, are easily shoved around, often bored, afraid to let people know when something's bothering you, afraid of disappointing your parents. Or you might say you feel you are gifted in some ways but act selfish and childish in other ways, that you don't terribly like or need other people around you most of the time, that you have the ability to run fairly well on your own steam.

Where do your impressions about yourself come from? Primarily from your parents and from individuals who are in parental positions—foster parents, relatives, intimate family friends, teachers, coaches, or any other adults who have been responsible for you during comparatively long periods in your life. The way they treat us when we are children makes us form strong opinions about what we are and what we can expect from ourselves. These opinions are strongest in our subconscious mind, down inside where you can't see them too clearly most of the time.

If parents or individuals in parent positions treat us as though we're OK, we believe we're OK. If they treat us as though we can't live without them, we become absolutely



convinced that we can't. If they treat us as though we don't need much control (or as if they can't impose it on us), we take it for granted that we are uncontrollable—by anyone, even ourselves. The only people who go overboard with uncontrollable habits like smoking, alcoholism, and most kinds of drug addiction are ones who subconsciously think they're uncontrollable and have to reinforce that idea—because whatever you think about yourself, whether it's something good or something bad, you automatically do everything you can to prove it is so.

Parents may treat us as if we are competent or incompetent to do things; as if we are remarkably bright or a little dense; as if we are pleasant and cooperative or stubborn and revolutionary; as if we are equal with others, or as if we are God's special gift to society; as if we need God, or

as if having them and some other capable people around is enough. Some of the impressions you've gotten about yourself from the way your parents or parental figures have treated you will ring true all your life. To some extent, they have given you real knowledge about yourself, although there can be cases where this is hardly true. Other impressions, you will find, are dead wrong. They are not the real you at all. But mostly you will discover that, even with good parents who have given you all the self-knowledge they possibly can, it just isn't enough to get through life with—not half enough!

When Jesus was twelve years old, he knew it was time to emphasize other relationships besides those with his own earthly family. His parents had taken him to a big feast in Jerusalem. When it was over, they packed up and started home. They'd traveled a whole day before they realized that Jesus hadn't come along with them. Desperately worried, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. It took them three more days to find him. He had gone off and left them for four days!—but only to go to a very safe place, God's Temple, and that's where they finally found him.

And his mother said to him, Son, why have you treated us this way? Your father and I have been looking everywhere for you.

And he said to them, Why have you been looking for me? Didn't you know that now I have to work with my Father?—Lk. 2:48,49

Do you see what he really did? He said he couldn't be with one father because he had to be with another one. He couldn't be with Joseph (who was not his father by blood,

but was in the position of being a father to him while he was a child), because he had to be with his heavenly Father. Do you see that Jesus was moving out of the activities in his earthly, childhood family into the action of his immense heavenly family? Even though he continued to live longer with his parents, his attention was on God's whole family and not just on his mother and Joseph. Later on, he said plainly that "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and my mother" (Mk. 3:35).

The kind of experience Jesus had comes to all of us after we are about twelve years old. We begin to feel that our own parents and our earthly families somehow aren't enough. God puts this feeling into us to show us that it's time to start relating more to our heavenly family. Earthly parents are sufficient for our childhood, but then God wants to fully adopt us—lead us into "the spirit of adoption, whereby we shall call him Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). We can accept God's adoption of us or reject it, just as a human body can accept or reject something transplanted into it from another person. If we accept, it means we start doing our part as full-fledged members of God's family. And accepting God's adoption of us means that, as we physically resemble members of our physical families, we shall now spiritually resemble God and all the members of his spiritual family—his and ours. And as we sometimes inherit material items from our earthly families, we can now inherit spiritual riches and beautiful virtues and the same gift that Jesus inherited—resurrection from death.

Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it is not clear in this life what we shall be some day; but we know that, when God appears, we shall be like him.—Jn. 3:2

The Spirit of God makes it obvious that we are his children, and we can see it ourselves. Being his children, we are his heirs, and we are joint-heirs with Christ.—Rom. 8:16,17

God lets our physical parents give birth to us and bring us into this world. Then he has holy people, like the apostles and other saints, give birth to us spiritually. We call our spiritual parents "father" because, as Saint Paul says, they have begotten us in Christ. That is, they don't only teach us things about God; they also bring us into an entirely new state of being, into the whole family of God. They do this mainly, of course, by baptizing us and by showing us how to accept the adoption. So through them we are reborn, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn. 1:12,13).

Now we have to make one thing really plain. All our knowledge of ourselves comes primarily from parents or parent figures, first from our physical ones and then from our spiritual ones. The world will be giving you a lot of other knowledge, but not self-knowledge—and I mean even if you include all the psychiatrists you want, unless they are members of God's family and full of God's wisdom about mankind. So if you do not accept membership in God's family and learn about yourself from God, you will never have much more self-knowledge than you've got right now. You will learn to do adult-looking things, but you will not have become mature. You will be grown up physically, but you will never be a real man or real woman. Being grown up is by no means the same thing as being mature. You become mature by getting to know yourself well, and the only way you can do that is by going to God. That's why he said, in his wonderful thunderous voice,





Ask me of things concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands, ask me. I have made the earth, and created man upon it. I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways.—Is. 45:11-13

Another thing you need to realize is that, down in your subconscious mind, you now have some wrong convictions about yourself and what you are like. These subconscious convictions about yourself are extremely powerful, and they will force you to act on them whether you consciously want to or not. Most of them are much more powerful than your mind is, and you cannot think or reason your way out of them. Without help from God, we can't even always determine exactly what they are. For instance, a person with

a subconscious conviction that he is not lovable can spend years trying to cultivate friendships, get people to like him, make even one person love him. But the subconscious conviction will win out, by forcing him to do more things to turn people off than his brain can think of doing to turn them on. And he will have no idea, consciously, why he can't succeed in getting someone to love him. Also, if anyone were actually to love him, he wouldn't be able to believe it because of his conviction that he is not lovable.

God's Holy Spirit is the only thing there is that can barrel in and smash up the errors in your subconscious mind, and the confusion that comes from them. That's partly what our rebirth into God's family is all about.



When we are reborn into God's family, we are healed of sin. Now you may wonder what on earth sin could have to do with your wrong convictions about yourself. Well, do you know what the early Christians say that sin is? It's anything unreasonable, anything irrational. That's because everything unreasonable tends to destroy us, and self-destruction is terrific sin.

Whatever is done through error of reason is transgression, and is rightly called sin.—Clement of Alexandria

We are virtuous or sinful according to whether we use things sensibly or stupidly. Evil is an erroneous judgment about things accompanied by their wrong use.—Maximus the Confessor

Isn't it irrational to think certain things about yourself that aren't true? And isn't it unreasonable to use yourself, as a result of these wrong convictions, in some way that doesn't connect with what you really are? That's sin. It's what people do when they're separated from God. And that's what the Bible is talking about when it says that in baptism we die to sin—we die to everything unreasonable and start living a life that makes sense, the life in God, if we accept God's adoption of us. That way we can die to our wrong convictions about ourselves, finally leaving the memory and confusion of them behind us. God rears us as his children when we accept his adoption, and the convictions he gives us about ourselves are all true and right.

Have you ever heard people say that teen-agers are partly still children and partly adults? Maybe now you can see that that's not exactly true. Actually, you're both. You are an adult in your earthly family and a child in your

heavenly family. Yes, with your parents you are now an adult. But with God you are a child. You can expect God to be quite indulgent with you, because you are a child of his. But you can't reasonably expect your parents to indulge you as a child any longer. You are now equally responsible with them for your family's welfare. They are doing things for you, and you have to do things for them. They are supporting you, so you should try to do whatever they ask of you. There is nothing childish about obeying those who support you. That's just fair play. Some day you'll have to do it for an employer who gives you a salary to live on, and he's apt to tell you to do things that seem just as dumb as some of the things parents tell us to do.

It is not to babies that God said, "Honor your father and your mother." They wouldn't know what he was talking about. It is to young adults who can read the message. When you are an adult, something adult is called for—namely, understanding your parents, instead of expecting all the understanding to be on their side the way it was when you were a child. One thing it's nice to understand about parents is that, if even Jesus' parents were worried and tried to question him when he left them and went about his Father's business, your parents certainly aren't going to do any better than his parents did! When you become preoccupied with yourself, with all the growing you have to do and the experiences you have to have in God's family, your parents are bound to misinterpret what is going on sometimes. They may think you are indifferent, or lazy, or moody, or selfish. You have to expect this. You also have to stop forming impressions about yourself from the way they treat you. If they treat you now as though you were a child, it doesn't mean that you are one. All you



have to do is just realize that, and also realize it's not easy for them to see you as an adult after they've spent so many years with you as a child. Then you can aim at the completely adult thing—give your parents all the help they request, and all the courtesy and consideration you can, but at the same time give plenty of attention to your growth in God.

Where parents cause no impediment or hindrance in things belonging to God, it is our bounden duty to give way to them, and there is great danger in not doing so; but when they require anything unseasonably, and cause hin-

drance in any spiritual matter, it is unsafe to obey.—John Chrysostom

It is our duty to esteem holy teachers above our parents—because they are the means of our well-being, but parents are only the means of our being.—Constitutions of the Holy Apostles

In this business of starting to live in God's family and getting a lot of self-knowledge from God, you should know that it doesn't even slightly matter whether you have any faith to start with. Once there was a paralyzed man lying beside a pool of water—you may have heard about it in church school. Jesus walked up to him and said, "Do you know who I am?" (He probably meant, Do you know I am the Christ and I can heal you?) The man said no, he had no idea who Jesus was. Did Jesus figure he had no faith, and just walk off? Not at all. He healed that poor invalid on the spot, and it wasn't until later on that the man found out he'd been healed by the Son of God.

Why did Jesus not require faith of this man, as he did in the case of others, saying, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" It was because the man did not yet clearly know Who he was.—John Chrysostom

But at least, when Jesus came up, the man didn't drive him away. When Jesus asked him whether he wanted to be healed, he didn't bitterly reply, "Quit putting me on, get lost." He was open. That's all anyone needs to be. So if you aren't a pillar of faith, don't worry about it. And don't ever pretend to have any faith you really haven't got. It just makes you feel sneaky and uncomfortable, and it doesn't

make any difference to God at all. The early saints, teachers of thousands of new Christians, often used to say, "In the nature of things, knowledge comes before faith." Isn't that perfectly true? Don't you have to get to know someone before you can have faith in him? How do you get to know someone? By hearing about him, by being with him, listening to him, talking with him. We get to know about various foods in the same way, by tasting them. We have to try them out before we can see whether they agree with us or not. That's what Scripture invites us to do with God—it says, "Taste, and see how gracious the Lord is!" No faith required for that. As you read the chapters ahead, you can figure that's what you're doing, tasting God's Word.



## WHAT IS COVERING UP THE REAL YOU?

If you merely watch an actor play several different roles, you don't get much of a clue as to what he's really like, do you? Before we come to God for self-knowledge, that's what we are in a way—actors whose real lives are still pretty much a mystery. We are playing some roles too. You see, there are other thoughts and expressions coming through us besides our own. We think they're coming from our real selves, but they're not. The holy physicians of the Church call them "passions." These passions are in all of us. They act through us and keep us confused about what we are really like. We assume that whatever we say and do comes from our own thinking. But not at all! A whole lot of it is coming from one passion or another and hasn't got a thing to do with our real selves or our own thinking. If you want to know yourself, the first thing that's necessary is to find out what yourself is not. And the way to do that is to get to know what the passions are, because they keep you from seeing your real self just exactly as thick weeds can keep you from seeing the flowers that are growing under them. If you get the impression that these passions are parts of your own personality, it's like mistaking a lovely flower garden for a weed patch just because no one's bothered to pull out the weeds and expose the flowers. One saint, after he was converted, realized that he had previously thought the



passions were parts of his own self—and that it had made him discouraged about ever becoming a good person.

I used to be held down by the errors of my previous life, from which I did not believe I could possibly be delivered. I used to think my passions were actually parts of me, and belonged to me!—Cyprian

Most passions are ordinary, natural feelings that get out of control—like a campfire that flares up and finally destroys a vast forest, or a stream that swells into a devastating flood. Loving yourself, for instance, is a normal and important feeling to have. Self-love is given to us by God, to make us take care of ourselves, work for the things we need, care for people who mean a lot to us—and most of

all to make us go to God, because that is the greatest benefit we can give ourselves. But when that normal self-love becomes excessive, it gets completely unreasonable and uncontrollable. It makes people want to eat until they're sick and fat, drink until they're drunk, lie around until they get weak. They hate work and want everyone else to do their work for them; they want masses of money, so they can live in luxury and not have to move. They become willing to kill anyone who threatens to take something away from them, or who keeps them from getting whatever they want. That is not the healthy self-love God gave us. It is what we call the passion of self-love, a huge emotional force that destroys humanity.

Hate is another example of a natural feeling which can become a passion. Hate is not the bad thing it is made out to be. Normal hate is nothing but a reasonable desire to avoid what hurts us, to turn away from things that are



not helpful to us. The fathers say that God has given us hate in order to turn us away from sin, which damages us. We are supposed to hate sin, have a strong dislike of it. Hate turns us away from anything or anyone that could stop us from getting to God. But when this natural dislike goes further than that—makes us get excited, stamp our feet and yell, want to get even with someone or smash something, when it stirs us into a fury so that we are ready to attack our fellow men like enraged animals—then it is no longer normal hate. It is the passion of hate. Once it is in someone, he hardly knows what he is doing any more. All the passions disturb us like this and keep us from being—or seeing—our natural selves.



Passion is an excessive feeling or appetite, going beyond what is reasonable. Passions are a disturbance of our soul contrary to our nature, in disobedience to reason. Passion is not natural, and it ruins our nature instead of fulfilling it.—Clement of Alexandria

When we speak of all the passions together, we call them “the world.” So when Christians speak of renouncing the world, they mean renouncing the passions.—Isaac of Syria

In this chapter, we shall talk especially about pride. The same thing we have said about self-love and hate turning into passions is true of pride. Normal pride is a wonderful feeling. It is often a feeling of triumph. We take pride in something we have done well, either alone or as a group. We are proud of our football team, our school, certain personal achievements, the way we’ve handled things in a crisis, and so on. That feeling of pride is a very deep satisfaction with what we have done or with something we’ve been part of. When a woman makes a dress that turns out perfectly, she is filled with satisfaction. She is proud of it. A man who builds a beautiful boat feels the same way. He is fully satisfied with his work; he is proud of it. That’s what pride is like when it’s healthy. When we know ourselves well, use ourselves in a good way, and do our best in life, we quite often have those wonderful moments when we feel totally satisfied and proud of what we have done.

But when people want just the feeling of pride without the right reason for it, without having done anything that could actually make them feel proud, then they are getting into the passion of pride. Instead of taking pride in how

they keep themselves, they take pride in the looks they were born with—something they had nothing to say about. They take pride in the money their families have, when they did nothing to earn it. They take pride in being related to influential people, although they did not make those relationships. And very worst of all, they take pride in purely imaginary things. They get a feeling of pride from imagining they are big shots like God and can do works that really only God can do.

They take pride in thinking they can judge other people, which only God can do. They take pride in imagining that they can make peace, whereas only God's Spirit working in us can make peace. They take pride in thinking they can save the world with their knowledge, whereas no one but God can save even a single person. They take pride in thinking they can make men love and get along with each other, but only God can put love into human beings. The passion of pride convinces a person, down inside himself, that he can get along without God—that he in fact is getting along without God. He becomes like a little branch on a tree, thinking it can survive without the trunk and the root. He is ignorant of how life works. He doesn't know it would all stop without God.

The passion of pride consists of two kinds of ignorance; a person with pride is ignorant of God's help, and ignorant of his need for God. So pride is lack of knowledge about God and about man.—Maximus the Confessor

Now when the passion of pride makes someone think he can get along without God, that doesn't mean without any god at all. No human being can stand to be without

any god, because a god represents protection, safety, a way out of trouble. A god is like the captain of a ship. If the captain is swept overboard in a storm, someone's got to hurry up and take his place and try to keep the ship afloat, whether he knows which way to go or not. Otherwise you have certain disaster. Obviously the true God never gets swept overboard. But people who are filled with the passion of pride think he does. They can't see a sign of him anywhere, so they rush in and try to take over his place. Then they begin to imagine that they really belong in his place. They start believing that they are the ultimate power in the world, and that there is no being higher than they are. They feel that whatever things are



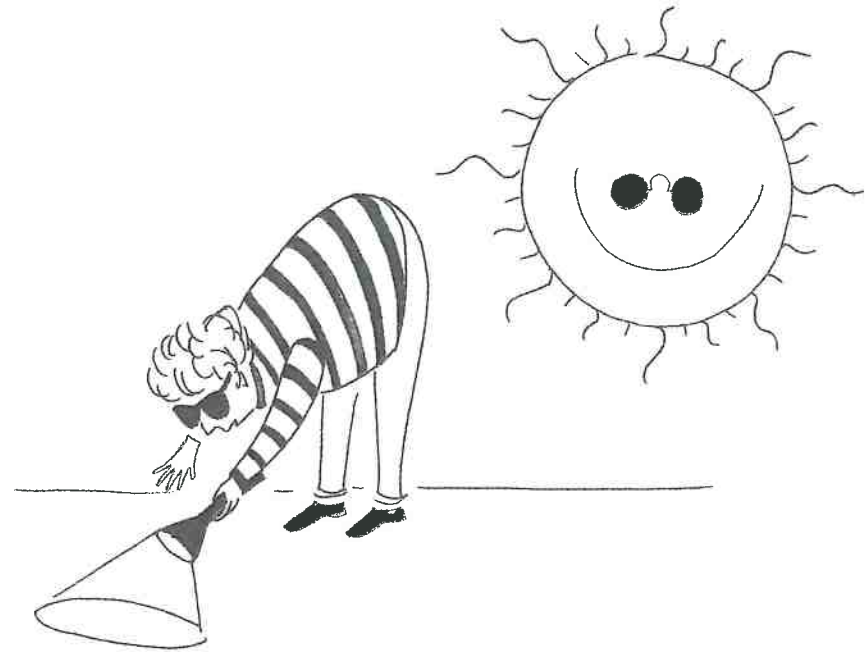
done on earth, they will have to do them. This awful pride—completely mixing oneself up with God—actually makes people go crazy, like the ones who think they're Julius Caesar or Teddy Roosevelt or something. Imagining you're God is about as crazy as it's possible to get, only people aren't always institutionalized for it.

Therefore are my people gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge of God.—Is. 5:13

You will fall into utter madness if you think you are loftier and greater than your Creator.—Irenaeus

A person submerged in pride can scarcely avoid going out of his mind. He will be in extreme danger of suffering this.—Simeon the New Theologian

When I first heard about this passion of pride, I wanted to understand it better. So one night before going to bed, I asked God to explain it more clearly to me. He sent me a really fantastic dream. It was night, but you could still make things out slightly. There was the silhouette of a very small man walking on a long ocean beach. He carried a dim flashlight and was bent way down over it, laboriously making his way around piles of rocks and stepping over big pieces of driftwood to avoid stumbling. Slowly the sun began to rise behind him, higher and higher, until at last it poured its dazzling light over the whole beach and across the water as far as you could see. But what was the ridiculous little man doing? He was still leaning down over his tiny flashlight, groping his way along just as he'd been doing during the night! He obviously had no idea that the



sun had risen, and that the whole world was brilliant with light. He thought he was still guiding himself by the light of those feeble batteries. I heard someone say, "That is pride." To be utterly unaware of the light from God—to think that the only light there is, is the light we make ourselves! That's exactly what the Gospel says pride is like. It says, "And the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness does not see it" (Jn. 1:5). Scripture says in many places that people who suffer from the passion of pride are like the blind. They cannot see themselves. They cannot see God. They cannot see God's light.

