

Piety's Zeal for God

We seek not the things that are ours but those that are of the Lord's will and will serve to advance his glory. This is also evidence of great progress: that, almost forgetful of ourselves, surely subordinating our self-concern, we try faithfully to devote our zeal to God and his commandments. For when Scripture bids us leave off self-concern, it not only erases from our minds the yearning to possess, the desire for power, and the favor of men, but it also uproots ambition and all craving for human glory and other more secret plagues. Accordingly, the Christian must surely be so disposed and minded that he feels within himself it is with God he has to deal throughout his life. In this way, as he will refer all he does to God's decision and judgment, so will he refer his whole intention of mind scrupulously to him. For he who has learned to look to God in all things that he must do, at the same time avoids all vain thoughts. This, then, is that denial of self that Christ enjoins with such great earnestness on his disciples at the outset of their service (cf. Matt. 16:24). When it has once taken possession of their hearts, it leaves no place at all first either to pride, or arrogance, or ostentation; then either to avarice, or desire, or lasciviousness, or effeminacy, or to other evils that our self-love spawns (cf. 2 Tim. 3:2-5). On the other hand, wherever denial of ourselves does not reign, there either the foulest vices rage without shame or, if there is any semblance of virtue, it is vitiated by depraved lusting after glory. Show me a man, if you can, who, unless he has according to the commandment of the Lord renounced himself, would freely exercise goodness among men. For all who have not been possessed with this feeling have at least followed virtue for the sake of praise...

Yet we have still not clearly explained how many and how great are the obstacles that hinder man from a right course so long as he has not denied himself. For it was once truly said: "A world of vices is hidden in the soul of man." And you can find no other remedy than in denying yourself and giving up concern for yourself, and in turning your mind wholly to seek after those things that the Lord requires of you, and to seek them only because they are pleasing to him.

Piety's Imperfection

I do not insist that the moral life of a Christian man breathe nothing but the very gospel, yet this ought to be desired, and we must strive toward it. But I do not so strictly demand evangelical perfection that I would not acknowledge as a Christian one who has not yet attained it. For thus all would be excluded from the church, since no one is found who is not far removed from it, while many have advanced a little toward it whom it would nevertheless be unjust to cast away.

What then? Let that target to be set before our eyes at which we are earnestly to aim. Let that goal be appointed toward which we should strive and struggle. For it is not lawful for you to divide things with God in such a manner that you undertake part of those things that are enjoined on you by his Word but omit part, according to your own judgment. For in the first place, he everywhere commends integrity as the chief part of worshiping him (Gen 17:1; Ps. 41:12, etc). By this word he means a sincere simplicity of mind, free from guile and feigning, the opposite of a double heart. It is as if it were said that the beginning of right living is spiritual, where the inner feeling of the mind is unfeignedly dedicated to God for the cultivation of holiness and righteousness.

But no one in this earthly prison of the body has sufficient strength to press on with due eagerness, and weakness so weighs down the greater number that, with wavering and limping and even creeping along the ground, they move at a feeble rate. Let each one of us, then, proceed according to the measure of his puny capacity and set out on the journey we have begun. No one shall set out so inauspiciously as not daily to make some headway, though it be slight> therefore, let us not cease so

to act that we may make some unceasing progress in the way of the Lord. And let us not despair at the slightness of our success, for even though attainment may not correspond to desire, when today outstrips yesterday the effort is not lost. Only let us look toward our mark with sincere simplicity and aspire to our goal, not fondly flattering ourselves nor excusing our own evil deeds, but with continuous effort striving toward this end: that we may surpass ourselves in goodness until we attain to goodness itself. It is this, indeed, that through the whole course of life we seek and follow. But we shall attain it only when we have cast off the weakness of the body and are received into full fellowship with Him