



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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EFFORT

"God helps those who help themselves." How often we operate in the Christian life as if this were our credo. To be fair, it is part of the American mentality, and has been preached from many a pulpit. And it is hard for us to imagine that we can succeed as Christians without some considerable effort on our part. It only makes sense that we should put in our effort, and God will reward us for it.

This is the way the world works generally. When we put in the effort, we get the rewards. When we are lazy and negligent, then things do not come our way. There are circumstances beyond our control, of course, and things do not always work out this way; but generally they do, and we know it. We assume that Christian life will work the same way.

There is a problem, however: this is exactly the approach of the Pharisees in Jesus' time, which He often condemned. They prided themselves on their efforts which had made them virtuous. Remember the Pharisee in the temple: "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers. . . . I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess." (Luke 18:11-12) He is not lying. He really is a virtuous man in the world's terms. This takes considerable effort and self-denial. Fasting and tithing are not easy -- as you know well if you have ever tried! Conscious of his effort, the Pharisee expects that God will reward him for his effort: that God will help those who have helped themselves.

Yet Jesus tells us that it was not the Pharisee who went away from his prayer justified, but the Publican who stood afar off, acknowledged his sin, and prayed only for mercy. The Pharisee's approach to the virtuous life is wrong. It is not his virtue that is wrong, but the significance he assigns to it: he thinks God owes him heaven in return.

Even if we see that "God helps those who help themselves" is the wrong approach -- because it places the initiative with us and not with God -- we may fall for a more subtle form of the same temptation. We want to accomplish things in our Christian life (by doing them ourselves) to please God. We want to present our good works as a fitting offering, worthy of His favor. We recognize, at least verbally, our need for grace. But they are **our** works. If they don't turn out well, or if we fail to overcome our temptation, we are depressed, feeling that we have failed God and our salvation is in jeopardy. We feel we have failed ourselves and all our striving for perfection is ruined. We stake our self-image on our accomplishments, and when we fail (as we inevitably do), we no longer respect ourselves.

Here is a test. When do we turn to God for help? Do we try to do things on our own, and ask for help only when our efforts have come short? Or do we ask for help at the outset, before we have even applied ourselves to the task? Do we delight in asking for help, or do we ask grudgingly, with a sense that even asking is already a failure? If we ask grudgingly and only when absolutely necessary, we are relying on our own efforts. We act as though we are required to do our part before asking for help, as though we are supposed to do things apart from God, on our own. This is the Pharisee's approach. Whenever we set ourselves apart from God, we get into trouble, even if we set ourselves apart in the pursuit of virtue. Since virtue is a good thing, this is often hard to see, as it was for the Pharisees in Jesus' day. If virtue is good (we tell ourselves), it should not matter how we acquire it.

But there is a greater good than virtue in this life: eternal life with God. And this comes not by our own effort, nor even by the quantity of virtue we have acquired, but by accepting the gift of God's love. This is the point: no work of ours, no matter how great, how sacrificial, how virtuous, is worthy of heaven. Nothing we can do will merit a place in God's presence. Good works are good, but not so good as to earn by right the heavenly reward.

This is Jesus' point with the Pharisees. They must put aside their good works, and admit that they cannot earn their way into heaven by their own effort. Recognizing themselves as sinners like the Publican (even if they are more virtuous in comparison), they can accept the offer of heaven which God makes as a free gift, unmerited by virtue. That is the only way we can receive the gift.

For our part, we must give up the notion that we can do something worthy of God, and that He requires it of us as a condition of our salvation. While we may not admit that we think this, it is often how we act. We go about tense, impatient, overly concerned with our actions, lest we offend God's expectations of us. We assume that we have to **do** something or we will be lost. This leads to a rather unhappy life, since we are never quite sure that we have done what is necessary -- or if we are sure, we will be quite insufferable in our smugness and pride.

Yet even when we acknowledge this as a temptation, we still feel that if we don't do our part in response to God's initiative, we will not get into

heaven. Surely we must cooperate with God, or we will be lost. There are all those parables which Jesus gave us about judgment: the sheep and the goats, the wise and foolish virgins, the great feast. People who are not careful risk losing out on heaven. So there must be something that we can do and must do.

There is a proper effort to Christian life, but it is not easy to find or maintain it. If we do not fall to the temptation of self-salvation like the Pharisee, there is the other temptation of sloth: let us sin more that grace may abound. That doesn't wash either.