They know nothing, neither do they understand anything; they go walking on and on in darkness.—Ps. 82:5



Can you imagine what being blind is really like? Try blindfolding yourself for an hour and getting a meal or cleaning the garage. You'll feel awkward, stumble, possibly injure yourself. You'll feel alone and unsure of yourself. Well, that's how your poor brain has to stumble around when it's blindfolded by those wrong convictions of yourself that we spoke about. They come from the passion of pride—which, you remember, is ignorance of God and of ourselves. Ignorance, for your brain, is a blindfold. When we're ignorant of what we are like, then our brain can't see where it's going. So it causes us to be confused and to stumble in life, to make serious mistakes and bump into unhappy consequences. Any wrong convictions you've got tied around your brain are going to make you have to feel your way painfully around, instead of letting you operate freely and naturally. And these wrong convictions will never disappear by themselves. They are tied on, like tight blindfolds, and won't just fall off. We normally get rid of them only when we ask God to heal us of the passion of pride, which is our blindness and ignorance.

Many people have asked God to do this, and always with wonderful results. They just keep saying over and over, wherever they happen to be, "Lord Jesus Christ, deliver me from pride" or "Lord Jesus Christ, deliver me from pride and give me self-knowledge." Other than that, they don't really do anything. The fathers say, "Pray, and do not labor much to conquer your passions by your own strength. Prayer will destroy them in you" (Way of the Pilgrim). Why will prayer destroy them in us? Because God answers our prayer, whether we feel able to believe it or not. He has promised that always and everywhere he will answer anyone's prayer for deliverance from pride.



I will heal the blind; I will lead them in new ways. I will make darkness light for them, and confused things clear to them. These things will I do for them, and I will never leave them without my help.—Is. 42:16

If you pray persistently for deliverance from pride, you'll start finding out about yourself in all sorts of ways. You'll have dreams, sudden realizations about yourself, unusual experiences that show you what you are like, new ideas that occur in your thinking and immediately give you a deeper understanding of yourself. Some of your wrong convictions about yourself will start coming to light quite soon. All at once you'll say, "Why, I always thought I

didn't like people, but now I see that I really do." Or you'll notice, "I'm awfully conceited and never even realized it before." Or you'll find, "I thought I wasn't very bright all these years, but I obviously have an ability for good clear thinking." Praying for deliverance from pride will remove the blindfolds of your wrong convictions about yourself, so that your brain will finally be able to see things clearly. Then instead of stumbling in blindness, you'll be walking in the wonderful light of God.

When we speak of God's light, don't think that we mean only a light to see by and get things cleared up with. It is certainly that, but it is so much more—just as sunlight is more than mere illumination. God's light is nourishment and strength, power and life. As sunlight makes plants grow, God's light is the food that makes us grow. You know it would be impossible to live by feeding on your own limbs, or for mankind to survive and grow strong by eating itself, by cannibalism. Well, that is profoundly true psychologically and spiritually. We human beings cannot live on our own ideas and inspirations. You see? That would be mental cannibalism. So what we live on is divine food, given to us in God's light. Some beautiful holy writers teach us about this.

Just as the life of the body does not come from itself but from outside itself, that is from the fruits of the earth, so God has arranged for the soul to have meat, drink, and clothing—everything which truly gives life to the soul—not from itself, but from his own Spirit and Light.—Callistus and Ignatius

Now, our soul lives. But it lives not because it is alive by itself, but because it partakes of the divine food from God.—Justin Martyr



most of the middle-aged people in our country, because they are blinded with pride and have not come into the light of God to be fed by it, are no more mature than teenagers are right now.

David, as a young man, moved into the light of God. God delivered him from pride and showed him what he was really like and what he would be able to do. Then God fed him and strengthened him with divine food, and made him grow into full manhood very early. David could see that, by living in the light of God and being nourished by it, he had become more of a man than many people who were much older than he.

Lord, I have more understanding than my teachers, because I study (am nourished by) what you have told me.

I am wiser than the aged, because I live on your teachings.—Ps. 119:99,100

If all people your age would pray to be delivered from pride and would move into the light of God right now, your generation would absolutely revolutionize the world—because you would become filled with the Holy Spirit of God, with his love and strength and wisdom. But even starting just with yourself, you can revolutionize your own life. If you start praying now to be delivered from the passion of pride and to be led into the full light of God, you'll become a person you would never otherwise have been. You'll become a person greatly superior to what you would otherwise have been.

## EVERYBODY PLAYS GOD

We get the feeling that we can take over God's place when we are very, very young. Even as babies, we expect to get heavenly results when we make demands. When God says, "let there be light," then there's certainly going to be light. We fully expect to operate on that same basis ourselves. We expect our teddy bears to stay put and our blocks to stay balanced even when we don't pile them up very strategically. We expect people to accept us whenever we smile and reach for them. We expect to have all our needs met, to be protected, and generally to continue in a sort of blissful state. This infant ignorance actually comes from the first trickling of the passion of pride—from being unable to see God and consequently assuming that we ourselves must be God.

As we grow older, we make more and more plans. We expect our plans to turn out well, the way all God's plans turned out well when he created everything. Pride makes us feel so much like God that we can't imagine being unable to carry out our innermost plans. So we go ahead as if we were all-powerful and all-wise, able to make beautiful and perfect lives for ourselves. We set up ambitious schedules and high goals, and we assume we shall live up to these aims all alone, without any help from God. We also assume that all our ambitions are good—that we know the difference between good and evil, just like God, and that everything we want is quite fine and beneficial. We



haven't the least idea that God is out there trying to get it through our heads that

My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways; and so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts.—Is. 55: 8,9

You see many people who make very ambitious plans for their personal lives, or for their businesses or careers. Now there is nothing wrong with having a goal you hope to achieve in life, or with working hard to accomplish things which you believe are God's will for you. In fact, it's im-

portant to do those things. It's only when you set your mind on something and count on it as if you can positively make it happen that you're in trouble. The passion of pride often makes people so sure that everything's going to work the way they've got it figured out that it detaches them from reality. They can't even see the possibility of things not turning out the way they expect. They feel so utterly like gods that it never occurs to them they could fail in anything they're counting on. The Bible tells about such a man and what happened to him.

The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, What shall I do? I have no room to store all my fruits. And he said, this is what I'll do. I will pull down my barns and build greater ones, and there I'll store all my fruits and my goods.

Then I will say to my soul, Soul, you have lots of supplies laid up for many years; quit working now; eat, drink, and be merry.

But God said to him, You fool, this very night your soul shall be required of you.—Lk. 12:16-20

The main thing the passion of pride does, then, is fill us with expectations of being able to accomplish a lot of aims without God. One of the passions with which the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness was this passion of pride. He tried to get Jesus to go after worldly power by making a deal on his own and leaving his heavenly Father out of it.

The devil took him up to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and the devil said, All these things will I give you if you will fall down and worship me.

But Jesus said to him, Get away, Satan; for it is written, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."—Mat. 4:8-10

So any time you leave God out of any plan, and out of your fondest dreams, it is because the passion of pride is acting in you. Any time we hope to produce heavenly fruits by ourselves, that is pride. Those fruits are love, wisdom, justice, peace, kindness, compassion, patience, every beautiful and every perfect quality you can think of. Whenever you see those qualities in people, they have come from God—not from the people by themselves. Now look at yourself and see whether you have been expecting something of yourself that really comes only from God, that he has to put into us before we can have it. Were you expecting to be fair and just to people? You can't until God shows you, in your personal life, how real justice works. Were you expecting to be friendly and kind to others? You can't until God has delivered you from certain fears and insecurities, until his Holy Spirit has strengthened you, and until you have recognized God's kindness in your own life. Were you expecting to love someone with all your heart? You can't until Jesus first comes into your heart and teaches it what love really is, and gives you the power and understanding to love someone else.

All the beautiful feelings and virtues and experiences we naturally yearn for are such that we can't have one of them without God. But the passion of pride makes us expect to have them by ourselves. Trying to run on our own steam like that, as if we didn't need divine help, is the same as putting ourselves above God. So the Bible says pride makes us "exalt" ourselves. Because this passion makes us expect such beautiful, lofty things of ourselves,

we are riding for a bad fall. The things we expect don't happen. And remember, all people have the passion of pride; so all people are sooner or later going to have this fall and the disappointments that go with it, even if their power failure is delayed until they grow fairly old. Expecting so much of ourselves is partly what causes the sadness in human life.

The pride of your heart has deceived you. Although you exalt yourself like an eagle, and although you expect to live among the stars, I will bring you down, says the Lord.—Obad. 1:3,4

The fall comes when things we fully expect of ourselves don't happen. We were expecting to have wonderful personality traits, but it turns out that they aren't all that wonderful. We were expecting to be lovable, but it turns out that people aren't loving us very deeply. We expected to be important, but it turns out that we don't even attract much interest. We were expecting to be pretty cool in our way of handling things, but instead we're often stupid and awkward. We can't manage to do some of the things we care most about—like fitting in with certain groups and getting certain people to like us. Whatever disappointments you feel in yourself, they've come because the passion of pride has made you expect something too perfect to be realistic—something that only comes from God and can't be manufactured by human beings. The whole world today is heartbroken and sore and bitter, because it has expected too much of human beings.

Your disappointments with yourself don't mean that anything is wrong with you as a human being at all. They mean that something is wrong with your idea of what you



are, that to some extent you are thinking of yourself as a god instead of as an ordinary human being. When you dream you are supposed to be something wonderful and then turn out to be just an ordinary human being, of course it's awfully upsetting at first. When it happens to us, we feel that we're absolutely no good at all. But what we're really finding out is that we're no good as gods. In fact, as gods we're total failures. When we have this experience of finding out we're not the gods we thought, it's the beginning of breaking through the passion of pride and discovering that we are real human beings—which, as you shall see, is not at all a bad thing.

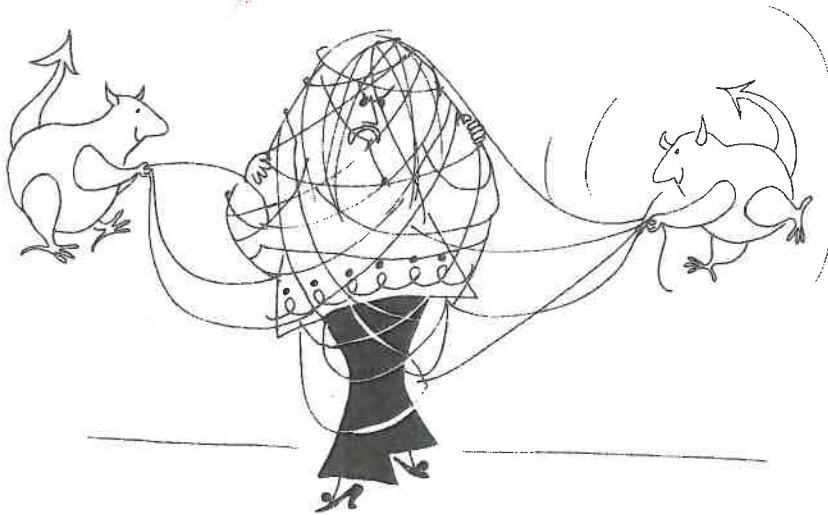
When people blinded by pride meet with failures, they are astounded, like people who meet with something unexpected, and they are thrown into confusion and grow faint-hearted. For they see, fallen and prone on the ground, that image of themselves upon which they had put all their hopes and expectations.

A man free of pride is also disappointed when he fails; but he is not thrown into confusion and is not upset, because he knows the failure came from his human weakness, which is nothing unexpected or new to him.—Unseen Warfare

When God lets us fall to cure our passion of pride, here's what usually happens. Instead of expecting the wonderful things we used to of ourselves, we start expecting all the worst of ourselves. Or we may go back and forth a little, first expecting something marvelous and then expecting nothing but miserable failures. Mostly we expect to be failures, to be rejected by other people, to be left out of interesting activities. We lose confidence in our own personality and our own thinking and our own worthiness. More and more, we start going along with the thinking and behavior of any people who will accept us and include us in their little group. When we lose confidence in ourselves and in our own thinking, we invariably allow people to lead us into directions that may not be wrong in themselves but are wrong for us personally—wrong educational pursuits, wrong pastimes, wrong careers, wrong social environments. These wrong environments are like big nets thrown over us, which prevent the real self from being able to move freely. Then we feel trapped, frightened, and hostile, just as any creature would.

If someone dreams of reaching on high, moved by the suggestion of pride, Satan easily enslaves him in his nets.—Gregory of Sinai

Another thing that happens when people lose confidence because of the passion of pride is that they reach a point where they undersell themselves, constantly talk themselves down. That makes them quit trying to do things they'd be interested in doing, and in a very sad way it protects them from failures—because if you don't try anything, you won't fail in anything strictly speaking. Some of the individuals most afflicted by pride are the ones who are most intelligent and gifted among us. When they fall and lose their confidence, their grades in school may start going down. They may lose the common sense they used to have, and start doing and saying a lot of dumb things.



If there's an opportunity to do something that would get them included in a good group or give them self-respect and confidence, they'll frequently shy away from it. In particular, they'll shy away from people who are their intellectual, cultural, and social equals. They'll nearly always gravitate toward rather bizarre, mixed-up, uncreative friends. They may claim they only want to help such people; but that's never true, because they aren't healthy enough to be moved by simple virtues like generosity and love.

This is the cause of their perverseness, namely ignorance of themselves; and if any one, having gained the knowledge of the truth, shall have shaken off this ignorance, he will know to what object his life is to be directed, and how it is to be spent.—Lactantius

Sometimes people who have lost their confidence will try to cover up their feelings of inadequacy by pretending (to themselves as well as to others) to be loaded with confidence. They become positively obsessed with being right about everything and knowing more than anybody else. Usually they talk incessantly, and it's very difficult to have just a short conversation with them or get a quick straight answer to a question from them. They tend to accept only their own opinions about everything, and they are sure they have the latest dope on any subject you might bring up. They are, as some Christian writers have said, unteachable. No one, however wise, can teach them anything, because they aren't receptive to anybody else's views. They seem to assume that other people don't know anything that will be of value to them. So when they are quiet

in a conversation, they aren't listening so much as waiting for their turn to talk again. They can often analyze other people beautifully, but without any feeling or compassion. As Saint John Cassian said, people full of pride are able to be superb critics of others, but they haven't even the faintest suspicion of how much is wrong with themselves. People who've had an unusual amount of pride, and have therefore had unusually big disappointments in themselves, will nearly all go through this stage of thinking they know everything and criticizing others for awhile. So the Bible calls our attention to it, in order to make us realize that we have this unmistakable symptom of pride.

And why are you looking at the mote (small particle) in your brother's eye, but paying no attention to the big beam that is in your own eye?—Matt. 7:3

What you might call the classic symptom of pride—and you can see it in people of all ages—is a sort of abnormal clinging to one's family. You see, the tendency to get ourselves confused with God, which is what the passion of pride basically is, is already in us when we are born. But the thing that dangerously reinforces it is having parents who look too much like gods to us when we are little children, parents who seem so adequate for all our needs that we are never led or compelled to go to the real God, or parents whom we never see going to the real God themselves. That kind of environment strengthens in us the idea that a human being can be God. It makes us expect to be gods the way our parents seem to be gods. If we're in that kind of situation, we get an unusually strong case of the passion of pride—which means that we're going to



have unusually big failures and disappointments in life.

When these failures come, we are plunged into confusion and despair. A person in that trouble reaches for a life buoy. If someone can persuade him to let God be his life buoy, everything will eventually be straightened out. God will show him that things aren't half so awful as they feel, that he only has to realize he's a human being and not a god. Then he will recover a healthy self-confidence—although for someone very sick with pride, it may take a long time. But if God isn't presented to him, he will grab at the only security he has ever known, his parents. No matter how often he fails, they will usually encourage him. They will often have shared with him his high expectations of himself, so they will be sympathetic with his disappointments and failures. They may remind him of wonderful and promising things he did as a child, and that will



comfort him a little now that he feels like a failure. Nearly always they will offer him shelter or money or other material help—their ability to do this is partly what has made them look like gods. They may also keep some social connections alive for him, which he feels he could not do so well by himself. So it just seems to be a law of nature that the more anyone is a failure because of pride, the more he will try to live on the success and capabilities and reputation of his family or his ancestors. Whatever they've done that looks good, he will claim and talk about almost as if he'd done it himself.

Pride in one's family or ancestry has always been an extremely serious threat to spiritual and psychological growth. If you're going to boast about your family or your ancestors, one thing is sure: you'll never be in a position to boast much about your relationship with God. Saint Paul repeatedly tried to show the other Jews that they must not depend on their ancestry for their salvation. The Jews were justly proud of Abraham and Moses and all their great prophets. Theirs was the one royal family of the whole world. Saint Paul (and later several of the fathers) often told the non-Christian Jews that their God was the true God, that their Law was good and their prophets were saints—but that all these still couldn't make them personally worthy of God's grace. He told them they would have to gain spiritual value of their own, and not depend upon their families or their ancestors.

People who are so full of pride that they become overly dependent upon their parents are bound to resent their parents, because leaning on one's family keeps increasing the feeling of failure—a feeling everybody just naturally hates. The only reason so many younger people are full of resentment and anger against their parents—or institutions



or the establishment or whatever—is that they are so filled with pride, so mixed up about what God is and what human beings are, that they were expecting the older generation to be gods. A lot of the older generation had just as much pride and really tried to play God. But that's their problem. Your problem is only to get rid of the pride in yourself, so you don't play God and pass the game on to your children. Anyone who expects his parents to be gods, and wants to lean on them as if they were, will end up disliking them intensely. If you put your parents first, above God, you'll hate them and also hate God because of the way things will turn out. But if you always put God first and lean completely on him, you will end up truly loving both God and your (merely human) parents.

As we said in the last chapter, you get delivered from the ignorance and confusion of pride simply by asking Jesus to take it out of you. You don't do anything else



about it. It's a spiritual disease which only the Great Physician can heal. As he heals you, you will gradually see who you really are and who God really is. All the little ways in which we secretly confuse ourselves with God will be weeded out. At first you will feel disappointed in yourself, when you discover for sure that you haven't any of the virtues and powers you thought you'd have. But at the same time you'll feel a sensational relief, because you'll be starting to see the answer. It's the real living God, standing by to give you, not just the wonderful traits and powers you were hoping to have, but even far better qualities. You see, the things we dream of being and doing by ourselves only look great to us because we are so ig-

norant. In comparison with the abilities and virtues the Lord will put into you if you let him, they are like so much rubbish.

There is no way to get really deep knowledge of who you are and what you are like except by praying to be healed of pride. This is a prayer God has never failed and will never fail to answer. It is the ancient formula for getting out of any confusion you have about yourself and moving into a really clear view of yourself. One of the first things you discover is a bit of knowledge you already have in your very nature, something that's always been there that you didn't know about. You discover that your real self already knows there's a God and already knows that you need him. That takes one load off your shoulders. You don't have to work at drumming up some kind of faith on your own, because the actual knowledge that you are a human being and that you are meant to live with the Lord is right there like an instinct inside you. The minute enough pride gets cleared away, you see that knowledge popping up without the least effort.

For the knowledge of God's existence has been implanted by him in all of us. It is in us by nature.—John of Damascus

When man was created, a certain knowledge of God was implanted in him, and in all men. That knowledge makes us tend to love God.—Basil the Great

Later—sometimes much later and sometimes just a little later—you meet the Son of God in your heart. You meet Jesus. When that happens, everything changes inside you.

All through your whole being, you realize that you never want to play God again for anything in the world—because having the real God with you is too great a thing to lose. With him there, you don't worry about having any good traits of your own. He's so wonderful you can't even look much at yourself in his presence. You don't have to protect yourself, or care whether you've been a failure, or wonder what's going to happen to you. You're so care-free you can hardly believe it. God's everything, and you know it. He's the complete and perfect answer to everything we are, everything we need, everything we love, everything we hope for. Once you meet him, you know you can't live without him. You love his name and use it reverently all the time. That's what it's like when the passion of pride goes down in you as a result of your prayers. You know—you really know in your heart—who the Lord is and who you are. And you begin to live just at that point. As one of the holy fathers says, "Have you found God?—Then you have found life!"

## DON'T BUY ANY FALSE GUILT

Have you ever had a guilty feeling that you couldn't easily shake off, or maybe a lot of regret about something that you can't seem to help? If so, you may have had those feelings for a right reason, for something you did that really wasn't the thing to do. But the chances are greater, when you haven't yet unloaded the passion of pride, that you had those feelings of guilt or regret for a wrong reason—for something you think you should have done but something God wouldn't expect of you at all. You see, the passion of pride gives us a lot of imaginary obligations and then puts a false sense of guilt in us when we can't live up to them.

