



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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CONTROL

Picture this: you have just settled down to say your daily prayers when a knock comes at the door. A neighbor needs a lift to the doctor because his car has broken down. How do you react? Rejoice that you can help out with a genuine need? Or help him, but do it with a certain amount of irritation and impatience because it interferes with what you had planned? Few of us manage the first response. The second response shows us that we want to control our lives, even the prayer and good works. We want to do them, but we also want to have some say in how and when. In this case, our daily prayer is undoubtedly good, and something we need to do. But God has put before us something more important this day, and it is safe to assume that this is what He would have us do. This is our goal in Christian life: to do always what God would have us do.

Unfortunately, this is not as easy as it sounds. It requires a perfect conformity of our wills with His -- not just in what we ought to do, but in how and when and why. It means letting God run everything. Our first step is to accept the ideal -- which is possible when we see how often we insist on our own way and mess things up as a result. But after accepting the principle that God should take over as Lord of my life, there remains the second step: making His lordship a reality. This can be one of the most frustrating and intractable experiences of Christian life. The "old man" dies hard, and nowhere harder than on the issue of control.

Part of the difficulty is our failure to fully grasp that we are saved by God's act and not our own accomplishments. This usually operates on a subtle level -- otherwise we would recognize it for what it is: pride. Pride makes us responsible for our own virtue, and thus resists the idea that God saves us by His free gift quite apart from our accomplishments. Even after we have accepted His offer of salvation as a gift, we may attempt works of self-salvation. The sign that we regard our works this way is that we think ourselves unworthy if we don't accomplish what we think we ought. We should be putting effort into the Christian life, of course. Our effort should be a response to God's loving initiative rather than an attempt at self-righteousness. Then we will not be so upset when we fail (at least in accomplishments in this world), for our failures cannot threaten the salvation which God wills to give us.

There is also a second form of control in Christian life, which afflicts even those who have accepted salvation as God's gift. In this form, we seek control not so much because we feel the need to make ourselves righteous enough for heaven, for we know that is impossible. Rather we want to be able to control our spiritual development. If we set ourselves to a given round of prayer and spiritual exercises, we want to see the results appear automatically. We want to be able to overcome our impatience by a year's course of spiritual patience therapy. We feel that if we can simply discover the laws of the spiritual life, then we can accomplish the needed reformation of our character by doing the right things. That we have failed thus far is merely an indication that we have an imperfect knowledge of spiritual cause and effect. We need only to find out a bit more, and then to do a bit more, and we will make it. In short, we expect to be able to control how things develop. Living by a rule of life (as virtually all of us should) can reinforce the idea that we are meant to control things spiritually. Since we determine the means (our rule), we think we should also control the results.

In one sense, this seems only natural. If we pray more we should be more holy, and become holier faster. If we practice paying attention in the time of quiet, then after a certain period of time, we should no longer be afflicted with distractions. If we fast faithfully during Lent for five years, than it shouldn't be hard or burdensome any more.

While there is considerable truth in all this -- there are "laws" of Christian life, for example, and the more we know and conform to them the better off we are -- there is one major flaw. If we can do all in this way, we would not need God -- and this defeats the whole purpose of Christian life, which is to be wholly God-centered. So long as we are in control of it, it is not: it is centered on us instead.

Moreover, if we think about it, we would not want to be in control: for look at what we have done with the rest of our lives. Have we not messed things up time and again when we have demanded that we do things our own way? Our Christian life will hardly escape the scourge of our own incompetence. It would be vastly better off in God's hands. He is not only more reliable than we are, He knows more, and is more compassionate. He is an all 'round better Master than we are, even for ourselves.

So rationally, we want God to be in control of our lives. It makes sense. Yet at the same time, we are afraid to let Him take over. We might have to do something not to our liking. We might have to give up some cherished desire (fame, wealth, family, comfort, marriage). So we devise subtle ways of controlling (or trying to control) our lives, even in our dealings with God. The "old man" is loathe to let go of his pretensions to power. Even when we recognize what we are doing and want to give up control of our life to God, we find it hard to do. Part of the difficulty is that the root of our pride goes very deep -- much deeper than we initially recognize. We are generally unaware of just how proud, how devoted to controlling our lives, we really are. This becomes uncomfortably clear when we try to let God take over.

But there is another fundamental problem with our efforts at letting God be Lord of our lives. It is inherently impossible for us to do by our-

selves. If we could make God control everything, then we would be in control of the process of letting God control. It is like pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps: as soon as we by our own efforts give up control, we have taken control of giving it up. When we try not to be self-centered, it is the self that is trying not to assert itself.