The key is to see that salvation depends not on accomplishment but on love. If we are to abide with God in heaven it will be because we love His Presence more than anything else. All the trials of Christian life are given us to purify and cultivate that love. Without it we will turn down the offer of heaven, like the guests invited to the great feast (Matthew 22:1-14). God's greater concern for us is not for our works or our virtues, but for our love, our willingness to accept His love as it is offered.

This means that we need to give up all ambition to achieve things in the Christian life: whether virtues, or a degree of sanctity, or position in the church, or distractionless prayer, or to be recognized as good Christians. All accomplishments smack of pride rather than grace, and of our desire to control our lives. Rather, God is Lord, and He will shape our lives as is best for us and for His plan of salvation.

It may be best for us to struggle all our life with distractions at prayer. If He wills that we join the battle in this way, we should regard it as an honor and privilege (though we usually do not!). After years of struggle with the passions of lust, we might think that we should be beyond it and attain some mastery of the flesh. But this is in His hands, not ours. If He allows the temptations to persist, then it is for our good.

It is hard to grasp that even our sin cannot overcome the gift offered us by the Cross. "I came not to call the righteous [i.e., the virtuous], but sinners to repentance." (Mark 2:17) God overcomes our sins, even the ones committed when we should know better, the ones we've struggled to resist for years. This does not mean we should give up the struggle. But it does mean that we can relax and turn it over to God, repenting when we fall, and not giving in to anger and frustration with our weakness. Our efforts do not require anxiety and stress over their success. If we get anxious it shows that we are not trusting God, but trying to accomplish things on our own. Rather, our efforts should reflect our confidence in the power of God's grace to accomplish all that is necessary in us. We do put effort into the Christian life, the effort which is a thankful response to all that God has given us and will give us.

We should, as Paul suggests, glory in our infirmities, usually the last things we want to celebrate. But by glorying in our weakness, we acknowledge that we cannot achieve our desired goal: nothing we do can get us to heaven. That is ours only as undeserved gift, and we can accept the gift only when we recognize that we do not deserve it. When we

face our infirmities honestly and without defensiveness, then they do not block the gift, but rather (paradoxically) enable us to receive it.

To glory in our infirmities is also to glory in the Cross of Christ, for only by faith in the Cross can we face our sins. Christ has done them away. They are no longer an obstacle to heaven. His sacrifice for our sin is the one accomplishment that matters in this life. "It is finished [i.e., accomplished]," Jesus says from the Cross. He has accomplished our salvation from sin. The more we focus upon this, the more we will be able to forget about our own deeds, both the good and the bad.

Then we will be able to put ourselves into God's hands. We will accept whatever He may send for our well-being. If temptations come, we will accept them for the good of training our character, since God's providence permits them.

Otherwise we will try to retain control of our lives; we will not trust God to take over. Renouncing control and accomplishment requires the humility to admit that He will do a better job of running our lives than we will, and that our cherished accomplishments are really nothing compared with the accomplishment of the Cross.

Accepting the accomplishment of the Cross is also the key to a joyous life. The Cross is God's judgment on our accomplishments: this is what our deeds do. They reject our Lord, and kill the Living One. Accepting the Cross frees us from the burden of having to achieve what we think is essential. We can let go of **our** goals, and let God accomplish things that are even greater.

Our motivation will no longer be to satisfy our own expectations of virtue and accomplishment, but to please the Beloved. Overwhelmed by His love for us, we will love Him back. Here is a far deeper foundation for life than worldly accomplishment and self-satisfaction. Being loved, and loving back, are the basis for the transformation of life by which God will remake us in the image of His Son. This is the only way to heaven.

Our failings in the Christian life are almost always failings of love. We fall in temptation because we do not remember the love of God for us. We think only of the desired object. Our pride misunderstands the love poured out for us on the Cross. Our impatience forgets the forbearance of Jesus as He is mocked and beaten by the soldiers and judged by Pilate and Caiaphas. Our lust pushes aside the true love of our life.

We are to wait upon God, attending upon Him in love. "O tarry thou the Lord's leisure ..." (Psalm 27:16) Only God can teach us to love as we ought. It is for us to let Him, to accept the lessons He sends our way. Our effort is not one of initiative or accomplishment, but of response, submission, and love.