If you'll think of pride as a yappy little person egging you on into all sorts of trouble, you'll see what I mean. When we're young, he hangs around getting all excited about our possibilities. Sometimes he shouts, "Oh, are you ever going to be an OK person! You've got some great ideas and really good natural instincts." (Then he whispers about certain things he's pretty sure we'll be able to do.) "Yes, just use your head, and I think you can make life a real ball," he concludes. All that time he's been careful not to let us see God, of course, so he's left us very elated with the thought that we can do these pleasant and worthy things by ourselves. As you know from our last chapter, they are things that only God can do. So naturally we fail to be as wonderful as pride had us dreaming we would be.



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After we find out we aren't so wonderful, and are sitting there feeling bruised and disappointed about it, along comes pride—full of scorn. "What a big dropout! What a dummy! Look at you! What use are you to anyone?" Then he harps endlessly on the things you do worst and things that humiliate you. After he's insulted you to his satisfaction, he walks off and abandons you for a time, leaving you to worry and feel miserably depressed about yourself. When the passion of pride gets a fairly good hold on a person, it repeatedly gets him dizzily high with unreal hopes and then dumps him down into the depths of despair and unworthy feelings like this. It causes what we call a manic-depressive behavior pattern, in which people are

first way up in the clouds and terribly exhilarated and then feel so low and condemned they don't even see much reason to live.

The thoughts that make people this abnormally high and then abnormally hopeless don't come from their real selves. They come from the passion of pride acting in them. And when pride has a really tremendous grip on a person's real self, it unfortunately doesn't produce just high and low emotional experiences—it brings in actual voices and demons that people can hear and see. The demons that come through as a result of a huge amount of pride are real; they are from the devil. They are never produced by human imagination or faulty human chemistry or anything else that is in human nature. A human being



couldn't produce a demon if his life depended on it. Christ said demons are real. Every apostle and disciple and every Christian saint in history believed in them—not only believed in them but in many cases saw and heard them and cast them out of people. Anyone who claims that demons are a product of human imagination, as some individuals have claimed, is saying that God and all the great men of God are liars. There are times when demons bother holy, healthy-minded people for some specific purpose of God's. But usually the appearance and sound of demons come only as a result of overwhelming pride. Virtually all the fathers agree that

Pride is (eventually) followed by the final evil of going out of one's mind, hearing voices, frenzy and visions of demons in the air.—Abba Evagrius

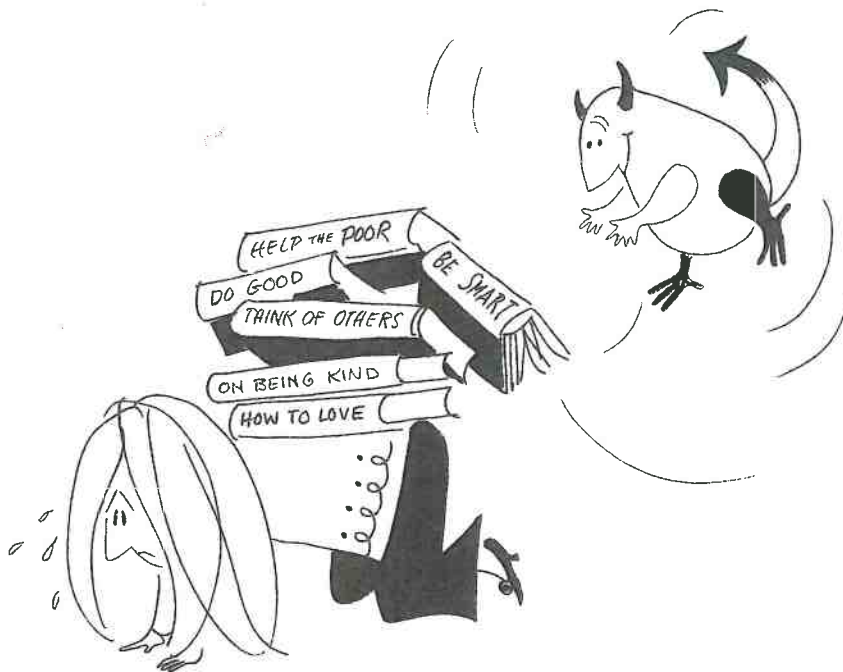
When pride can't get people to expect extravagant things of themselves, it does something that may be even worse. It makes them feel they ought to be doing certain fine and marvelous things, and makes them feel hopeless and guilty because they aren't doing any of them. Like a cruel man overburdening a horse, pride piles heavy false obligations on us until we are nearly crumpled beneath the load. These false obligations are our "shoulds"—the things we have become convinced we "should" do by ourselves. We should avoid offending any other human being. We should make something of ourselves in the world. We should be tolerant and understanding. We should be considerate, generous, kind, and sacrificing. We should love and take care of everybody. We should accept full respon-

sibility for everyone who's unhappy. And so it goes, one devastating obligation after another. Pride makes people condemn and punish themselves unmercifully when they can't meet such obligations. Many of the things pride may suggest to you are all right in themselves, but they're things which are impossible for you to do with your particular personality, or impossible for you to do without growing a great deal spiritually, or impossible for you to do because God has something different in mind for you. And of course every one of them is impossible for you to do by yourself, without God. That's the real catch with false obligations.

Sometimes pride will let a person think he's meeting these false obligations well for quite a long time, let him bask in a feeling of personal success, and only then will pull the rug out from under him and point out what a lousy job he's really been doing. Then a feeling of worthlessness, and often a feeling of being hopelessly doomed to failure, will start building up in the person. Catching false obligations early is a big help. Any time you have even a small feeling of guilt or failure or worthlessness that you can't seem to get out from under, pray to be delivered from pride and false obligations—and keep praying, no matter how long it takes, until the false obligation that has caused your guilt or failure feeling becomes revealed to you so you can dump it. Praying for deliverance from pride always finally exposes any false obligations you may have and shatters your tyrannical fake conscience. It always will show you clearly whether your guilty feelings are coming from false obligations or from real offenses. When Jesus invites those who are heavily burdened to come to him and receive rest, he is including heavy burdens like these im-

possible obligations that pride puts upon us and the cruel guilt and hopelessness that come from them. Going to Jesus relieves us of pride and therefore gives us great mental and emotional rest. The false obligations, which cause constant failures, are wiped away. Then we start to be successful in whatever we do, because we no longer try to accomplish the impossible.

Hold only to what is your own, to what is human, and thus make your burden light. For he who, through pride, makes his burden heavy shall indeed have to bear it himself.—Basil the Great



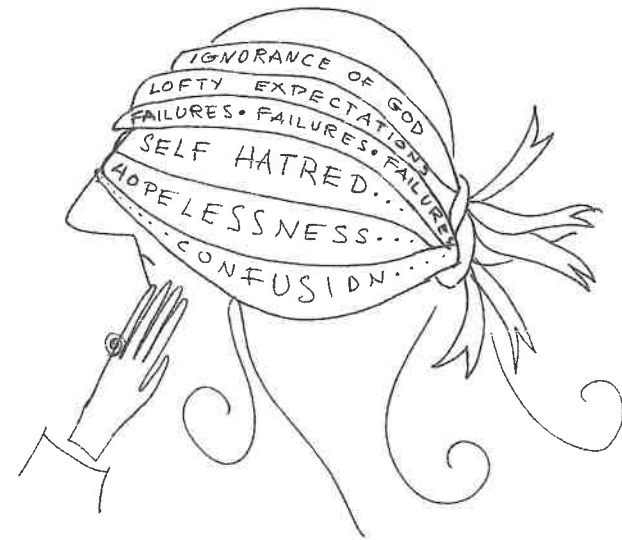
In all that we do, we must look to see not only if a thing is virtuous but whether it is possible, so that we may not enter upon anything we cannot carry out.—Ambrose

False obligations are all the kind of things that, if you could do them, would make you abnormally wonderful, outstanding, quite a lot better and more sensitive-looking than other people with abilities and opportunities similar to yours. Our ordinary obligations—like cleaning house, gardening, repairing things, being faithful to friends, and doing our fair share of the work in family life—don't make us look especially wonderful or exceptional. People who are burdened with a lot of false obligations invariably fall down on what most of us consider to be normal obligations. They tend not to help others with anything. They

make promises and then break them without giving it a second thought. They tell you they'll be at your party or meet you on a certain afternoon, and nine times out of ten they'll back out the last minute with a very unconvincing excuse. Even though they are constantly getting after themselves for not loving and being kind to everybody, they have almost no sense of obligation to other people and are completely inconsiderate most of the time. They rarely notice or feel guilty about the everyday obligations they could be living up to. But they feel terribly guilty and miserable about the false obligations they can't live up to.

The way to get rid of guilt feelings, and also of our false obligations (because we all have some), is by prayer—plus confession. There's no getting around it. The fathers say that without confessing you can't be healed of the passions. The Bible says the same thing in many places. Naturally we confess our sins and weaknesses to God when we pray. But we also have to confess to a priest or a monk or some other fellow Christian. You'll notice that individuals who pray but never confess anything to anyone else usually don't really change much in their lives. That's because they don't want to change very much, and the reason they don't want to change is that they aren't convinced there's that much wrong with them. People who strongly believe something will let you know about it. They will "confess" that they believe it. And any person who really believes he needs the help of God will confess that too. He will go to another Christian and confess his desire to be healed.

For instance, if we see symptoms of the passion of pride in ourselves and want to get rid of it so we can get straightened around and have more self-knowledge, we'll



go and confess these symptoms and confess that we see a lot of pride in ourselves. What are some of the symptoms of pride that we could confess? Making our own plans without having any idea whether what we're planning is something God wants us to do or not. Making important decisions without praying about them or asking fellow Christians for their advice. Thinking we are superior to others (being conceited). Clinging to our families in a childish way. Thinking we know a lot about everything. Putting other people down. Getting in with a wrong crowd (even if it seems accidental or unavoidable). Not doing our share of work that needs to be done. Feeling frustrated in what we're trying to accomplish. Being bored or frequently despondent. Feeling hopeless about ourselves. These are all things which result from the passion of pride. And if you not only pray to be delivered from pride but also confess these symptoms of it, you'll be much more quickly

freed from this passion that causes such mental and emotional disturbance to people.

Sometimes it's hard to find another person in whose presence we can comfortably confess. The fathers said we should "confess the illnesses of our soul to a holy physician capable, with his advice and prayers, of healing us." The early Church taught that we should confess only to a "Spirit-filled" person. Holy confessors like the kind they were talking about could be either laymen or priests. They were people who were especially gifted as confessors. Many of the holy fathers were confessors. But other priests and laymen, who may not be so gifted in counseling, can hear confession and pray with you—and God's healing grace comes either way, with or without a gifted confessor. There are some people it is better to avoid confessing with. One is a person who subtly flatters you. That means someone who makes light of your sin and makes you feel slyly proud of yourself. A person of that sort would be like a doctor who won't tell you your appendix is about to burst, because he doesn't want to upset your feelings.

Those who pretend to be kind and fail to acknowledge your sins are actually sentencing you and laying plots against your true life.—  
Basil the Great

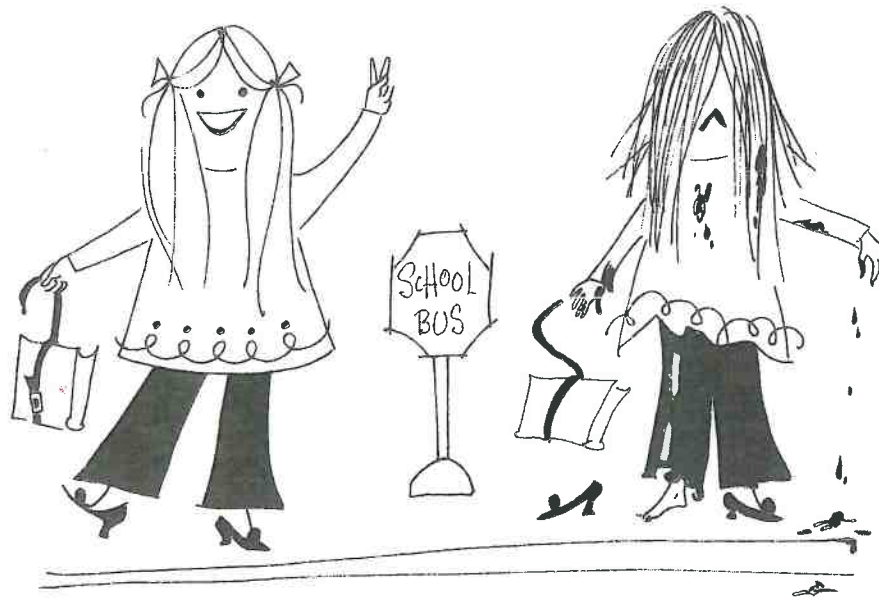
The second kind of person to avoid confessing with is one who adds harsh judgment or criticism or stupid advice to your confession, so that you come out feeling disturbed or rejected or angry and definitely worse than when you went in. When we're truly repenting, we're defenseless; we're exposing our weaknesses. And God judges very severely anyone who attacks you when you're weak, kicks



you when you're down. The fathers say that repentance is mourning—mourning our sins and separation from the Lord. And the Bible says people who mourn are blessed, because they shall be comforted—comforted, not attacked, not lectured to, not rejected. So avoid confessing to anyone who looks coldly and judgmentally on our human weaknesses, and seek someone who is warmed by God's compassion and love for sinners.

Some people don't like the idea of repentance and confession because they figure they didn't ask to be born and had nothing to say about what they were going to be like. They think that whatever they are is somebody else's problem, that they were shaped by heredity and environment





and there's nothing they can do about it now. Let me show you how mixed up that kind of thinking really is. Say you are clean and neatly dressed early in the morning. You take off for school looking just fine. But it's pouring outside. A car splatters mud all over you. Somebody's umbrella snaps a button off your coat. The water soaks through your raincoat and gets your clothes so wet that later on they look as though you'd slept in them all night.

When you get home, you look at yourself in the mirror and see that you're pretty messy. Do you say, "I'm not responsible for any of it, so it's not my job to clean up"? Do you go to school the next day looking like yesterday's rainstorm and explain to everyone that none of it was your fault? Why not? That would be true, wouldn't it? Yes, it would be true all right, but not a bit reasonable—

and remember, according to the saints, anything that is unreasonable is sin. At home you've got soap and water, needle and thread, and whatever else you need to clean yourself up with. So if you were to go to school the next morning without having put yourself into presentable shape, you'd feel something was wrong with you—and something would be wrong with you. You'd be guilty of being utterly unreasonable.

Spiritually we all have this very experience. We all inherit certain passions, and we all get messed up a little or a lot by our environments. Then when we go home, to God, we all have a mirror to look into. Do you know what that mirror is? It's God's law. Saint Paul says, "When the law entered, sin abounded." You see? That means when you look at God's shiny law, reminding you of how great you could be, you can easily see how messy and unholy you are by comparison. It's the same when we look at the saints and see how far away we are from their holiness. Everything holy is like a big sparkling mirror with untidy us, all splattered with sins and troubles, looking into it. But then Saint Paul says, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:13). That means no matter how much sin there is, there's more than enough grace to wash it off with—just as we have more soap and water than we've got mud on our clothes. It means God is stronger than our environment, that he can do more to clean us up than our environment can do to make us messy.

So however we became unholy, however our environment has hurt or confused us, however the passions got into us, doesn't matter any more. As soon as we look into God's mirror and see what is wrong with us, our job is to use God's grace to get cleaned up. Whatever has happened



to us before wasn't our personal responsibility. But what happens to us now that we can see ourselves in God's mirror, and now that we know about God's grace, is completely our responsibility. The first real guilt you could have would be to discover sin in yourself and then not use that grace of God to get it cleaned up. It's called "abundant grace," because it does infinitely more than just clean us up. When we repent and confess, God's grace doesn't only repair a particular sin. It gives us a whole new wardrobe to wear—new knowledge, new strength, new affection, new interests, new confidence in ourselves, and a wonderful new love for him.

It is as if you were not only to heal a sick man of his disease, but were to give him also beauty,

and strength, and fame. It is as if you not only gave food to a hungry man, but were to put him also in possession of great riches, and were to set him up in a position of high authority.—John Chrysostom (explaining abundant grace)

Repenting and confessing the symptoms of pride over a period of time will absolutely lead you out of confusion about yourself. It will give you, as our holy counselors say, an alert mind. You may think it's unpleasant to look at weaknesses in yourself and to confess them to another person. You may feel that it's putting yourself down. But you don't feel that way when you go to a doctor, do you? If you have pain, fever, a rash, you confess to a doctor that you have them. You tell him about your symptoms so he can cure you. The passions cause pain, just like any disease. They throw your thinking off and make it more or less delirious, just as a high fever does. They make you break out into a rash of actions that are uncomfortable and aren't the normal you. Repenting and confessing them brings God's healing. It restores you to good mental health.

Blessed is the man who realizes his weakness, for this knowledge becomes the foundation, the root, and the beginning of every boon. For as soon as a man understands and truly feels his weakness, he immediately puts a restraint on the pride of his soul which obscures reason, and thus he gains protection.—Barsanuphius

We've talked about false obligations, but we haven't said anything about what your real obligations are. Perhaps you are wondering what sort of morals Christianity

demands from you. Well, growing up in the West as you have, you are going to need to change your thinking about morals very drastically in order to get lined up with the holy teaching of the ancient Christians. You probably think of morals as rules that you're supposed to live by. And you may be trying to make up your mind whether living by them is going to save you or just make you a social misfit in your world. Possibly, too, you are discovering it's hard to find good reasons for being moral and meeting certain obligations—because moral teaching is thrown out at us every which way, and sound reasoning is hardly ever thrown at us along with it.

Now here is how morality really works, and here is how Christians arrive at their morals and obligations. Morals are simply a pattern of behavior, and they happen by themselves as a result of the way we believe and as a result of getting the Holy Spirit in us. The Bible says, "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart brings forth good things" (Matt. 12:35). And the fathers explain that "good treasure" means the Holy Spirit. The Bible also says you will know good people by their fruits, the way they act and the things they do. The fruits of Christian faith are Christian morals. To become truly Christian, you don't think about morals and obligations first; you think about what you believe first. Christianity believes you can't survive and be your real self without God. So that leaves you with only one real obligation—to yourself—which is getting together with God. The obligation to survive and become what we were created to be was put into us by God, in the form of a powerful instinct. Nothing is more unnatural and weird than for a creature to be born and then not want to preserve and take care of itself. With us, this

means taking care of ourselves spiritually, because we are spiritual beings intended for eternal life with God.

God, having promised you eternal blessing and given the pledge of the Spirit in your heart, commanded you to take care of your life, that your inner man, freed from passions, should even in the present life begin to taste these divine blessings.—Maximus the Confessor

The one obligation you start with, then, is to yourself. You must learn how to preserve and benefit yourself by uniting with God. That means you have an obligation to read and hear about God, to get together with fellow Christians, to pray and ask God to join your life safely with his. Until you meet that one obligation to yourself, you will never be any good at carrying out obligations to other people. A number of the fathers remind us, "First do the good that you know; then the good that you do not know will be shown to you." So don't let yourself worry about other obligations and commandments until you have first carried out this one great obligation to preserve and benefit yourself by being genuinely converted to God.

Then you will see other obligations coming along. They will still be obligations to yourself, even if they sometimes look like obligations to other people. For instance, you'll realize that you must not get mad and hate someone. That isn't for his good at all—some people are bothered when you hate them, and others simply aren't. It's for your own spiritual peace and growth that you have an obligation and a commandment not to hate anyone. Or you'll realize you may not covet or steal something that belongs to your neighbor. That's not primarily to protect him from losing

anything. It's to protect you from losing something—from losing self-control, from losing faith that God will provide you with whatever you need, and maybe from losing salvation. Or you'll realize (as I hope you do somewhat by now) that you've got to do your fair share of work around the house or with your friends or in your community. That's not because others can't get along without you. It's because you can't get along and keep your emotional balance unless you've got work to do and are socially connected with others by sharing the load with them.

