



Spiritual Advice from Abbot Nikon

"Abbot Nikon: Letters to Spiritual Children" Nikodemos Orthodox Publication Society

Saints Peter and Paul Bulletin, January 20, 2002

There are only two choices -- either a person succumbs to the passions and betrays Christ, preferring the world and the life it offers, or he fights and suffers, and through this process spiritually matures.

Whoever gains the ability to see his own sinfulness sees not individual sins [only], but the complete distortion of his soul which constantly exudes all manner of evil; what's more, he sees that even his good deeds are saturated with the poison of sin. When a man sees this clearly, and likewise becomes convinced after a thousand incidents that he cannot heal the leprosy of his soul on his own, then he will genuinely (not artificially) humble himself, will stop judging others, and no longer take offense when his feelings are hurt.

Do not think that a spiritual father feels aversion upon hearing the confession of sins. On the contrary, if there is real contrition, then he feels a sense of mercy and love for his repenting spiritual child. That is certain. This state of the spiritual father is proof that the Lord forgives the penitent and accepts him with love into His company, just as He did the prodigal son.

Insufficiency in fulfilling the commandments is compensated by contrition of heart. I even dare say that this contrition of heart, tears of the heart over transgression of the commandments, is of greater value than their fulfillment according to one's self will. For the latter leads to high-mindedness and pride, and all the good is thereby destroyed, whereas contrition of heart replaces (by God's mercy) "doing" [of the commandments] and keeps a person in humility, without which all spiritual toil is vain and can even lead to perdition.

When a person is standing on the brink of an abyss, it is easy to push him over and make him fall. But when he is far away, he must be dragged to the abyss and in the meantime he can call for help. For this reason it is always best to keep away from places where one can easily fall into sin.

The closer one is to God in reality -- and not simply in one's imagination -- the more one feels unworthy and sinful, more sinful than anyone else. The Holy Fathers felt this way. There are many examples of this. The publican considered himself a sinner for altogether other reasons. Nevertheless, he realized his sinful state and did not try to justify himself. He asked only for mercy and forgiveness of the Lord,



and he received it. Everybody has an insolvent debt before God. No amount of ascetic struggles can repay this debt. The Lord Himself says: If you do all that is demanded of you (that is, follow all the commandments), consider yourselves unprofitable servants whose duty it is to fulfill the master's order (Luke 17:10). How necessary it is for us, who constantly break the commandments, to keep the same disposition of soul as the publican: not to look for virtues in ourselves. Regardless of any spiritual labors we might undertake, we shall always remain abominable slaves. Only by the mercy of God, those who repent are forgiven and are vouchsafed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

For this reason, the seeking of high spiritual states is forbidden by the Lord and by the Holy Fathers. All our inner struggle should be concentrated on repentance and on everything which promotes that penitent state. God's grace will then enter by itself when the soul is clean and if the Lord Himself so wills. If an ascetic has no sincere, heartfelt acknowledgment of his sinfulness, if he has not a contrite heart, he is most definitely in a state of prelest [self-deception]. For those who devote themselves to prayer, it is especially important to practice the publican's prayer and to maintain contrition of heart, else they will be deceived by the demons and fall into high-mindedness, spiritual pride and vanity. May the Lord protect us from such a state.

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