This is what makes our control such a frustrating and intractable issue in Christian life. There is literally nothing we can do to overcome our self-centeredness and desire for control. But -- thanks be to God! -- this does not mean that our selfishness cannot be overcome. God can and will overcome it. For He wills to be our Lord: for this we are made, and to accomplish this He sent His son to die for us that we might live to Him: Christian life is done in us by the Spirit, not by us.

Our aim is not to control but to receive what God wills to do in us, to cooperate so far as we are able. This means that we must be willing to let go. Even if the "old man" is still in control of our feelings, we must acknowledge with the mind and practice with the will our desire to let God be Lord. We cannot by force of will make this happen, but we can desire it, and welcome all that God may do in us to accomplish it. In other words, we can accept the ideal of His Lordship, and pray that He will make it a reality. When we lapse into our old habits of control we may need to remind ourselves that this is what we really want, so that we can persevere.

Since God wants us to be wholly His, He will give us the opportunities to let Him be Lord. Unfortunately, this is not usually pleasant for our old habits of control. The opportunity for Him to be Lord is also the opportunity for us to let go of our attempts to control. In particular, God will allow the circumstances of our lives to show us that our control leads to disaster and that it is inconsistent with our profession as Christians.

He shows us the consequences of our actions: a relationship which we try to manipulate turns sour. The other person doesn't respond as we want him to. Or we try to control things at work and end up being overwhelmed. We try to keep all the balls in the air (so others will think us competent), but it just gets harder and harder. We end up saying, "God, I can't do all this!" And this is the opportunity. When we admit that we cannot do what we have to do, then we can let Him take a shot at it. We can let Him have a bit more of the control. The problem is that when we say, "I can't do all this," we usually mean, "God, you HAVE to take some of this away, and then I can handle the rest." We think His demands upon us a little exorbitant, and if He would just be reasonable, we could deal with the rest. For our sake, though, He will not be "reasonable," for He wants us to admit our limitations, and give up some of the control.

He will not test us beyond our capabilities. (I Corinthians 10:13) We will be overwhelmed only if we refuse to let Him take over. He will push us beyond what we can do by ourselves. That is necessary, or we will go on depending on self. His pushing is an expression of His love for us, His discipline for us as His adopted children: the chance to grow up. The chastening is no doubt unpleasant, but it is the only way to grow up. (Hebrews 12) We can welcome such trials if we remember that what we really want is to be His: to be perfectly conformed to His ideal for us. Anything less will leave us

unhappy and unfulfilled. Since this means giving up control of our lives, then we want that too, even though it is sometimes an unpleasant thing to learn.

While we cannot directly give up control (for that would be to assert control), but must let God take it from us, there are some practical things which will help us along. A spiritual director can be immensely helpful, for he can confirm that what is happening is God taking control -- and not that we have gone off the deep end, being overwhelmed and unable to cope.

To counteract our tendency to say, "Why can't I do this myself?" we should be faithful with **thanksgiving** in our prayers. Being thankful is inherently other-centered. Even in the greatest trials we still have much to be thankful for -- for our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life. And even more for the blessings which are ours in Jesus Christ: that He died for us rather than renounce His love for us. That in Him we are alive and have a sure place in heaven. That His love for us is more sure even than our own. It helps to remember all this, so that we will be more ready to put ourselves into His hands.

In our prayer we should also ask God to deal with the things which trouble us. Such **petition** is not just a matter of asking Him to deliver us, but of resolving things according to His good pleasure. We have to trust that He really does know the best solution, and not insist on our preferred one. And we have to trust that He cares enough about us to take care of things. We learn this trust in the very act of putting the problem into His hands in prayer. This is a key element in our letting go of control.

Our petitions should be very concrete. If the stress is such that I am apt to be difficult with my wife, I (in the car on the way home from work) need to ask for the grace to be charitable and not take it out on her. I ask not just that she will not be demanding, but that I can fulfill my obligation and desire to love her whatever else is going on. If God allows the other stresses, then I know (by faith) that He will give me the grace to love her in the midst of everything. Asking God's help to get through each day will teach us better than almost anything to depend upon Him, and thus to give up our selfish control.

Finally, we should persevere in the prayer of **quiet**. In this time, we should practice putting ourselves in His hands to do with as He will. It is a time for us simply to be in His presence, not doing anything, not demanding anything, but just opening our hearts to Him to remake us as only He can. To do this means giving up our long cherished goals for ourselves, should they conflict with His: whether spiritual experiences in prayer, or a sanctity which others recognize in us, or a particular calling (marriage, priesthood, wealth) in this life. Better by far what God would make us than what we would make ourselves. Waiting upon Him in quiet gives Him the opportunity to draw us to Himself, to fulfill as quickly as possible the purgation of our pretensions to control.

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