All the commandments given by God are considered by the saints to be "divine prescriptions for our mental and spiritual health." So the faster you can take hold of them and use them, the healthier and stronger you're going to become—and the saner you're going to become. Do you know what the fathers say sanity is? Perfect obedience to God—because perfectly obeying God means that you are perfectly preserving and taking care of yourself. Some people even nicknamed Christianity "The Sane Way." So, you see, God doesn't give us a list of ways to perform just because he'd like us to look great. He gives us divine prescriptions for our health and preservation. When we fulfill the obligation of desiring our own health and preservation the way God desires them, it brings us together with God's will. It brings us into obedience, even though what we are doing is for our own sakes. Fulfilling that simple and natural obligation finally makes us appreciate and honor and love God so much that we want to please him in everything we do. And that's what Christian morality is—having enough wisdom and affection for God to make you determined to please him in everything you do.

## PUT YOUR SEX IN A SAVINGS ACCOUNT

Suppose someone walked up to you and said, "What's the big deal about Christians holding back on sex? Man, it's beautiful, and it's wonderful, and don't you Christians believe in using everything God gave you? Then what's your hangup?" Have you got an answer for him—I mean one that doesn't sound childish and embarrassing? Isn't it true that we're supposed to use and enjoy everything God has given us? Remember the parable of the talents? The man who received a talent from God and then just went and buried it, instead of using it, was a loser. God said, "If anyone doesn't use what I've given him, I'll take it away."

But using sex is quite an art. There are many psychological ways, as well as many physical ways, to use sex. You know how sometimes you use money best by not using it, by saving it? If you spend it on a lot of little snacks and doodads along the way, you won't get the skis you want, or the car you want, or the camping trip or vacation you want. Using sex is quite a bit like using money—it takes some know-how to use sex so that it brings you the greatest pleasure it can.

The best way to think about sex is to get back for a minute to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve had everything they could possibly want. The story of Eden, by the way, is clothing for God's truth about us. If you see John going down the street, you don't say, "Look, there

goes some men's clothing, and John seems to be in it." You say, "There goes John." The story of Eden is like that. It says only what the truth inside it says, just as John's clothes move when John moves. So we don't say, "There is a biblical story; perhaps it has some truth in it." We say, "There is the truth about us, dressed in a biblical story so we can recognize it." The story of Eden is the truth about what we basically are and what kind of situation we are in when we are born. There is no psychology, and no philosophy, and nothing that has ever been written about what we are like, that is so entirely true as the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Anyway, God showed Adam around (men may be glad to know that this was before Eve was created) and invited him to use and enjoy everything in Eden. Then he gave his first commandment. He said, "Do not eat of the tree that yields knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17). Do you notice he didn't say it was bad? Then why did he say not to eat of it? Simply because Adam was too young, too newly created, to handle the potent stuff that was in the fruit—the knowledge of good and evil. You don't just become created, or just become an adult, and right away tackle something like the knowledge of good and evil. That's like going to a snake farm and trying to take the venom out of a rattlesnake when you haven't been trained to do it. It's like going into battle when you don't know how to take the orders or shoot a gun. That's why God said, "In the day that you eat of that fruit, you shall surely die."

The tree of knowledge was for trial and proof and training. This knowledge is a good thing for



those who are mature, but an evil thing for the immature, being like solid food to tender babes who are still in need of milk.—Basil the Great

The tree of knowledge was good, and its fruit was good. For it was not the tree, but the disobedience, which had death in it. For there was nothing in the fruit but knowledge, and knowledge is good when one uses it discreetly. But Adam, being only an infant in age, was not yet able to receive knowledge worthily.—Theophilus

So Adam and Eve became subject to death because they didn't obey God and wait to mature spiritually and

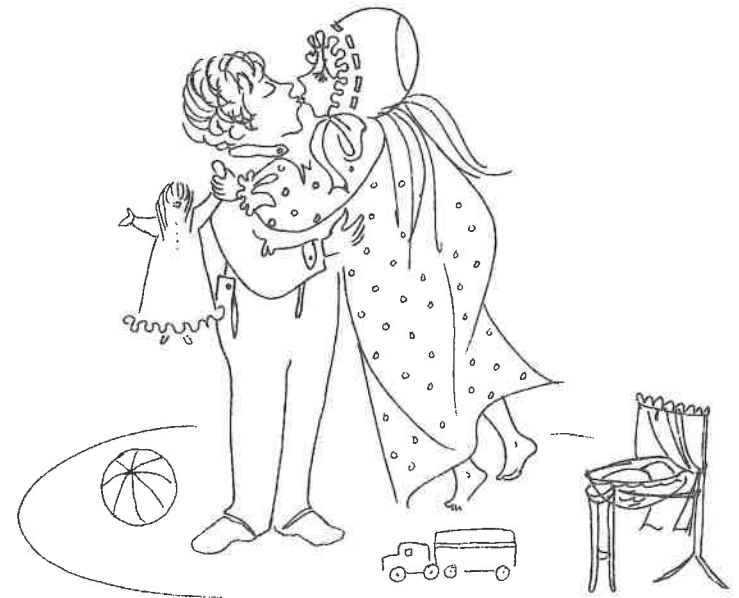
then taste of the tree of knowledge, when God would tell them they were ready for it. And they were cast out of Eden. Do you know what Eden means in Hebrew? It means "delight." They lost their delight, their happiness, by not sticking with God and letting him train them gradually for more mature experiences. That should ring some bells for all of us!

Do you begin to see the connection? Sex is your fruit tree in Eden. What people say about it is true—it's beautiful; and it's wonderful, and it's a gift from God. But eat of it too soon, and you will run into trouble, like Adam and Eve. Sex has not been given to you at a young age just by accident. God could have waited until you were psychologically mature and ready for a family, just as he could have kept the tree of knowledge away from Adam and Eve until they matured a little. Except that there's no way to become mature without undergoing some tests of character—without standing on your own adult feet and choosing God when you are quite free to choose something else if you'd rather. We started this book by saying that you are an adult after you're about twelve years old. Your sexual maturity is the biggest proof of that, because it's your first spiritual challenge. It's your first opportunity to choose God freely, to protect your own life psychologically, and to increase your own capacity for happiness.

Adam and Eve died because they didn't save their tree of knowledge for later. How do you lose some of your life if you eat of your fruit tree, sex, before God gets you trained for it? There are many ways. The worst, I think, is that you stop growing emotionally if you start using sex almost as soon as it comes to life in you and keep using it freely from then on. Spiritually you are not full-grown. If

you were to lace some boots onto your feet when you were not yet physically full-grown, and never take them off, you would have child-sized feet when you became an adult, as the Chinese women used to have. That's what happens when you wrap yourself up in sex before you are full-grown psychologically. You don't grow much, and your sexual ability does not grow. It is laced into your adolescent idea of what it should be like, and it never gets to be as big an experience as it is meant to be by nature.

There are thousands of older people who cannot have mature sexual experiences, because their sex is still reflecting their adolescent personalities. They may have physical satisfaction (though many do not), but there is



not strength, no personality, no beauty, no love, no nothing in it. Their sex is about as exciting and tender as shaking hands with a stuffy politician. Many of these people are frantically trying to get the one thing that will make them worse instead of better—more sex. They think if they practice more (something that is absolutely unnecessary for a healthy person), and if women get more seductive, and if men make more conquests—they think that then they will be more womanly or more manly. The world has become so insane from the passion of pride (ignorance) that it really believes having lots of sex is what makes girls womanly and boys manly. Nothing could be further from the truth. What makes us become mature men and women is not the animal in us (I mean, any ordinary dog or cat can have successful sex), but the God in us. Only God's spiritual food and God's careful training will bring us into what we were created to be, into full manhood and full womanhood. How can anyone, unless his brain is half asleep, imagine that he can become a man without doing anything strong, or anything difficult, or anything courageous? Only somebody really wild can think that having as much sex as he feels like will magically turn him into a mature man. Sex has never yet made a man or woman out of a single person, and it never will. Used wrongly, it does just the opposite—makes people perpetually weak and childish. But a truly mature man and a truly mature woman can make a stirring and ecstatic thing out of sex.

Blessed is the man who endures temptations; for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.—Jas. 1:12

Maturing is something you can't do unless you develop the ability to say no when it's really hard to say it. Most of us have an inclination to say no at times, but it's not easy to actually do it. People will accuse us of being afraid or weak or stupid—which is strange, because having the power to say no is usually a sign of courage and strength and wisdom. Or people will ask what our reasons are. That's strange too. If you say yes when they want you to do something, they never ask what your reasons are. It's only when you say no. So when they ask for reasons, it must mean they just don't like your answer and are trying to force you to change your mind; they aren't honestly curious about your reasons. Then why give them any? Why not just stick to your answer and immediately change the subject?

God backs up all our desires to say no when we should by matching his commandments with our deepest and best natural instincts—so that we can take hold of one of his commandments to support ourselves when someone is trying to lead us into a mess. Once a young man was persistently trying to talk a teen-aged girl into sex. They were walking past a public library. Tired of arguing, she said, "Do you see that library? It has all kinds of Bibles and books written by the saints. If you can go in there and find one of them who agrees with you, then I'll say OK." It was so easy. They were friends for a long time after that, but sex was never a problem again. When you take a stand backed up by God's commandments, then everything starts getting simpler. And besides the commandments, you have the strong assistance of the Holy Spirit, which you received in baptism.

A man who wishes to act rightly receives from God the power to act, no matter where he is.  
—Simeon the New Theologian

Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.—I Jn. 4:4

When people reach your age (if you are a teen-aged reader), they have had so many do's and don'ts thrown at them for so many years that they are awfully tired of commandments. But look how you love it when a coach gives you orders that finally land you in the game, really playing. And look how you love it when a drama or dance or music or riding instructor gives you directions that train you to take part in a play or enable you to perform exceptionally well. When commandments are going to lead you into new abilities and new experiences, you love them even if they mean a lot of hard work and self-discipline. God's commandments lead you to an opened-up life within yourself that you can hardly dream of until you've experienced it. He is your supreme Coach and your devoted Instructor, training you for the kind of full life and deep personality that your own heart is made for and really wants.

You'll be surprised to learn what the misuse of sex—using it to stop your growth as a man or woman—comes from. It comes from having in us too much of the pride we spoke about in earlier chapters. The passion of pride is called "the unclean passion." All the passions are unclean, of course, but pride is especially called unclean—because, to holy people, there is something so filthy and repulsive about mere men confusing themselves with the pure God, imagining that the kingdom and the holy power and the infinite glory of the Lord are things that could come out of

us. As the fathers say, uncleanness obviously doesn't start with sex or anything physical, because the devil does not have sex or physical needs but is still the most unclean of all creatures. It is because of his pride that he is called unclean. And when sex is called unclean, that means that it is sex resulting from pride—so the uncleanness of pride is in it and pollutes it, just as some foul waste pollutes a river.

Everyone who exalts his heart is unclean before God.—Prov. 16:5

(The people) became proud in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened, so God gave them up to uncleanness, to dishonor their own bodies among themselves.—Rom. 1:21,24

Unclean sex is a counterfeit of real love. It makes people look warm-hearted when they aren't. It makes them appear affectionate when there is no real affection in them. You will discover more and more in your own life that only self-control produces love and affection—because love and affection take real strength, something self-indulgent people never have. Certain people, called "stoics" (people who are loaded with a desire to look virtuous and be admired for it), can have terrific self-control on the outside even though they're thoroughly mixed up and immature and sort of dirty on the inside. But you don't normally get self-control over your body without first getting control of your mind. And you don't ever get control of your mind until you are freed from the passion of pride. Self-control and self-discipline produce the most magnificent human





performances we ever see in life—all the top medal-winners in the Olympics and all the top medal-winners in the contest of everyday living.

Self-indulgence is the opposite of self-control. It makes you forget about the other person. No matter how politely you pretend to be interested in him, you are really thinking only about what he will give to you or do for you. Self-indulgence produces emotional weakness, hardness of heart, and very, very cold feelings. It tries to cover itself up with warm, lustful expressions, so that you won't see how cold it is on the inside. Self-indulgent people don't care about anything that happens to you, or about how you feel or what you think; they care only about getting everything they want out of you, and they try to do it by being very charming and flattering toward you. When self-

indulgent people say they love you, it's the same as when they drool over beefsteak and tell you how much they love it. To them, sex is just a better-tasting beefsteak. So when you're about to melt away under their charm, stop and ask yourself, "Do I really want to be anyone's sloppy old beefsteak?" The more unclean sex such people indulge in, the more hard-hearted and cold and emotionally barren they become—no matter how darling and cuddly they may look. When people are filled with this coldness, this pride and self-indulgence, their sex is unclean even if they are married.

Indulging in unclean sex gives a person such inner coldness and selfishness that he is unable to have good emotional responses to sexual experiences later on. Very often, also, because he is so greedy and self-centered and mentally immature, someone who really knows him can't stand him physically. His mate will find constant excuses not to have sex with him, and that makes him feel like no man at all—which, to tell the truth, he isn't. You'd be surprised to know how many of the people who try to push sex on you, both commercially and personally, are people whose own sex lives are unsuccessful. Most individuals who are suffering will try to pull you in with them. And one reason so many people are pushing so hard to get young people into premature sex is that there is such a tremendous sexual failure in this whole country today. They're so frustrated they just want to haul you into the quicksand with them, so that at least you won't turn out to be any better than they are.

There are people for whom sex has become a drug. They crave it and wouldn't be without it. They're convinced it builds up their self-confidence, makes them feel they're

really living. They are in the worst state of all. Sex completely controls them after awhile, so they will hurt any other person and go into any situation—however dangerous it may be because of disease and crime—to get sex. A majority of these people are also hung up on other addictions, like alcohol and drugs. They are people who fiercely hate themselves and their lives, because pride has thrust them into so many painful failures and disappointments. They are pathetically babyish and self-centered. Half the time they are almost unable to be aware of another person, let alone care about him. They are possessed by many passions, and that pressure gives them an agony inside themselves that is indescribable. Some of them hate themselves most, and some of them hate others most. Every one of them is silently screaming and committing suicide in his own way.

Falling into unclean sex, which is an easy thing to see, is always the result of first having been immersed in the unclean passion of pride, which we could not so easily see. Do you realize how important it is, then, to get rid of that passion of pride? As long as it is in us, we are almost bound to get tangled up with unclean sex—and other unclean physical things as well, like smoking, alcohol, and dope. When unclean sex becomes a temptation or a problem, the most important thing to pray for is deliverance from pride. Along with prayer to be delivered from pride, you need to avoid getting too close to an opportunity to have sex, especially with someone you know might want to get you into it. Because after a certain point, particularly for men, sex is awfully hard to control. The fathers say that putting sex together with too much temptation is like putting fire close to gunpowder.

So, my brother, flee this fire, for you are gunpowder, and never dare to think in your conceit that you are damp gunpowder, moistened with the water of a good and firm will. Never rely on the firmness of your resolve, because frequent occasions of being alone in private will gradually dry up the moisture of your good intentions.—Unseen Warfare

If you try to stay out of sexual involvement just because you are intimidated by your parents or some other authority, first of all you probably won't succeed. And if you do, you probably won't be a whole lot better off psychologically than the people who weaken themselves with promiscuity. You will not have used sex by controlling it and putting it in the bank. You will have avoided it by throwing it into the ditch. The same is true of trying to stay out of sexual involvement for sentimental reasons—like thinking sex is a glowing treasure which you must save for the one and only. Sex is the commonest thing in the world. Sex is no treasure—you are! It's not a matter of saving up your sex for someone. It's a matter of developing your real self for someone—so that when the sex is there, your whole unique, grown-up personality will be there with it.

There is no sense in kidding yourself on this point. You will not benefit by refraining from sex just because somebody tells you to, and you will not benefit by having sex just because somebody tells you to. With sex, you will win only by taking a strong position that is all your own. And you will only take a healthy position if you sincerely want to become a mature person.

Why does Christianity say that sex belongs only in marriage? There are a number of beautiful reasons. But the

one I want to mention is that there's no way on earth to mature without responsibilities and difficulties and adjustments—all of which are necessary in marriage, but are not necessary when you're just living with someone and can leave any time the going gets rough. You can't believe how basically infantile and self-centered people are who keep having sex without any responsibilities to go with it. The reason our society is so infantile, from a Christian point of view, is that it's constantly reaching for everything it wants and constantly running to every conceivable escape hatch to avoid responsibility. That's profoundly sick—and besides, we're running very low on escape hatches these days.

Infantilism, which comes from endless self-indulgence and utterly destroys human character, is the pagan thing. But maturity, which comes from accepting the challenges and responsibilities that are natural to us, is the mark of Christianity. That's one reason Christianity is so great—every law in it works to bring us into mature experiences. When it says not to have sex outside of marriage, it does it so we'll become courageous people, capable of loving and respecting and even sacrificing for one another, and capable of running our lives the way we want to—instead of getting **bogged** down in a childish existence that keeps us inwardly ashamed of ourselves for being so wishy-washy and never satisfies us or wins the respect of anyone living with us as we grow older.

By now you can see that a person who fails to meet this first challenge of adulthood, who will not say no to the fruit tree in his Garden of Eden, is going to lose all his natural powers to some extent—depending upon how long he continues to give in to self-indulgence. That's because



if you can't say no to your fruit tree, it's a sure sign you won't be able to say it to anything else that's important either. You won't be able to control your work, your bank account, your various appetites, or your family. Most men obviously aren't controlling their wives or their children, or much else in the world of human relationships, very well today. The reason is that they aren't mature men with God's authority in them; they are middle-aged adolescents.

Man is the person to whom God gave his law and all his instructions, and man is supposed to have control of his wife and children so that he can keep them safely in God's hand. There is a very profound psychological reason for this, which we shall have to discuss in a later course. You cannot protect anyone you cannot control. You have to

have enough control of a horse to stop it from hurting itself when it becomes startled and wants to take off, or enough control of your dog to call it back from a main highway when it goes out for a run. The only reason for a man to have control over his own household is to protect it. But the desire to protect—and therefore the ability to control—comes only from love. I mean really mature love, that has strength and endurance and courage and humility in it. Man has lost his control because he has smothered so much of his capacity to love. This has happened because, through pride, he has lost sight of God. Consequently he is not experiencing God's love and protection himself, so he can't pass it on to anyone else.

When you lose the experience of love and protection at the top, you lose it all the way down the line—from men to women to children to animals to nature itself. The whole picture goes out of control, except for the individuals who work hard to reconnect themselves with God. So men who have not matured and experienced God's loving protection themselves can't love and protect their families. They haven't the power to take loving and protective control of their wives and children. The women rise up and nag at them, and spend too much money, and keep rubbing it in that these men are emotional failures. And their children insult them, disobey them, and show no respect or consideration of any kind for them. Our fiery prophet, Isaiah, describes this terrible predicament better than anyone else can, when he foretells some of the things that are happening in our world today.

And the people shall be oppressed, every one by another, and every one by his neighbor; the child shall behave himself proudly against the

ancient, and the base against the honorable.  
—Is. 3:5

As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O my people, they who lead you cause you to err, and they destroy the good way of life.—Is. 3:12

To survive what the world has become, to avoid losing your natural ability to love, and to avoid losing control of yourself and your whole family, follow the advice of the wisest and most loving people on earth, God's holy saints. Get control of your own self at every opportunity God gives you to do it. Do it with prayer, with confession, with communion, with religious talks and meditations. When you have even fairly reasonable control of yourself, you already have something like a million dollars in your spiritual bank—plenty to start a home and family with. You won't be living the way most of the world is living, and I'm sure you realize that will make things difficult sometimes. But once we have our God, and his loving purpose for us in our hearts, we can stand up and face a whole world of immaturity and not be moved by it.

We recognize the nature of this present time from the teachings shown us by the Scriptures; and having formed our opinion according to God, we live our lives in Him.—Basil the Great

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so you can accomplish the good and perfect will of God.—Rom. 12:2

## THE PASSION THAT MAKES YOU SHOW OFF

We come now to the second main passion that's in all of us. It's the passion of vanity, or vain glory, which means empty glory. It gives you an irresistible urge to show off and look glorious. Maybe you think showing off couldn't really hurt anyone and isn't much of a sin. But do you remember hearing about when the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness? He tempted Jesus three times, with three different suggestions. Considering that he was dealing, not with some weakling, but with the mighty Son of God, he chose the three strongest passions in human nature to tempt him with. And one of these was the urge to show off.

