

The legitimate struggle (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

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When John the Forerunner was in jail, he sent two of his disciples to ask Christ: “*Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else? Jesus replied: Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor*” (Matthew 11, 4-5). Historically these cures have been performed to those who were ailing, but they also have acquired a different meaning in the wider context of the Scriptures. The ailments of our nature symbolize the passions of the soul, where the law of corruption resides. There are few blind people in the whole of mankind. Spiritually blind though aren’t we all, when we are not able to discern our main purpose and destination? Whoever attaches his hope to worldly interests is blind; he will only regain his sight

if he places his faith and hope to the Lord. Similarly, if he allows himself to be enslaved by the other unnatural ways of life and places his hope and his concern only on them, he is deaf and a leper and is permanently bent double and demonized.

Our Lord Jesus *“who took up our infirmities and carried our diseases”* (Matthew 8, 17) is the true healer of our corrupted nature. Whoever believes and follows Him is cured. His most-pure passion, which He willingly suffered for our salvation has the same meaning, since no wicked passion belonged to Christ. *“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth”* (A Peter 2, 22). The Lord hands over His most-holy member to suffering in order to cure our corrupted nature: he hands over each of His most-holy member which corresponds to each of our own bodily part which has disobeyed the commandment and committed a sin. Adam spread over his arm to catch the fruit of disobedience; Our Lord has spread His arms on the cross. They stripped our Lord of his garments and he cured the forefather’s emptiness from divine grace. They spiked our Lord’s ribcage and He cured Eve who has been carved out of Adam’s rib. His legs were being pierced so that He could cure Adam’s feet which were directed towards the commission of sin. He was spitted upon and slapped, in order to cleanse Eve’s shame of false deification, which she has been pursuing at the instigation of the enemy. He held the stick of ridicule in His hands so that He could sign the absolution of mankind’s guilt and annul the manuscript of our transgression. He tasted vinegar and bile in order to spit out the hedonistic taste of sin. He assumed on each of His most holy bodily parts the corresponding discipline of our own transgressions.

The Scriptures symbolically indicate the ways and means which are beneficial to our intentions, instigating us to adopt a zealous mindset. *“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning”* (Luke 12, 35) says our Lord. The comprehensive temperance with humility is described as the ‘useful belt around our loins’ which makes us ready for the unseen battle.

Why is temperance placed before our entry into battle? Since our enemy starts the attack by using the causes of sin, our Lord, as a general, shows us how to absolve ourselves and be set free. *“The prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me.”*(John 14, 30) If the enemy does not find the reasons and materials by which he will tempt us, he cannot win over us. ‘The burning lamps’ symbolize the deep prayer accompanied by love, which constitute the armor which destroys the fiery arrows sent by the wicked one. *“Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God”* (Galatians 6, 16). *“These are like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes*

”(Luke 12, 36-37).

The epicenter of our struggle is to mitigate passions and then to win over them with the grace of God. Secondly, we must substitute the old passions with virtues, so that our soul does not remain naked and empty of spiritual garments. Thirdly, we must be on our guard so that we do not lose the treasure. Thus, we fulfill the command *“work it and keep it”*. It is through practical work that we can generally subdue impassioned desires and place a harness over anger, which is the outer form of the ‘old-self of sin’. However, the mind is raised towards God and is set free from the domination of material things through spiritual knowledge and contemplation. Our Fathers are justified in stressing that man can find no rest unless he totally turns his mind towards God, in such a way that he thinks that only him and God exist. This seems strange to those who have not experienced this work. Those, however, who underwent a little trouble and turned this into a skill, they take pleasure in the contemplation of divine things and are being set free from evil thoughts in accordance with the saying: *“I stay close to you; your right hands upholds me”* (Psalm 63,8)

Just as in the social realms, one needs to be shrewd and diligent and have a regime, similarly *“he who loves his own salvation plots”*. Whoever believes in God is afraid of judgment. Whoever is scared of judgment and his separation from God, tries to heed the commandments. Obeying the commandments is what is meant by the ‘narrow and steep path’ and thus he also patiently perseveres in the face of hardships. The fruit of patient perseverance in the face of hardships is the hope of grace, which does not shame anyone. This hope separates the mind from material things and hopes, and then the love of God comes as a prize.

Our blessed elder advised us: “Firstly, the cunning demons upset the mind’s peace by unspeakable pretexts. Then to all those who do not keep a guard on their minds, they move the passions of desire. In order to take the mind away from the contemplation of the heavens, for the sake of which the faithful especially labors for and hastens towards, they spread before him the hedonistic image, excite in him the biological operation and present it as a necessity. Thus, they take his mind away from the spiritual energy.

Previous sin and the domineering passions cause us to distinguish the active evils inside us. God’s philanthropy begins our cure from these, applying the appropriate medicine according to the measure of the injury”. The ever memorable elder was saying that there is one appropriate cure, which is the easiest therapeutic method and it is even the way to be set free in advance. It is none other than humility. The only weapon and means which helps us win against the enemy and makes us

impregnable is the humble mindset at which satanic pride cannot even glance at. It is one thing to talk using humble words, another is humbleness and quite a different thing is to be truly humble in heart. Talking humbly and humbleness are born out of love for hard work, out of suffering hardship for the sake of the commandments and out of virtue. They belong to the so called 'practical' outer part. True humility though is a divine and mighty gift which is granted by the divine grace to all those who have gone beyond the practical and have risen to the contemplation of God by the grace of Christ.

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