Leading Jesus up to the "pinnacle of the temple," the devil said, "If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down there; for it is written that God will put his angels in charge of you, so you will never be hurt by being dashed against the stones" (Matt. 4:6). Then Jesus answered, "It is also written, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Matt. 4:7). You see? He refused to show off.

Vanity tries to push you into doing something spectacular like that, something stupid with no point to it—and especially with no love in it! It urges you to do things that put you in a wonderful light and make people admire you. But it leaves you empty, because in the end human admiration doesn't do anything for you psychologically or spiritually. Getting human praise is like going into a jewelry

store and putting on fabulously expensive diamonds that you really can't pay for and will have to take off before you leave the shop. For a few minutes you look splendid and wealthy, but you leave without having been able to buy and keep a single thing. It's like imagining you are the leading person in a thrilling TV movie. For a couple of hours you live in the exciting action and feel you're a real part of it. But when the set is turned off, you haven't actually done anything, and nothing important has happened to you. Vanity is pretending or imagining things that aren't true about yourself and won't do you any permanent good, but only make you look wonderful for a little while. It's like living your life in a dream.

It is as when a hungry man dreams, and behold, he eats; but he awakes and is empty. Or as when a thirsty man dreams, and behold, he drinks; but when he awakes, he is faint and thirsty.—Is. 29:8

You remember when the serpent slithered up to Eve and told her that if she would eat the forbidden fruit, it would make her like a god and she surely wouldn't die from it as Adam had said? Well, when Eve fell for that, it was because she wasn't thinking straight—it was because of pride. Pride made her ignorantly suppose she could be god in Eden and make the rules herself. It made her forget the real God and his rule. The fathers say that pride affects the "thinking part" of us; it is what keeps us ignorant and unable to think straight. It makes us think there's nothing wrong about deciding things for ourselves, without God. Then vanity comes along and affects the "desiring part" of us; it makes us want to carry out the dumb ideas that pride

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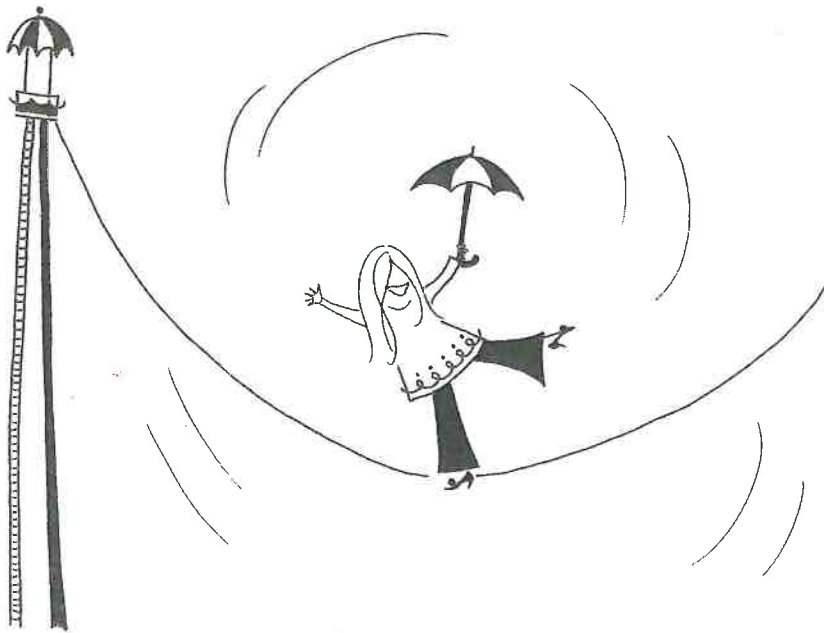
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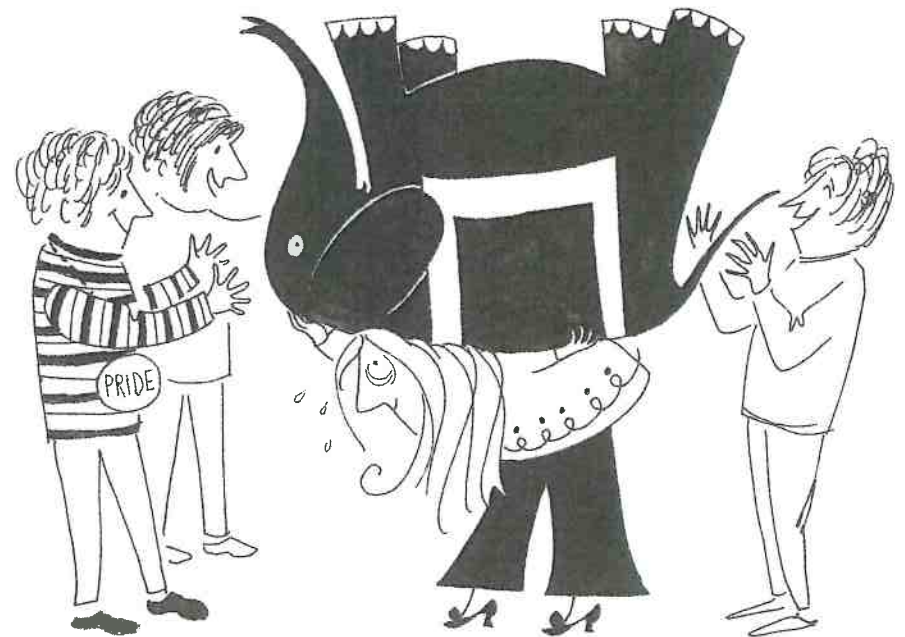


keeps coming up with. Vanity is what gives the go-ahead signal to all our wrong thoughts. So when Eve believed what the devil said—that eating the fruit would make her like a god, and that she would not die from it after all—then vanity got her all pepped up to go ahead and do as the devil and her own proud thoughts suggested. The idea of having all kinds of wisdom and glory, like God, sounded lots more exciting to her than just sitting around being a helpmate to a plain old human being like Adam.

Do you see how pride and vanity work together? Pride makes us unable to know there is a God around, and gets us to think we can be God ourselves and make all our decisions by ourselves. Then when vanity moves in, we begin to like that kind of set-up. Vanity makes you want to keep

God out of the picture, so you can feel glorious and important by imagining you really have taken his place. It makes you want to keep your brain blindfolded, so you can dream and not be disturbed by the reality of God's light. The Bible is talking about vanity when it says, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light" (Jn. 3:19). You see? They actually desired the darkness.

Pride only makes us think we ought to be important and be able to accomplish great things. But vanity fills us with a desire to look important, whether we are or not, and to look as though we are accomplishing great things. People



with a lot of vanity are frequently very hard workers. But they aren't working out of love or mere necessity. They're working to get known and respected, to be applauded like actors. They don't usually like the work, but they're so addicted to human admiration that they'll work themselves right into an early grave just to be praised during the short time they have to live. It's an awful waste of effort, because they've done nothing to make themselves truly happy or to please God and be blessed by him.

Vainglory is a change of nature, a perversion of character. It is a dissipation of labors, a waste of sweat.—John Climacus

With pride, we are merely ignorant of what our real self is like. But with vanity, we deliberately build a fake image of what we are like. We set up this image of ourselves so we can gaze fondly at it—like Narcissus, the handsome man who gazed at his reflection in the water for such a long time that the gods finally changed him into a flower growing alongside quiet little pools, so he could everlastingly look at his own image. It was the death of him as a man, of course. And when we set up an image for ourselves and others to admire, it's the death of us too. Our real self becomes buried in a little sepulchre way down in our heart; and as long as vanity is in control, no one ever hears much from it again. Vanity hates your real self and wants to keep it buried, because your real self is weak and awkward and would humiliate it. Your real self would never get all the praises and compliments that vanity can get by setting up its fake image of you. Vanity can make you look sweet, sincere, faithful, noble, and even humble, whereas your real self wouldn't begin to look that good if it were show-

ing. Vanity always hates God too, because God is waiting for the least opportunity to go down into your heart and revive your real self and give it the strength to live.

Vanity wants to make you look attractive, fascinating, bright, gifted, faithful, in control of everything, and in possession of all the characteristics your society most applauds, so you will have a kind of glory of your own. Well, perhaps I shouldn't say it wants to make you look attractive, because the fathers tell us that's not true in every case. Saint John Cassian mentions that "where the devil cannot create vainglory in a man by means of his well-fitting and neat dress, he introduces it by means of a dirty, cheap, and uncared-for style." Either way, vanity makes you crave the attention and admiration of people around you. That's why the fathers say that vanity is man-pleasing instead of God-pleasing. Vain people don't care about anything except winning the admiration of others. They ingeniously hide whatever is weak in themselves, whatever they think other people would not praise. They cover up their sins and weaknesses and pretend not to have any.

For instance, something that always comes in the package with vanity is a terrific amount of anger, but vain people cover it up. They very often cover it up with illness and physical disabilities. They can cover it up by being quiet or by walking out on you. Or they can let it out and then cover it up afterwards, by making it look like righteous anger for some just cause. In any event, they never let it look like a weakness or sin. They keep it out of sight, or they make it look like a brave protest so you'll admire it. So vain people are actually habitual liars, always trying to give you impressions that aren't true. Because they are fighting to look so good, they are hypersensitive to the least criticism, al-





ways afraid their shortcomings will be found out. The more dishonest they are, the more sensitive they are. Sometimes they'll take the most objective remarks very personally. Half of what you say may offend them, because they'll interpret it as personal criticism. Anyone who is too easily hurt or too quickly offended shows that he has a dangerously high amount of vanity in himself and wants a very abnormal amount of praise from other people.

It is impossible for one who is captivated by love of applause to think of or do anything great or noble. He has to be base, mean, dishonest, little, petty-minded.—John Chrysostom

When you fall into the disease of man-pleasing (which we all do to one degree or another), you become a slave. You do whatever people say, and you lose the power to stand up for yourself. If someone says dress a certain way, you dress that way. If he says have certain likes and dis-

likes, you make it your business to have them. If he says go with certain people, you go with those people. If he says shut out certain people, that's what you do. If he says don't embarrass me by being too religious, you'll even pull yourself away from God for him. And if he says you should be ashamed of yourself, you're immediately ashamed of yourself. Very often, also, vanity allows "pests" into your life—people who can walk in any time and disrupt whatever you're doing. Vanity tells you that you won't look polite and warm-hearted if you are firm about pursuing the things that matter to you and refuse to let people throw you off course. So it makes you put up with individuals who waste your time, whom you really do not benefit, and whose main function is to interfere with the enjoyable and worthwhile things you could be doing. Vanity is what produces the person who can't say no to people but can easily say no to God. If the disease goes too far, your one and only aim in life is to please all other people so they will approve of you and flatter you. At this point, unless a miracle turns you back to God, you die as a real person the way Narcissus did.

Vanity often starts out with something quite natural, like making ourselves attractive to the opposite sex. Once I was visiting a young woman who had an apartment of her own in New York City. There was a knock at the door, and a handsome neighbor came in to bring her a bouquet of flowers. When he left, the young woman shrugged her shoulders in disgust. "I wish that man would stop bothering me," she said. "He's always doing stupid things like that, bringing me flowers or something!"

"Well," I replied, "if you could sit where I'm sitting and see how passionately you flirt with him every minute he's in the room, maybe you wouldn't blame him so much. With

the beautiful mating calls you're sending out, I don't see how he could help responding." She was genuinely surprised. "I had no idea I was doing it!" she exclaimed. She thought she was just being herself—and so she was, but with a little vanity thrown in, which urged her to show off and get attention. You see what she was doing, don't you? She was advertising something that wasn't for sale. That can be a big nuisance. It's like advertising your furniture in the newspaper when you just want to show it off but don't really want to sell it. Can you imagine the trouble you'd have when people came and found out it wasn't actually for sale? A rich king in the Old Testament was a show-off like that. Once some mysterious travelers came along, and he insisted that they come to admire his great mansion and all the exquisite gold and jeweled ornaments he had around. They came and admired everything all right. But pretty soon they came back a second time and took it all, and then killed him besides. That's what can happen when you advertise things that aren't for sale.

The worst thing about a woman's advertising herself physically is that it allows vanity to get a firm toe-hold in her system, and from then on that vanity works to distort her female nature. It keeps her from being a natural woman. In the beginning, vanity only urges you to beautify your own sexual characteristics—that's to make you trust it and think it's just innocent fun. But after that it gradually twists your nature, making it more and more fake and finally altogether unnatural. So it gradually makes a woman mannish and takes away her natural womanly traits. In the extreme—with both men and women—vanity makes people unable to be healthily attracted to the opposite sex, because they are so infatuated with their own images that they are attracted strongly only to their own sex. It is the cause of homosexuality.



Vanity counterfeits nature itself. When a man has vanity, nothing about him is natural.—Maximus the Confessor

Many people use things other than sex appeal to show off with. They may use money, or personal prestige, or important social connections. But whatever they use, showing off removes them from everything natural and real, which of course includes God. Scripture tells about individuals who lost God forever because they wanted to show off and have personal glory more than they wanted to be honest with God. One such person was Ananias. Do you remember him? He wanted to impress the apostles and other Christians gathered around. So he came up with a pile of money and offered it to the Church, saying it was everything he'd gotten from selling his land. Actually he had kept quite a bit back for himself, but he

wanted them to think he was so holy and devoted that he'd donated his very last cent to God. And for coming into a spiritual place and lying, and trying to make a cheap impression and get glory for himself, he died almost immediately.

Ananias would have been justified, to begin with, in not promising his money to God. But when, looking to human applause, he consecrated the money by promising it to God—just so he might be admired by men for his generosity—and then held back part of the price, he aroused such anger of the Lord that he was given no time even for repentance.—Basil the Great

Some of the Jews also lost Jesus because of their vanity. Quite a few of them believed in Jesus enough to want to come and listen to him and hear more of what he had to say. But most of their society did not approve of taking Jesus seriously. And their vanity would not let them even go and listen to him, for fear of losing their high positions in society and the flattering respect of their people.

Vanity makes some people who know the truth pretend they are ignorant of it or are opposed to it. It was not through real ignorance that they denied the Son of God, but in order that they might obtain honor from the multitude. "They believed," says Scripture, but were afraid, lest they be put out of the synagogue. And so they gave up their salvation. One who is a slave to the glory of this world cannot obtain the glory which is from God.—John Chrysostom

When Jesus himself was speaking with these people, he said "How can you believe, when you want glory from



one another, and not the glory that comes from God alone?" And he told them that anyone who would be ashamed to be with him and follow him openly in this life would not be able to enter into his glory in the next life. The great people in our history have never been ashamed of their God. They have not even bothered to please kings and rulers, to say nothing of mass populations or little social groups, if it meant denying their God. The Church calls them lions among men, because their courage is so amazing. They are afraid of no one on earth. They are heroes because they have lived only to please God, never to please and be admired by men.

The aim of all those who live in God is to please our Lord Jesus Christ and become reconciled with God the Father through receiving the Holy

Spirit, thus securing their salvation. If this aim is lacking, all other labor is useless and all other striving is in vain.—Simeon the New Theologian

Most of you who are reading this book are young enough to overcome the passion of man-pleasing quite easily if you begin praying now to be delivered from it, because it hasn't had time to get you into the habit of being governed by it. It's quite dangerous to let vanity go very long. People who have pride can come to God and be healed at any age—although they'll have suffered a lot of unnecessary pain if they have delayed for many years. But vanity is a disease that very few people recover from when they are older if it has become strongly established in them, for a reason which you will see in the next chapter. As you pray to be delivered from vanity, and as God takes it out of you, you will feel a deeper honesty in yourself than you've felt before. You'll feel your real self coming more and more to life. It's kind of like the feeling of getting thawed out after you've spent a winter's day outside and gotten your hands and feet uncomfortably numb. You'll feel more relaxed about being yourself, even if you don't look so great all the time. Your sense of humor will increase, and affectionate feelings will increase. The tendency to please others will die down. You'll begin to do more to benefit and develop yourself. And the desire to benefit yourself will put you squarely on the road to loving and pleasing God—which is the very opposite of vanity and man-pleasing and will lead you into a very different kind of glory.

Teach me to do the thing that pleases you, O Lord; for you are my God. Let your loving Spirit lead me forth into the land of righteousness.  
—Ps. 143:10

## THE TROUBLE WITH PASSING THE BUCK

You've probably heard the story of Prometheus. In ancient Greece, Zeus was said to rule the heavens, and Prometheus worked for him. It seemed to Prometheus that Zeus was very hard on human beings. So one day Prometheus decided to revolt against the rule of Zeus and do something on his own to help humanity. He stole fire from heaven and gave it to mankind, so they could warm themselves and cook their food. Zeus was furious, because Prometheus had taken this heavenly "glory" and given it to mere human beings. So he had Prometheus bound to a rock, where it was cold and windy, and an eagle came and ate some of his flesh each day.

The more Prometheus suffered, the more he hated Zeus and plotted against him. Prometheus was convinced he'd done a good thing, and that Zeus' punishment was unjust. Friends came and tried to get him to repent. One said, "You have not learned humility yet; you are only making things worse. Stop rebelling; there are rules in heaven and a high monarch, who does not have to explain to you all his reasons for doing what he does." Some other friends said, "The trouble is that you don't respect Zeus. You are full of self-will, and you give way too much glory to mortals." But Prometheus only hated Zeus and revolted against him all the more. It didn't do any good. Terror and madness struck Prometheus. In the end, still bound to terrible agony, he exclaims, "I have done a wonderful and

generous thing, but look what injustices I have to endure!”

The spirit of Prometheus lives in every one of us. We all feel at times that our good intentions (and sometimes we think our intentions are even better than God’s) are not appreciated, that we are innocent victims of injustice; and we all feel like yelling and protesting about things we think are unfair. Maybe we were born into a family that can’t afford the really nice things in life, so through no fault of our own we aren’t included in the social groups we’d like to be in. Or we are born black, so that all kinds of people reject us and hurt our feelings for no good reason. Or we are born into a family so full of passions that we end up in mental confusion and feel helpless to get ourselves straightened out and live a normal life. These are the kind of injustices most people see and hate and rebel against.

There are many other things that seem unfair too—like not having a chance to go to college, being drafted into the army or having to suffer the consequences, losing out in sports or dating or school competition, having a drunken parent or divorced family that spoils your home life and embarrasses you, having people gossip or lie about you, having people put you down whenever they get a chance, or having your parents treat you as a child. All these cause the spirit of Prometheus to rise up inside us and make us angry, because we feel we have been innocent victims of unfair or humiliating treatment.

Walk along a street in almost any big city, and you’re likely to get some dirty papers blown against your legs, a lot of soot in your face, and a cinder or two in your eye. Life is like that—windy, with garbage blowing around. And plenty of it is going to hit you as you walk along



through the years. You will always have to be disentangling yourself from some sort of **garbage**—I mean, mistreatment, injustice, humiliation, personal offenses. Vanity, which wants us to look glowingly clean and innocent and wonderful, nearly goes frantic at the sight of garbage. When a vain person is hit by some injustice, he thinks it’s outrageous. He has no idea it’s only a natural part of everyone’s life. He keeps thinking and thinking about it. As the years go by, he piles up all the unfair things that have happened to him and spends many hours mulling them over in detail. He remembers everything unkind or unjust that people have done to him, and he remembers all the unlucky breaks he’s ever had. It’s as if he’s collected all the garbage that ever blew against him and is sitting there with it stacked up around him. He gets sadder and sadder, and madder and madder, which anyone would do if he were living in the middle of a garbage dump. The

fathers are very alarmed when people do this, because it is the first step toward losing all contact with God.

The ways of those that remember injuries are unto death.—Prov. 12:28 (LXX)

Remembrance of wrongs is the consummation of anger, hatred of righteousness, a worm of the mind, a nail stuck in the soul, continuous sin, unsleeping transgression, hourly malice.—John Climacus

The second step toward losing God is blaming others for everything that goes wrong—everything that is wrong with us, or everything that isn't going well in our lives. We all know what blaming others is like. Someone comes up and accuses us of something. We say, "It's not my fault; he told me to do it that way, or they made me do it, or you



wouldn't give me a chance to do it the right way!" Do you see that whenever we blame others, we do it for only one reason—in order to proclaim that we are innocent and have no guilt in us?

Blaming others in order to make ourselves look innocent is called "self-justification," because we are blaming them to justify ourselves. Adam started it all. When God caught him hiding in the bushes after he'd eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam glibly explained, "That woman you gave me handed me the fruit, so I ate it" (Gen. 3:12). Then Adam relaxed and felt perfectly innocent. It was all Eve's fault—in fact, it was all God's fault for giving him Eve in the first place. So Adam made himself feel innocent of the whole business. Then God asks Eve about what happened, and she does the same thing. She blames it entirely on the serpent and doesn't take any blame herself at all.

What is self-justification? Self-justification is when a man denies his sin, as we see in the case of Adam, Eve, Cain, and others who have sinned but, wishing to justify themselves, denied their sin.—Barsanuphius

Why does self-justification take us a second step away from God? Can you see that if we blame others for everything, it makes us conclude that we're innocent of any sin ourselves? And can you see what a terrific lie we're telling if we say we have no sin, when we're actually full of passions? Just that lie alone is a whopper of a sin! But the worst part is that if we start imagining we're innocent and haven't any sin, if we sell that line of goods to our own selves, we won't even think about going to Jesus. The only reason anyone goes to Jesus at first is to be forgiven and healed of his sin. If you don't think you need to be saved,

you certainly aren't going to look around for a Saviour. Remember when we said in the last chapter that people with too much vanity are quite often never healed? Now you can see why. It's because they won't believe they need healing, so they never go to God and ask for it. If you won't believe you have any sin, you can't possibly repent—because repentance is “the renunciation of sin and the acquisition of virtue” (Nicephorus). And repentance is the only open door to God that we have; there is absolutely no other. People who repent are constantly being changed and enriched by God all through their lives, even when they are old. But people who refuse to repent never change, which means they never grow psychologically, no matter how long they live. In fact, they hate change. After all, why should they change if they have not been guilty of anything, if they are innocent and perfect as they are? They just can't see it.

Repentance is the door to mercy, open to those who seek it diligently; by this door we enter into divine mercy, and by no other entrance can we find this mercy.—Isaac of Syria

Realizing we are sinners who need to repent is not especially difficult. All we have to do is pray for deliverance from pride, the passion that blinds us to the truth about ourselves, and very soon we see other passions and sins and various unholy (unhealthy) things we are doing. Some people think we are innocent, and then only become sinners when we sin. But that's like thinking that we get a rash first and then the chicken pox moves in later. Actually we break out with sins because sin is already in us—just as we break out in a rash because the chicken pox virus is already in us. We are sinners until, by living our lives in God,



we become saints. And the only thing that can take away our whole chance to live a life in God is self-justification—denying our sin and therefore refusing to repent and go to God for healing. God has promised he will never reject any person, however sinful, who comes to him. And the Bible tells us he never fails to answer anyone who calls to him.

And it shall come to pass that before they call,  
I will answer; and while they are yet speaking,  
I will hear them.—Is. 65:24

Does it seem kind of depressing to think of yourself as a sinner, unworthy of blessings and honor and all that? Well, I have to say that almost nothing is more restful and peaceful than finding out you are a sinner. It may not sound appropriate, but you actually feel like celebrating! You see, just getting at the truth is so great, because then

you're not going around in the dark worrying about a lot of things you can't do anything to help. If you smashed your arm and couldn't move your fingers, you wouldn't want to keep worrying and wondering whether it was broken for weeks and weeks, would you? You'd want to have it X-rayed, even if it turned out to be broken. You'd want to know the truth about it, because then you could take the right action and not have any more doubts and worries. Discovering, through prayer, that you are a sinner is like seeing yourself under an X-ray machine. As long as you don't get to the X-ray machine and don't know you're a sinner, you build up worries and anxieties about yourself every year you live. You can get really tense that way. But when you find out for sure that you're a sinner, then you know exactly what to do about it. And the main thing is, you know you're curable. You know God cures you as you repent. Besides making life so much simpler, finding out that you're a sinner makes you happy and optimistic about yourself—because now you know that the sins and passions aren't the real you. And you can see that when the real you gets out from under your sins, it's going to have to be an OK person. God wouldn't have created it any other way. So once you understand you're a sinner, you can know that every least little thing you dislike about yourself is going to go if you keep faithfully praying about it.

By being able to know and condemn what we are, we immediately become able to love what we shall be in God.—Cyprian

After you realize you're a sinner, you drop self-justification. You don't pass the buck any more. As long as you can blame others for anything, it means you still haven't

quite gotten the point about being a sinner. Once you get it, you're far more interested in tracking down your own sins and getting rid of them than you are with worrying about what nasty thing someone said or did to you. When someone puts you down or is unfair to you or lies about you, you don't pay much attention to it. You walk through all the garbage that's blowing around almost as if it weren't even there. And if you suffer an injustice, you aren't half so sure as you used to be whether it really is an injustice in the long run. I mean, if a person hurts you with injustice and then God uses that very experience to lead you into triumph over some passion that was causing you way more pain and trouble than any other person, which is it—justice or injustice?

Human injustice is always pretty obvious. But God's justice takes a bit of time to investigate. A simple approach is—when I look at myself, what do I see? A sinner. Have I done much to deserve anything good? Have I stayed away from all evil, avoided doing anything wrong to a single person? Have I done a lot of good for people? Have I saved anybody? Of course not. Then when I look at Jesus, what do I see? I see Someone who's always kind to me and loves me perpetually. Someone who listens to hear about everything that troubles me and everything I need, then solves all the problems and meets all the needs. Someone who removes sins which would otherwise be with me forever, and who heals passions that would otherwise drag me into hell. The one Person who has never inflicted injustice and never will inflict it, but who has truly suffered injustice himself—to give me the kingdom of heaven. Do I deserve that sacrifice and salvation? Of course not. When I look at myself and God, I don't see any justice at all. All I see is mercy, the infinite overflow of his



justice. And I'd certainly never want to see merely his justice—heaven forbid! I'd be completely sunk, with justice and no mercy. It would be the end of me—and of you too, and of everyone. It's a good idea to think about that before we get too stirred up about someone who's been unjust to us, and before we start demanding justice. If God were to take us at our word and really give us straight justice, we'd all be in a total disaster! So until we get some idea of God's justice and mercy working in our own lives, we should not make any quick decisions about the human injustices that hit us. As a wonderful early Christian, Athenagoras, said, "With creatures who have no notion of justice, how can there be any complaint of injustice?"

One thing you can do about human injustice—the attacks and deprivations that come to you from other people—is learn to use it to your own advantage. Once a very generous man had several people working for him. They were extremely disrespectful, frequently paying no attention to his instructions—which were perfectly reasonable and politely given. They did sloppy work, often didn't even show up, and were rude and profane in front of the man's wife and children. He fired three men, but those who replaced them were just as bad. He was very frustrated and hurt, and angry. Then he turned to God and said, "I will stop complaining about their disrespect. I am a sinner, so why do I think I deserve respect? Lord, forgive me for thinking people should respect me. And show me why you have let this disrespect come to me. Show me my own sins, and deliver me from complaining about the sins of others." Suddenly a question came to him, "Tell me, how much do you respect others?" And the man was amazed—because when he thought deeply about it, he found he was so

secretly proud of himself that he did not truly respect other people at all. He felt miserable about it and repented. And God led him into such full respect for others that he gained many friendships from it, as well as inner happiness. So if you were to ask him, he would say that being treated disrespectfully by those workmen was a real blessing. But you see, he made it one by turning to God and repenting his own sins.

One of the most beautiful Christians I know is a Negro woman. Not long ago, some of us were at her home for luncheon, and we asked her to tell us the story of how she came to God. When she described what it was like, as a little girl, to be a Negro and be shut out and avoided as if you had a terrible disease, and how deeply it hurt her feelings, we all had tears in our eyes. She had felt injustice and cruelty of a kind we had never experienced. But she had the courage and largeness of heart to turn to God and repent of her own sins. The longer she did this, the more God drew her out of human injustice and into his own divine justice, and mercy, and love. She has now become so filled with God's Spirit that everyone who loves God wants her as a friend. Do you think she would exchange equality with fellow Christians, and sharing the Holy Spirit with the saints of God, just for equality with the white skins that cover so many filthy hearts and lost souls? I know she would not.

So it is not injustice that makes or breaks us. It's how we use it. We are meant to use it in such a way that we go from the resentment of Prometheus, bound to a rock and cursing Zeus, to the love of Jesus, nailed on the Cross and blessing his Father. That's the trip we take when we sign up for Christianity. We take it by concentrating on our

own sins, and on our own repentance, instead of on the unfair and unjust things others do to us. When we're under fire, we imitate the wise David.

I became even as a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no reproofs.

For I will confess my own wickedness, and be sorry for my sin.—Ps. 38:14,18

People who go the repentance route have used their offenders to do good to themselves. They have used injustice to receive the mercy of God—the way a skillful surgeon can use a wicked-looking knife to save your life, and not to murder you. But people who blame others for their troubles and keep thinking about how much other people have hurt them become full of poisonous self-justification and self-pity. Anger builds up inside them, and finally their desire is to punish anyone who has hurt them, to get even. They act as if they are innocent victims, wholly justified in all their complaints. But, because they have never repented of their own sins, their hearts are filled with lies, rage, bitterness, and destruction. Inside, they become every bit as cruel and unjust as the people who injured them.

Whenever you resent and rebel against another person, and allow him to be in your thoughts for a long time, you automatically get so you resemble him. People who rebel against tyrants tend to become worse tyrants. People who rebel against brute force tend to become more brutal than those they were rebelling against. People who rebel against greed become swallowed up by greed themselves. I think the main reason is that people who rebel—who proclaim their own innocence and set out to punish their

offenders—are never people who are truly concerned with justice. They are interested in being gods, not in defending justice. They want to take the place of the people who are in power. By fighting, they only transfer the passions of their oppressors to themselves. It's like two people fighting on a sinking boat. They both go down, and the injustice they were fighting about becomes very unimportant. We are always on a sinking boat in this mortal life, and there are always going to be people on it who will be unjust to us and tempt us to fight back. But God is holding out the lifeline, an opportunity for us to repent and be pulled up to him. The choice seems simple enough—turn your back on the injustice and the temptation to fight back, and grab that lifeline. There are so many injustices around that if we pay attention to them all, we won't have room left for any spiritual life. We'll go down in the sinking boat, without having been saved by God.



The reason the Bible tells us not to fight against unjust people, and not to sue anyone, and not to take vengeance against anybody, is simply to protect us from becoming just like them and sinking with them. Saint John Chrysostom says that when we look at cruel, angry, greedy, unjust people, we ought to do everything we possibly can to avoid becoming that way ourselves. That means not blaming them for our troubles, not resenting them, not hating them passionately, not getting involved with them in any way—but running as fast as we can in the opposite direction. We do that by repenting and getting rid of the selfish tendencies and passions we have in our own hearts. The fathers warn us time and time again never to blame anyone else for our lot in life, and never to nourish anger or rebellion against anyone.

If anyone reviles us, irritates, stirs us up to violence, tries to make us quarrel, let us keep **silence**. Let us not be ashamed to become dumb. For he who irritates us and does us an injury is committing sin, and he wishes us to become like himself.—Ambrose

If you are persecuted, do not persecute; if you are crucified, do not crucify; if you are slandered, do not slander.

To seek justice against a man is not fitting in Christian life; there is no hint of it in Christ's teaching.—Isaac of Syria

The next time somebody hurts your feelings, accuses you of something you haven't done, insults or rejects you, do what David has taught us. Be quiet and let it pass—don't justify yourself in any way. Then when you are alone, ask



God to show you your own passions and sins, and ask him to forgive and heal you. Soon you'll realize that God does all the defending of us that's necessary. He justifies us in his perfect way, as long as we never blame a single other person for our troubles. Whatever damage others may do or seem to do to us, our own passions and sins are causing us infinitely more damage every day. So if we're sensible, we'll put first things first. We'll attend to the cure of our own sins and not worry about somebody else's. We'll repent in the spirit of the early Church, which began its evening prayer with

Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us; for we sinners, void of all defense, offer unto thee, our Master, this supplication. Have mercy on us.—Romanian Orthodox Prayerbook

## A GREAT WAY TO FIGHT FEARS

Have you ever been afraid of two things at once and had to choose which of the two things you were less afraid of? For instance, have you ever been afraid to tell the truth about something you've said or done, but also afraid to tell a lie when someone asked you directly whether you'd said or done it? Have you ever been afraid to go to a party or some sort of gathering, but still more afraid of what people would think if you didn't show up? Have you ever been afraid of getting hurt if you played in a rough game, but even more afraid not to join the crowd in whatever they were playing?

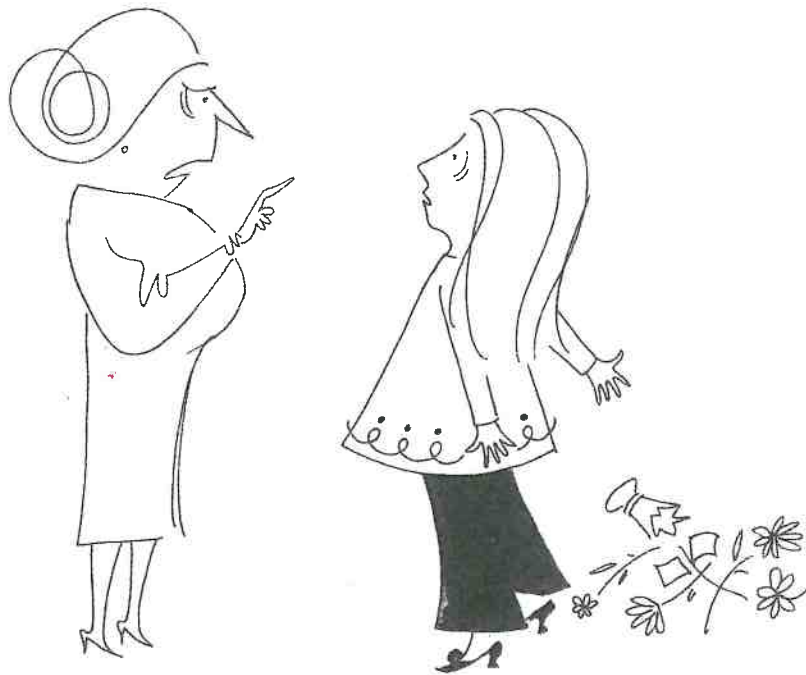
I think perhaps all creatures know what it's like to have two fears at once, even animals. A mother cat can be very frightened of a large dog that's after her kittens, but so much more frightened for the lives of her kittens that she can stand up to the large dog and scare it off. Small birds will face enemies they are terrified of, in order to protect their nests. When we were vacationing at a mountain lake last summer, we found that my little dog, Cookie, was afraid of boating. She shivered all over when we tried to get her into a lightweight canoe, so we decided to paddle around and leave her on the shore. But it turned out that she was even more afraid of being abandoned than she was of getting into the canoe; just as we were pulling away from the dock, she took a running leap and landed in my lap.

We are all afraid of many things, just by nature. Until

we become saints, we are controlled more by our fears than by anything else. Fear is the biggest natural protection we have. The fear of death and destruction makes us protect our lives, keep ourselves in good health, avoid whatever we think would destroy us. When we are afraid of two things at once, the bigger fear controls us, and the smaller fear loses its power. Often people have to have surgery to save their lives. They fear the surgery, but they fear death more. The greater fear of death controls them, and enables them to go ahead and have the surgery even though they are frightened of it. All your natural fears are quite reliable. Mostly they protect your life and the lives of people you love.

There are, however, some terrible unnatural fears that sweep in and attack us all. They come when vanity—that disease of man-pleasing—puts you under the power of other people. Vanity makes you feel you must please them, win their approval, get them to admire and flatter you. So whatever they say, vanity makes you go along with it—as if they were wardens in a prison and you were their prisoner. With vanity, the people you feel you have to please become your gods. The Bible calls them “idols,” and it says that living just to please people is idolatry. Idolatry is letting something or someone else take the place of God in your life. You have probably heard of the ordinary material idols that pagans used to worship.

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; They have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not; they have hands, but they handle not; feet have they, but they walk not;



neither speak they through their throats. And the people who make them are just like them; and so is everyone who trusts in them.—Ps. 115:4-8

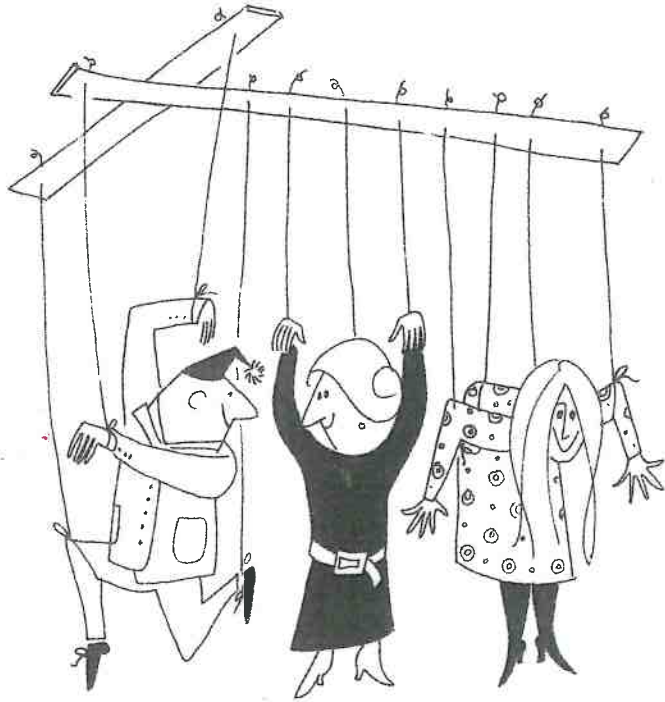
Scripture says people who have idols become spiritually dead, unable to do anything. They can't speak to you about any thoughts of their own, because they think only what others tell them to think. They won't see or hear any facts of life on their own, because they can only look at and listen to their idols. They cannot move freely and wouldn't know where to go if they could; they are completely controlled by what their idols want them to do, just like mar-

ionettes that can't move unless someone pulls the strings for them. Instead of being motivated from the inside out, they are motivated from the outside in, like material objects. Such people often have ruthless political leaders as their idols and blindly do whatever they say. So-called "mob psychology" is the result of idolatry and could not exist if people had no vanity.

When vain people come together, their individual folly is increased by numbers and becomes greater. And they are led like sheep, and follow in every direction the opinions of one another or of a violent leader full of savage tyranny.—John Chrysostom

Do you remember the golden calf some of Moses' people made and worshipped while they were waiting for him to return from the mountain top with God's commandments? Worshipping a golden calf would seem pretty far-fetched to us today, but what the fathers say about it is quite interesting. They say that the golden calf stands for our human brain and reasoning power. They say it is the greatest and most dangerous idol people can have. That's why the ones who worshipped it in the Old Testament were so severely punished, with death—to show that whenever we make a god out of our own brain and human reasoning power, everything we do will eventually fail and we shall die like Moses' people in the wilderness. Trusting entirely in our own reason, being guided by it instead of by God, is idolatry.

For many people, money is an idol; they worship it and do everything they can to get more than they need of it. They can't live without owning all kinds of unnecessary

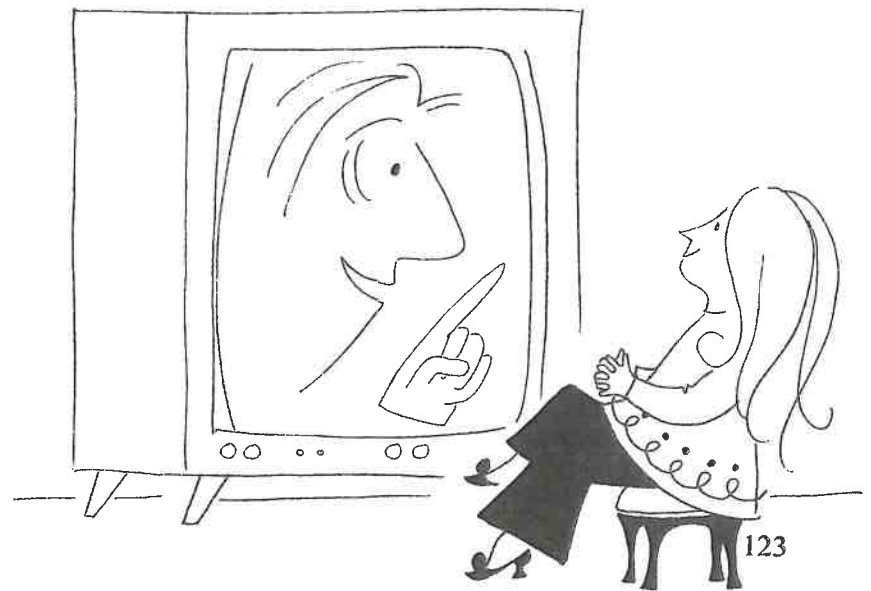


things. They serve the idol of money even if they have to be dishonest, even if they have to kill other people or fight other nations for it, even if they lose all their friends and their own health and their own lives in the pursuit of it. Television is an idol for lots of people too, although they don't always realize it. It tells them how they should act, how they should think, how they should look, and even what they should smell like.

We all have, especially when we are young, other people as our idols. And I don't mean as our models. A model is someone you imitate because of affection and admiration, not someone you obey because of fear and intimidation. Parents are models of adulthood for us when we are

children. Unless we are quick to move to God in our adolescence, they can also become idols to us. Then, whether for good or for bad, their opinions of us and desires for us will control us. Usually their desires for us are good; but the trouble is, they cannot possibly know us in a deep way, as God does, so they simply haven't the ability to desire what is spiritually and psychologically best for us, no matter how much they may love us. They haven't the least idea in the world what God is preparing us for, or what he is going to call upon us to do in life. So while we can appreciate their good desires for us, we must not in any way let them become idols and let their desires actually control us when we are adults.

Your real self is always terrified of human idols, because in your real self is buried an awareness that it needs God. It knows idols cut it off from God's protection, that they



will crush it and paralyze it and take the life out of it. So idolatry causes terrific fear in your real self. When we have an idol, our real self plants its finger on the panic button and sends out fright in every direction all through our system. The fears that come out on the surface can be really crazy ones, but the alarm itself is very reasonable. It means your ship is in danger of sinking—just as the apostles' boat seemed ready to capsize during a storm until Jesus woke up and calmed the waves. So if you have fear that doesn't make sense, or feel fears running every which way inside you, it means that you need Jesus to come and calm things down. When we ask him for deliverance from idolatry, he calms our fears by delivering us from the power of our idols as he delivered his friends from the power of great storm-tossed waves.

Our fear of idolatry is sensible and helps to preserve us. But the various fears we get from having idols are not sensible. They work against our happiness and destroy our confidence. They make us cowardly and nervous about certain things. If you're afraid to work at what you really like because someone else (an idol) doesn't think it's worthwhile, that's an unreasonable fear. If you're afraid your parents won't like what you do and be proud of you, that's an unreasonable fear. If you're afraid someone will find out about an awfully embarrassing relative you've got in the family, that's an unreasonable fear. If you're afraid of doing everything wrong and being a failure in life, that's an unreasonable fear. If you're afraid to say you don't want to go in for rough sports because people will think you're a sissy or an oddball, that's an unreasonable fear. If you're afraid people will ridicule or reject you, that's an unreasonable fear. If a young person is afraid to go to camp or visit



friends away from home, that's an unreasonable fear. There are also unreasonable fears of things like harmless spiders, snakes, mice, and dogs. And there are unreasonable fears about being in certain situations, like a fear of high places or a fear of the dark. All unreasonable fears, whatever ones you may have, come from idolatry—from letting something or someone with no power to protect you become your god, and from not being close to and protected by the real God.

Unreasonable fears make us nervous, agitated, worried, sometimes even hysterical. Scripture says, "They that run after another god shall have great trouble" (Ps. 16:4). A big part of that trouble is unreasonable fear, cowardice.

When we pray to be delivered from idolatry, and from the vanity that causes it, God drives our unreasonable fears out of us and restores us to healthy, natural fears. Our natural fears are calm and well regulated, like traffic lights. They show us when to go ahead and when to be cautious and when to stop. No doubt you've heard people say, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." It means that when we are living with the natural fears God has given us, they force us to make wise choices in life. They make us choose paths that will bring us to God, because they make us afraid to go in directions that will take us away from God and away from his protection. These natural fears that God gives us are so strong that they trample down every unreasonable fear we ever had.

Fear is not to be uprooted, but directed into the right way; and apprehensions—mistaken fears—are to be taken away, so that only the fear of God is left. For since this is the only lawful and true one, it alone effects that all other things may not be feared.—Lactantius

The fear of God that Scripture talks about is the fear of being separated from him—losing his love and protection, the joy of his friendship for us, and the beautiful rich life we can have in him but can't find anywhere else. If you were on the ocean twenty miles from land, with sharks here and there, wouldn't you be afraid to leave the boat and start swimming for shore? That's just a little what the fear of God is like for people who are wise and experienced enough to know how seriously we need his protection. God gives us that fear of himself, so we'll stay with him and not try to swim through the dangerous waters of life alone.



And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me all their days: and that it may be well with them and with their children after them. I will give them fear in their hearts, so they will not depart from me.—Jer. 32:39,40

There is another way in which we have a fear of God. When God looks into your heart and sees that you want him, that you have freely chosen him and desired him, then of course he cooperates with you. He does everything to get to you and help you get to him. It's like what would happen if you put yourself in the hands of a doctor and committed yourself to a hospital when you were seriously ill. From then on, everybody would be out to heal you, because they'd know that's what you really want—even if you didn't like the taste of the medicine or the discomfort of the treatments you had to have. Or it's like committing



yourself to lessons from a music teacher. Once you're officially his pupil, he's got a right to give you a hard time when you don't listen carefully to what he says or don't practice enough. In the same way, when we commit ourselves to God in our hearts, God takes over our lives and holds us to our commitment if it's really an earnest one.

Our second kind of fear, then, comes when we have invited God to take over our lives and have realized that, in his loving way, he will be "out to get us" from then on. So we realize we'll make things a lot easier for ourselves by cooperating with him. This fear makes us like Jonah. God knew perfectly well that Jonah loved him and wanted to be with him forever. But Jonah, you see, was scared to death to go and preach in a wicked city when God told him to. He was so scared he ran away and hid himself in a ship. God knew Jonah didn't mean to disobey, but was only frightened. So he cured Jonah by giving him an even bigger thing to be afraid of—nearly drowning in the sea and being swallowed by a monster. Then Jonah became more afraid to disobey God than he was to face the wicked city. And he saw that God was more powerful than those wicked people could ever be, powerful enough to protect him from anything. So he was not the least bit afraid to go and do what God had commanded, and he walked into that wicked city as calmly as if it were a holy church, rejoicing every minute that he had been reconciled with his Lord.

He who is permeated by fear of God is not afraid to be among evil men. Having the fear of God in him, and wearing the unconquerable armour of faith, he is strong in everything and can do things which seem hard and impossible to others.—Simeon the New Theologian

You see what the fear of God does? It absolutely wipes out the unreasonable fears we have, without our having to fight against them or reason them out in any way. If you are afraid you have to go along with something that doesn't look good to you just because someone is putting on pressure, but are more afraid you will lose God and your real self by going along, then it will be easy for you to say no. If you are afraid of being rejected by people for what you do, but realize it would be worse to reject God and then be stranded without him, your fear of being rejected by people will just vanish. Also when you decide to stick with God because you are afraid of losing him, God immediately takes definite steps to give you extra protection against anyone who might threaten your development. At the same time, he gives you extra power to move ahead and do what is best for yourself, which is his will. This special help of his is something extremely solid, something you can really feel and see when it comes to you. Then you begin to understand that you're safe in a way you've never been safe before. You can look at the dangers of life, things you used to be afraid of, the way you'd look at dangerous wild animals in a zoo, with a big moat between them and you.

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?—Ps. 27:1

The fathers say to pray earnestly for the fear of God until we get it in ourselves—it dries up every unreasonable fear we have, like the hot sun drying up dewdrops in the morning. It gives you tremendous confidence and peace. When you've been delivered from enough vanity so that

you have quit wanting to please people and have really decided to please God instead, that's when you get this healthy fear of God and the courage that comes from it. And that's when God starts showing you personally what he has for you to do, because he knows now you will have both the courage and the desire to do it. At that point, God moves much more closely into your life.

Saint Paul says people with a lot of vanity are "without natural affections." That's because of unreasonable fear. They're frightened of others most of the time—frightened about not impressing people, frightened about being criticized or rejected, frightened of any number of things. So a person who doesn't get rid of vanity and idolatry is too scared to love anybody. He thinks anybody who gets the chance will hurt or humiliate him. When people's opinions no longer threaten you, when you can be your real self among people and feel comfortable about it because you've gotten rid of some vanity, the first thing that happens is that you are free to like them more. You can feel more affection for them, and have more fun with them. Without getting rid of vanity, and getting the strength of character that comes from a healthy fear of God, no one can really love others—because to some extent they will be idols to him, able to push him around against his will. He will often be afraid of them and resent them. When you get the fear of God in yourself, it's the end of that idolatry and fear of other people, and the very beginning of love.

The fear of God trains and restores you to love.  
—Clement of Alexandria

The blessed Saint John, when he wrote to some Christians, explained exactly how we go from the fear of God to

the kind of love real saints have—the kind you can have down in your own heart some day. You see, the fear of losing God makes us repent, and repentance is what brings God's love into us. So Saint John got the people to think about what it's like to have God and what it's like not to have God, and he got them to worry about the passions and sins that were separating them from God. In this way he put the fear of God on them, like putting a halter on a straying colt. With that halter, he led them into repentance, the way you'd lead a colt into a safe shelter with plenty of food and water in it.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.—I Jn. 1:8,9

The fear of losing God always makes us repent, always makes us want to drop our sins and return to him to be restored and protected. As we repent, we receive God's mercy—we receive God himself in our hearts. That means love is coming into us, because "God is love; whoever is living in love is living in God, and God is living in him" (I Jn. 4:16). When people eventually become filled with this great love of God, actually with God himself, then all fear is gone—even the fear of God. From then on, fear is not needed, because the love is so strong it entirely controls one's life. So Saint John says that beautiful thing, "Perfect love casts out fear." As long as our love is still not perfect, we need to depend upon the healthy fear of God for our safety. There is nothing that will so mirac-

ulously protect you as that fear. But we are not meant to have even that intelligent fear forever. Only take hold of it now, by praying for deliverance from vanity and idolatry, and hang onto it for all you're worth—until God brings you safely to dwell in himself and fills you with such love that you no longer need to be guided and protected by any fear.

Repentance is the ship and fear is its helmsman; love is the divine harbor. Fear sets us aboard the ship of repentance, carries us across the dangerous sea of life, and brings us into the divine harbor, which is love. When we have attained love, we have reached God, and our journey is over, for we have come to the island of the other world, where dwell the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.—Isaac of Syria

9

## YOU'RE MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOU THINK

Self-importance is a funny thing. We all have a tremendous thirst for it. It's one of the hardest of all things to get along without. And, strangely enough, it's a thing we don't believe we've got unless we can feel it. When our toes are numb inside ski boots or skates, we still know we've got them. But when we can't feel our importance, we don't think we have any. Do you know why? It's because we get our sense of importance from other people instead of from God, where we're supposed to get it. So when other people aren't treating us as if we're important, we actually don't think we are!

To God, each of us is infinitely important. God closely watches and cares about everything you say and do and every single breath you take. It's absolutely impossible to make ourselves either more or less important than God has already made us. No other human being can add to our importance or subtract from it, no matter how he treats us. Our importance is always with us, whether we are successes or dropouts, whether we are **accepted** by others or rejected by them, whether we are saints or criminals. The only reason we are all important is that God thinks so, and says so. The whole Bible is a record of how important every human being is to God.

Have you ever heard the word "redundant"? It means overdoing something and making it clumsy or grotesque.

If you put another mouth on your face, or added two more eyes to your head, that would be redundant. And any time you try to be important, that is redundant. That's adding something clumsy and grotesque to yourself, something you've got enough of already. You see, you already have perfect importance from God, and it will show up best if you let it alone and never try to do anything more to it. Whenever we try to be important, all we do—both spiritually and psychologically—is detract from the wonderful importance we already have. If you pray, you will realize this and become able to stand up with the importance you already have from God. You'll never feel that you need any other importance.

Wanting to be included by others is natural and healthy; it's not the same as wanting to be important. We are supposed to be included by other people, and to include them in our lives. But we do not get included by acting important—at least not by the people it's a pleasure to be with. People who try to add importance to themselves beyond what God has given them are full of vanity, which makes them secretly envious and cruel and bitter, the worst sort of friends. They include one another in their social and intellectual groups—and if you want to add something redundant to the importance you already have from God, you will probably be included by them too. But that whole life is a fake, and if you're a sincere person you won't like it. People who only use each other to boost their vanity and self-importance become boring after awhile, because they're so self-centered and shallow and insincere. Better, much better, to skip their company and let God take care of how important you are, and not give it another moment's thought yourself.



If you pray to be delivered from the passionate human urge to be important in an ugly, redundant way (and it takes quite a lot of prayer), then God will begin showing you how important and dear you are to him, and he will greatly increase your faith in him. Whenever you give up trying to look important to people, you always get in return the experience of discovering how extremely valuable you are to God. Among holy people, no one tries or wishes to be any more important than anyone else. The Bible says that such people, all doing the work God gives them, are like the parts of your body—your hands and feet and eyes and all the rest. The parts of your body belong together and work together and help one another. If you function the way God tells you to in his Body, you will have the secure feeling of being important among his people and really belonging with them. You will be necessary to them, and they will be necessary to you—just as your hands and

your feet and your eyes are all necessary to your body and to one another.

God has made you different members of his body. The eye can't say to the hand, I do not need you; nor can the head say to the feet, I have no need of you. No, all the members of the body are needed, and especially the parts that may not look most attractive. You are the body of Christ. You are individual members in it.—I Cor. 12:18-27

People who do not become obedient to God can never feel assured of their importance, and are therefore never quite able to get rid of the urge to look important in an ugly, redundant way. Don't worry if God hasn't made his whole will for you clear yet. You're like a jigsaw puzzle, and you have to keep praying and wait until God puts the pieces together for you before you'll be able to see the full picture of your special calling. You may have an obvious talent in music or art or science, but that by itself is really nothing. Many people have gifts like that and use them only to try to make themselves redundantly important. The only natural abilities that can become real offerings among the members of Christ are the ones you go ahead and develop entirely in obedience to God. And a gift that may look very small to you when it first appears can have great consequences when God has fully developed it. Obedience to God is where the bigness is, so any gift you've got is going to be big if it grows out of doing what God tells you personally to do. The saints, who gave precious offerings to their people (and to all of us) later on, started out simply by obeying God.

I am small and of no reputation; yet I do not forget thy commandments.—Ps. 119:141

Whatever God builds up in you, as a result of your strong determination to obey him, becomes your offering to other people. It is by making that offering that you are a functioning part of Christ's Body and are fully included among the right friends for your interests and your personality. When everyone has made an offering that comes from obeying God, and not from an urge to be stupidly important, you've got a circle of friends you can enjoy and trust and love. You're all bound together by faith and joy, and by an unbreakable fondness for God and for one another.

Behold, how good and joyful a thing it is for friends to dwell together in unity!

It is like the fresh dew of the morning, which fell upon the hill of Sion.

For there the Lord promised his blessing, and life for evermore.—Ps. 133:1,3,4

Lots of people look as if they're not trying to act important at all. You can only tell for sure whether someone is trying to be redundantly important if you watch to see what happens when he doesn't get his own way on a number of occasions. If he really isn't trying to be important, he won't mind being crossed in what he wants. But if he's secretly trying to make himself important, he'll be awfully upset—awfully angry or pained—at not getting his own way. Wanting your own way is the classic symptom of trying to make yourself redundantly important. And wanting our own way, like a spoiled child, is a passion that's pretty deeply entrenched in all of us.

You may think it's unmanly not to make yourself felt. You may think it's good to assert yourself and demand your rights and get your own way. No, it is not. Everything we think up and want to do on our own and regardless of the will of God, no matter how noble or wonderful or just it may appear, is harmful to us because it keeps us from being joined with God's perfect will. You can't possibly be going after your own will and after God's will at the same time—any more than you can be going after big game in Africa at the same time that you're going after pearls in Japan. If you really believe in asserting your own will and demanding your rights, God will be of no help to you in what you desire. There is not a single father in all of Christianity who will tell you differently. The fathers say that being able to perform miracles, to conquer whole armies and nations, even being able to raise the dead, can't compare with the courage and holiness of a man who has conquered his own self-importance and willfulness.

Let us flee from willfulness as from the poison of death.—Hesychius

Our will is a brass wall between man and God.  
—Abba Pimen

He who wishes to kill his own will must do the will of God—instead of his own will, introduce God's will into himself, inculcate and implant it in his heart.—Simeon the New Theologian

That soul is perfect whose desiring power is wholly directed toward God.—Maximus the Confessor

You can't get over this passion of willfulness by deciding to reform, by using your own will power. You see, you don't have just a single will in yourself. You have two wills. One is your higher, intelligent will. It wants God and everything good. The other is your lower will—sometimes the fathers call it your dumb sensory will. Saint Paul said he had one will that delighted in God's commandments, but another will that kept trying to draw him into sin (Rom. 7:21-23). The more we pray, the more our higher will prevails and leads us into God's perfect will. But when we don't pray much, our dumb lower will takes over. It wants everything that is bad for us and nothing that is good for us. It is called dumb (or irrational), because it has no reasoning power. It's just a "wanter." All it does is want, want, want—without any judgment of any sort. When something looks beautiful, it wants it, whether you can afford it or not. When something tastes or feels good, it wants it, even if it's poison to your system. When an exciting idea floats by, it wants it, even if it's from the devil.

Two wills existing in us fight against one another. One belongs to the intelligent part of our soul and is therefore called the intelligent will, which is the higher; the other belongs to the sensory part and is therefore called the dumb, carnal, passionate will. The higher will is always desiring nothing but good; the lower, nothing but evil.—Unseen Warfare

If this dumb sensory will is not cut off by wise training when we are children and by prayer when we are older, it gradually makes us want our own way in everything, even the smallest details. Life is such that we are going to get

some opposition when we want our own way in everything. So this dumb sensory will releases energy into our bodies to help us fight the opposition. If you were suddenly confronted with a desperate emergency—like having to save a child's life or fight off a wild animal—adrenalin would be released inside you and would give you abnormal strength with which to meet the crisis. The fathers say this is what happens in people who let their dumb sensory will run away with them. Getting their own way becomes so urgent that every least desire is an emergency to them. Merely getting a sweater they want, or going to a movie when they want to, or watching a favorite TV program, is such a hot issue to them that they release as much inner energy for it as if they were going to rescue a baby from a burning home or escape a grizzly bear.

Being all worked up that often, according to the fathers, actually affects our brain and our blood. It makes people unable to think straight or control themselves, even when they really want to. It can end in what the fathers call "frenzy" and what today we call insanity. So falling into the habit of wanting our own way all the time is no small thing. Even if it doesn't lead us all the way into insanity, it certainly takes us in the direction of mental imbalance.

In the words of a certain wise man, this frenzy is due to the passion of vainglory, which affects a certain place in the brain and disturbs all its tracts.—Nilus of Sinai

This spirit (of vainglory and willfulness) seizes upon the vessels in which the vigor of the soul resides. It overwhelms the soul with foulest darkness and interferes with its intellectual powers—as we see also happening from wine

or fever or excessive cold and from other indispositions.—John Cassian

Wanting our own way in everything is also the main cause of anger. If you don't care about having your own way, there won't be a whole lot to get mad at in life. If you feel angry frequently, it's probably because you aren't getting your own way often enough to satisfy your dumb sensory will. And if you want your own way so much that you're getting mad about not having it, then it means you're trying to make yourself redundantly important and aren't content with the importance God has given you—because getting our own way primarily makes us feel self-important. So getting angry a lot (unless you're in a situation that seriously threatens your spiritual safety, and need to be propelled out of it by the force of anger) means you



want to feel important and have your own way more than you want to obey God.

People who are determined to get their own way in everything look peppy and strong-minded, especially in their earlier years. But the ancient Christians say that wanting your own way all the time uses up your energy and finally leaves you without much strength to go on. They say wanting your own way leads to chronic weariness and eventually makes you want to quit working and lie around all the time—many people keep pushing themselves and don't give in to this urge to rest, but it's an awful strain. One saint says that your energy is kind of like the flowing power of a stream. When your dumb sensory will is in control, making you want everything in sight, it spreads the stream of your energy out over flat, wide land. The shallow water (your dissipated energy) soaks into the ground and disappears. Your higher intelligent will, on the other hand, channels the stream of your energy into what the Bible calls the narrow way (of obedience to God)—forces it between high banks of discipline that keep it running fast and finally push it into a gushing waterfall that generates real power. That's why the fathers say that people who wait for God to tell them what to do, and then obey him, never become easily worn out or lose their natural energy.

They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.—Is. 40:31

Extreme vanity, with willfulness as its constant companion, gives us the stoics—people who seem to have

fantastic will power and will nearly wipe out their whole personalities in order to look good. When vanity is a little less strong, so that people fail to be successful stoics, then willfulness goes into various defenses and escapes, like smoking and drinking and other destructive actions. We usually say such people have no will power, when the real trouble is that they have far too much (self) will—so much that they won't give it up and let God's will operate instead. A person who thinks he has weak will power needs to pray earnestly to get rid of vanity and willfulness. Then his natural power to obey God and say no to self-destruction will be restored to him.

I know only too well how hard it is to get over wanting your own way in everything. We grow up getting our own way so constantly that we think we're supposed to have it. Nearly everybody you see is fighting for it. Because of the sickness we've inherited from our society, we think something is dreadfully wrong if we can't have our own way. But if we don't do something about it, we'll become drained of our normal strength—to say nothing of losing our natural gifts and our real selves, actually our very humanity, by being seriously cut off from God. What can we do? Ask God to deliver us from vanity, and especially from the awful trap of wanting to feel important when we already are important. He will do it. And as soon as he does, you will naturally stop wanting your own way quite so much as you did before—because you won't have any motive for being bossy and demanding, for throwing your weight around. When you get your first few experiences of deliberately not having your own way (because you have become interested in doing God's will instead), it will make you unexpectedly happy about the control you feel



coming into yourself. We tend to think self-control is unpleasant; but the truth is, you can't possibly get inner contentment and happiness without it—just no way. When you get a good taste of it, you'll realize that always wanting your own way is frustrating and painful, but obeying God is beautiful and gives you confidence. Then you'll start asking God to deliver you even more from wanting your own way. And you'll really mean it.

When you pray to give up wanting your own way too much, remember that you're doing it so God can take you over—not so that anybody else can. As you make progress in overcoming vanity and willfulness, the people who want to influence and use you won't think you're getting less



willful at all; they'll think you're getting more willful and stubborn than ever. You can't afford to be naive about this. Most people don't want you to obey God; they want you to obey them. They like your dumb sensory will very much, because they can cater to it and in that way keep control of you. So as you pray to be freed from your dumb sensory will, pray also to enter fully into God's will for you, and not into anyone else's. And don't worry about anyone who doesn't seem to be pleased with it.

This is our last chapter on vanity and the various things that come out of it. You can be delivered from them all by prayer. The fathers say we overcome our passions with two weapons—the Holy Spirit and the name of Jesus. So use the name of Jesus when you pray, and the Holy Spirit will drive out the passions we've been talking about. Here are the main symptoms of vanity, which you especially want to pray about and confess if you spot them in yourself. A tendency to show off and want people to praise you. A weakness for flattery, either giving it or taking it. Envy, jealousy, and gossip. Trying to look better than you are (being a fake). Blaming another person for something that's happened to you. Being highly sensitive to criticism, or suspecting others of criticizing you when you haven't any proof that they're really doing it. Thinking you're not a sinner and not guilty of anything. Feeling virtuous or noble or innocently victimized. Bitterness. Trying to look or act self-important. Feeling unable to realize how important you are to God. Wanting your own way in a lot of small things. Fighting for your own way in anything which is not clearly God's will for you. Being unreasonably afraid of people or things or certain situations—cowardice of any sort. Feeling you are under the control of other people,

that they can stop you from being yourself. Wanting to use other people for your own purposes. Letting something or someone else influence you more than God does. Feeling frequently angry, tired out, or unable to go on because things haven't worked out the way you wanted them to. Being unable to feel strong affections or to love anyone. Being unable to believe in God (because God says, "How can you believe when you seek glory from one another?"). Being unable, in due time, to see God's will for you. Being unable to play in a relaxed way, to have fun and enjoy things.

When you are somewhat freed of vanity and everything that goes with it, your reward will be warm human relationships—which come from getting much more faith and love and deep confidence in the Lord. Only then will you clearly see who other people are and what they are like. As long as you have vanity, you don't see people the way they really are. You only see them from the standpoint of what they've done to you or what they can do for you. As long as we use other people to admire us and praise us; as long as we let them be our idols and control us; as long as we use their offenses against us to justify our own sin and make us look innocent; as long as we depend upon them to make us feel important, or use them to get our own way—we shall never actually know much about them. They'll seem more or less like instruments to us.

When God delivers you from enough vanity, then you can see someone outside yourself and clearly recognize who he is. You won't be seeing a tool you can use, or someone who can use you as a tool. You'll be seeing another person just as real and individual as yourself. And



you'll have a natural, spontaneous feeling of relationship to him. That's when you'll be able to answer the book-title questions—Who am I? and Who are you? You can say, "I'm me and you're you" and understand, in a really profound way, that you're talking about two equally important, separate human beings—both with the same basic passions in them and both urgently in need of salvation by the Lord, and both equally in need of loving the other person.

For nothing that is endowed with reason and judgment has been created, or is created, for the use of another, whether greater or less than itself, but for the sake of the life and continuance of the being so created.—Athenagoras

He has equally created all and has died for all, in order to save all equally.—Callistus

## GOD WILL NEVER CLOSE THE DOOR ON YOU

Our third basic passion is probably the one that most often makes people turn to God for help. It is the passion of self-love. It leads to alcoholism, dope addiction, and other debilitating habits that make so many of its victims unable to function well physically. The fathers say that the passion of self-love is the irrational love of one's body, an unreasonable attachment to flesh, which interferes with our spiritual and psychological and physical life. They often tell us that every Christian needs to be a good athlete, so we can "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). You can't be a good athlete without hard training. If you stuff yourself with unhealthy foods, choke your lungs with smoke, or drown your strength in liquor, you're certainly not going to win any medals. And unless you work out regularly, sometimes under uncomfortable conditions, you won't get very far either.

Keeping yourself fit for the Christian life requires exactly the same sort of self-control. If you indulge in too many bodily pleasures just for the sensations you get, and not because they are necessary to your health and a normal enjoyment of life, you become spiritually unfit and unable to keep up with the activity of God's Holy Spirit. You especially become unable to pray (which is the "working out" part) with any interest or regularity. Then you

lose touch with the great Coach, who is our only Source of energy, and you begin to fall into both spiritual and physical weaknesses that can really cut you down. You begin to lose the spiritual matches you could be winning if you'd stayed in training.

The Christian must follow after those pleasures which are both natural and necessary. The pleasures which are considered healthy are those that are not bound up with pain, and bring no cause for repentance, and result in no other harm, and keep us within the bounds of moderation, and do not draw us away from serious occupations, and do not make slaves of us.  
—John of Damascus

Out there in the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus only with the three passions which were in Adam and Eve and are in all of us—pride, vanity, and this third one, self-love. After Jesus had fasted for forty days, the devil came up and said, "If you are really the Son of God, command that these stones be made into bread" (Mat. 4:3). Jesus answered him that Scripture teaches us not to live by bread alone, but to live by the Word of God. Can you imagine starving for forty days and still not giving in to the hunger of your body? But Jesus was being nourished by God's work. He was able to live on his Father's will—he even called it food. He said the meat that fed him was doing his Father's will.

When a person is free of self-love, like Jesus, he is free of every pressure the world or the devil or anyone can put on him to force him to do anything. If you avoid being overly self-indulgent, your reward is terrific freedom to go



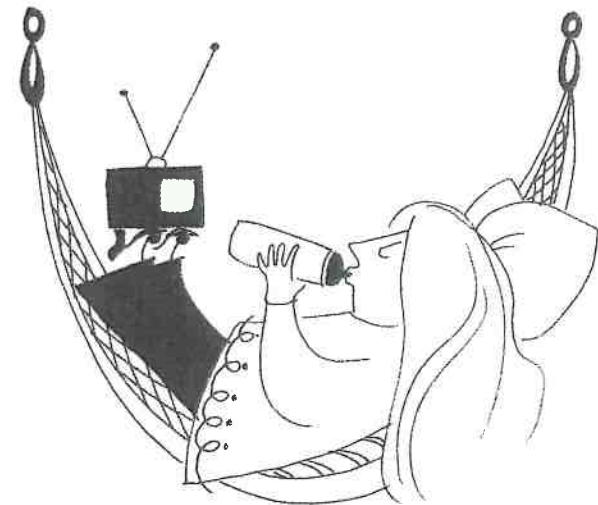
ahead and do anything God gives you a chance to do. Great spiritual adventure comes only to people who become good athletes for God and can put up with discomforts, when they have to, in order to stay close to God. The passion of self-love is so ground down in holy people that they know they will stick with God regardless of the worst things that could possibly happen to them.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No. For him we can be killed and slaughtered all day long, and yet we are the conquerors. Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which we have in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
—Rom. 8:35-39

People who have not become filled with the Spirit of God and trained to resist the passion of self-love are controlled almost entirely by their bodily needs and pleasures (I say almost, because they are also controlled by other passions, as well as being controlled by the devil to some extent). Most of their concern is to avoid hunger, thirst, disease, and pain. Without God, we are all the same as animals—the only real purpose we have in life is to get comfort and avoid pain. But when God comes into our lives, we see that this is a kind of meaningless way for human beings to live.

Freedom from pain cannot be the proper end for men, for this they would have in common with beings utterly devoid of reason and sensibility.—Athenagoras

As Christians grow in the Spirit of God, they become able to endure more stress physically as well as spiritually.



They gradually put behind them their old animal concerns about obtaining comfort and avoiding pain. Finally they are not even afraid of imprisonment or torture or death. Then they are beyond the control of all men. They have at every moment the perfect freedom to be everything God made them to be. No one can affect their love, or their faith, or their deep joy, or anything that is important to them. The saints on their way to martyrdom praised and thanked the Lord and had good will toward their murderers. The blessed Bishop Polycarp (who, as a little boy, was greatly influenced by knowing Saint John the Evangelist) was threatened with being thrown to the lions. "Call them, then," he answered, "for it is good for me to go from mortality to eternal life with God."

We see that incredible martyrdom only when people live in God so completely and constantly that at last they become indifferent to the comforts and pains of this world. Naturally we can't accept discomfort and pain until we are sure something good is going to come of it. A dear holy father, Saint Isaac of Syria, says, "No one can endure trials unless he is convinced that the sufferings in which he is prepared to share may lead to something worth more than bodily comfort." To athletes, a chance to win a game means more than bodily comfort. And most of us, when we need or want anything enough, can accept whatever discomfort we have to go through to get it. People who want to be with God also become willing to accept any amount of pain or material deprivation in order to live in his holy presence forever. They say they don't even feel pain and loss of comfort to the extent that you and I would. Becoming freed of self-love makes them really like Jesus—dead to the comforts of the body but alive to the powerful and everlasting comforts of God.

When you have self-love, you live in the Land of Flesh; and when you don't have it, you live in the Land of the Spirit. Wherever we live, that's the scenery that becomes familiar to us and the climate to which we adapt ourselves. If you live in California, your winter wardrobe isn't going to be anything like the winter wardrobe of people who live in Alaska. And if you live in England, your food isn't going to be much like the food you'd eat if you lived in Mexico. Our clothing, our food, our customs and activities are very much affected by where we live.

When we live in the Land of Flesh, our surroundings are all physical, all material. Material things eventually disintegrate. When they are all we see around us, then no matter how firmly we think we believe in spiritual life and survival after death, we live as if there isn't going to be any spiritual survival. That's because we live in a land where everything rots away, and we just can't completely believe that we aren't going to rot away too, along with our surroundings. So people who are too full of self-love, too surrounded by material concerns and self-indulgences, can never in a deep and true way believe they are created for eternal life. They'll try to believe it from time to time, but they can't become established in the belief. They have never seen the Land of the Spirit, and they can't imagine what it is like or even be sure that it exists. Because of this uncertainty, such people are not able to have a very steady flow of hope, and they don't have the natural optimism about life that we should normally feel. They often feel a need to drum up bodily enthusiasm, to look for physical kicks, to replace this natural hope which they have lost.

For people who live in the Land of the Spirit, it's just as impossible to think this life is the whole end of everything

as it is for people in the Land of Flesh to think that eternal life is the whole point of everything. Those who live in the Land of the Spirit clearly see that material things will disintegrate but spiritual things won't. You don't get the view of eternal life, you don't see the vast spiritual landscape, until you move out of the Land of Flesh and into the Land of the Spirit. When, by desiring and praying about it, we begin to make that move, we very soon realize how much more natural the spiritual life is. We recognize that we are born to live eternally with God.

The Bible tells us not to indulge in lusts of the flesh, because God knows how difficult it will be for us to recognize the truth about life if we do. When people in the Land of



Flesh look around, they see nothing but death. But when people in the Land of the Spirit look around, they see only life—nothing ever dies in the Land of the Spirit. Then what a foolish thing it is, really, to debate about whether certain unnecessary physical indulgences are harmful—to wonder whether a little marijuana will do any damage, or whether regular smoking and a little drinking binge now and then is going to matter much. Every physical indulgence we add to ourselves—and especially the ones that serve mostly to calm our nerves or lift our spirits (things that should never be done by anything material, but only by God)—will just root us all the more inescapably in the Land of Flesh, where there is no life, no kingdom of heaven, no hope in God.

Righteousness comes when we walk, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For they who are

after the flesh mind the things of the flesh; but they who are after the Spirit mind the things of the Spirit. To be fleshly minded brings death, but to be spiritually minded brings life and peace. If the Spirit of God is in you, you are no longer living in the flesh, but in the Spirit.  
—Rom. 8:4-9

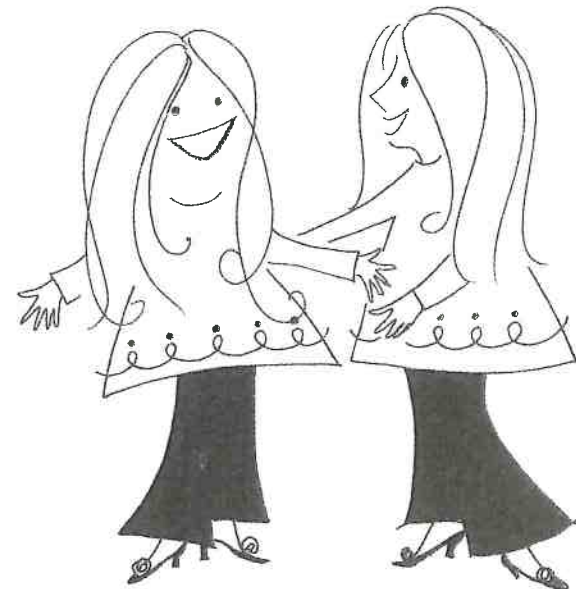
God has made it possible, with his life-giving Cross, for us to move out of the Land of Flesh and into the Spirit—because he treasures human nature above all else. He made it to dwell with himself in all his holiness, and he sacrificed his own life to save it from death and corruption. As he has loved us, we are also supposed to love ourselves and one another. This brings us to the self-love that is not a passion. God gives each of us a strong, natural self-love. This love for ourselves makes us desire life. It makes us desire God, because he is the Giver and the Redeemer of life. It gives us a craving for God—so that, wherever else we look for happiness, we shall always be dissatisfied and restless until we find it in God.

Every human wish, every undertaking, every action, has as its purpose the satisfaction of self-love, the seeking of man's own happiness. But the human spirit is not satisfied with anything that belongs to the senses, and the inborn love of self never lets up in its urgent pushing. The less the natural man succeeds in attaining happiness and the more he has it in view, the more his longing grows and the more he finds an outlet for it in prayer. He goes with a petition for his desires to the Cause of all being.

So it is that inborn self-love, the principal element in life, is a deep-seated stimulus to prayer

in the natural man. The all-wise Creator of all things has given the nature of man a capacity for self-love precisely as an "enticement" which will draw the fallen being of man upwards into touch with celestial things.—Way of the Pilgrim

If you don't feel that you love yourself, then pray to be delivered from vanity. Vanity is the main cause of all inability to love, including the inability to love yourself. When you begin to love yourself, you become very open and honest, with nothing to hide. Anything we love, we tend to bring into view, don't we? If it's a favorite coat, we wear it. If it's a favorite friend, we arrange to see him often. So when you love your real self, you bring it into view more and more. Instead of hiding it under a lot of pretenses, you let it show. That way, you get to know it



much better and faster. You become a friend to yourself. Considering that we actually do have a natural urge to feel friendly toward ourselves, it is really dishonest to say we don't love ourselves. You may think you can't help that kind of dishonesty, because it's the way you truly feel; but you can. All dishonesty comes from vanity, so all you have to do is pray to get rid of the vanity. Then you'll be an honest person and have honest love for yourself.

When you love a person, the first thing you generally do is avoid harming him. That's also the first thing you do for yourself when you become a friend of yourself. You avoid harming yourself in any way. The ancient teachers say that's the beginning of patience. Saint John Chrysostom tells us that patience starts with a refusal to harm ourselves, especially right after we've been hurt by something or someone outside ourselves. Often when someone hurts us badly or rejects us, we want to run in and overeat, or do something nasty and violent in return, or sulk and miss a good time, or take a few drinks or smoke some pot or whatever. But if a friend of yours were attacked by some mean individual, can you imagine going over to him and beating up on him even more? Of course not. And it's the same with yourself. If you are a friend to yourself, you won't do anything spiteful to add to the damage someone else has already inflicted on you. You'll do everything you can to try to make yourself comfortable again, just as you would for anyone else. When you truly love yourself, you may be hurt by others; but you will firmly refuse to harm yourself. What does it mean to harm yourself? According to the fathers, just one very simple thing. It means to break our connection with what is good, with God. When we love ourselves, we will never break that connection. And it



is not possible for any other person to break it for us.

Healthy self-love also protects you from the misguided criticisms and judgments of other people. Only God's judgments of us are entirely good and true and safe. When ignorant people criticize you, it usually makes you feel unacceptable and hopeless, depressed and confused; and you can't see any way out of what they say is wrong with you. God's judgment of us is quite different. He never points out something for us to repent until he's gotten us ready to be cleansed of it. When he judges, he causes a great disturbance in our hearts—like the disturbance in the biblical pool of water just before a person could go into it and be healed. You never have a feeling of being unacceptable or lost when you are being judged by God. Others, when they judge us, often close doors on us and shut us out.



But God never closes the door on anyone. He confronts us with a deficiency in ourselves only when the door to understanding and repentance and salvation is wide open.

Finally, to see how necessary it is to love yourself, look at God's great commandment to love our neighbor as ourself. If you don't love yourself, you can't even get off the ground with that commandment. In the early days of Christianity, people were taught not to try to obey that commandment until they had developed a healthy love for themselves first, and learned to protect and benefit themselves in many ways. One holy teacher said it's better to be regarded as a destitute tramp than to try to benefit your neighbor before you have learned to benefit yourself. Running around doing a lot of charitable things for others when you still aren't able to do anything charitable for yourself is a dangerous waste of time, because it nourishes hypocrisy and arrogance and resentment and cruelty. And you can't possibly understand how to protect and comfort another person, how to meet his needs or lead him into a good life, unless you've learned to do those things first for your own self. So before you worry much about anything else or think about really benefitting any other people in the world, take hold of the natural self-love God has given you and become a faithful benefactor to yourself. Ask Jesus, and he will show you how to do it. He is the Way. Any time you call on him, he's there. He said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the world" (Mat. 28:20).