



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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MEMORY

We like to think of ourselves as being in control of our lives. We take the initiative to keep our relationships basically healthy and satisfying. Career is in hand and progressing nicely. We make it to church pretty much every Sunday, and find time (usually) to say some prayers every day. Everything seems to be going along on an even keel. But then -- the unexpected disaster intrudes, and we realize that we are not in control, but are at the mercy of many circumstances outside our control.

The disasters of our lives, both great and small, have effects far beyond the immediate occasion. A beloved spouse dies, and it takes years to deal with the grief. An indiscretion of youth comes to light at a particularly inopportune time, ruining a career and reputation built by years of hard and conscientious effort. The memory of a betrayal by a close friend keeps coming back to haunt the mind and heart at the time of prayer.

Much as we would like to be free of the past, it does not happen automatically. We cannot accomplish our freedom by an act of will: declaring ourselves free of our past deeds accomplishes little. People still remember what we have done and hold it against us. We are apt to do likewise. Though we may try to ignore it (and even succeed to an extent), our guilt still weighs upon us. The weight of the big things can be overwhelming: the memory of a loved one's death can taint all joys for years. But even the smaller memories can prove an obstacle at the time of prayer.

Think of what so often happens when we try to be quiet for prayer. Instead of pious thoughts of God and virtue, a thought comes to mind of some past offense which someone inflicted upon us. It attracts our attention, and we begin to think about it. We remember how much we were hurt at the time, and how the person never apologized. Perhaps he does not realize the magnitude of our suffering. We think of the injustice, and consider whether we might make an

opportunity to let the other know of our pain; we might even think of hurting him back as a matter of justice. We construct imaginary conversations of what we should have said at the time -- or what we would say now if only we had the chance. In short, we end up resenting the episode all over again. All the old anger and resentment come out anew. We find that we are not quieting down at all, but becoming more and more agitated.

Or it might be a memory of one of our misdeeds that proves an obstacle at the time of prayer. The thought provokes an overwhelming regret. We wish we had never done it! We think of the circumstances which put us in the position where we erred. We think of how we ought to have done differently, and if only circumstances had been a bit different we would not have fallen. When the memory returns, we hash it through once again, with all the old passion.

Or we may call to mind an occasion when something or someone made us angry or depressed. (Anger and depression are closely related, one often following the other.) The memory is enough to get us angry or depressed all over again. This is especially true in the case of depression, since we can get depressed anew at having given in to depression and wasted all that time.

Or it might even be a dream or fantasy which sets off such emotional distractions. It need not even be something which has actually happened. A particularly powerful dream which had a strong emotional impact can renew its hold on our emotions at the time of prayer. If the memory can take hold upon our attention, then we are led back into all the feelings, whether fear or anger or lust or loathing, which attached to it in the first instance.

Such things occur to all of us on occasion. It is part of the condition of fallen human nature. They sneak up on us, and we are hardly aware of what is going on until we are well into the passion which the memory arouses.

How are we to deal with such obstacles to prayer? We might try to forget everything and deal with life only in the immediate moment -- but then we would also forget all the good things that God has done for us. Amnesia is neither desirable nor possible.

We do try this approach sometimes. Because our passionate memories remind us that we are not in control of our prayers, we are tempted to deny their existence. We refuse to admit that we can still be upset about events long past, with the result that the wound goes on festering. Our pride prevents us from acknowledging the problem, and so doing anything about it.

Another alternative is to try to overcome such passionate memories by vigilance: keeping a lookout at the time of prayer, so that we can head off the thoughts before we get involved with them. This doesn't usually work too well, either. In the first place, thoughts arise unbidden at the time of

prayer. While this may become less acute as we become more mature in prayer, it never ceases entirely. We never gain complete control of our thoughts. While this may seem inconvenient at times, it has the benefit of keeping us dependent upon God. As with all distractions, they remind us of our need for Him, even to do something as personal as prayer. They offer us the opportunity to become more God-centered and less self-centered, by reminding us of our lack of control over our own thoughts and feelings, and thus the need for God to help us.

Moreover, it is not good for us to exclude such thoughts entirely from our prayer, since they are often things which we need to deal with in prayer: unforgiven sin, for example, whether ours or others'. Recollection and quiet are impossible (sometimes, at least) unless things are dealt with. This can be for our benefit: it forces the issue. Unless we acknowledge the problem and lay it open for the healing of God's grace, we cannot get on with our prayer.

This is the hard part: to allow God to heal the memory. If we do not, we will remain vulnerable at the time of prayer and in our Christian lives generally. Any part of our being -- whether past, present, or future -- which has not been reconciled to God is an obstacle to prayer and our communion with God generally.

This is easy to see: when the thought arises, we are led away from God. It becomes more than a distraction; it arouses a passion within us. The passion feeds on itself, and it becomes harder and harder to pray. Satan uses these memories to dredge up our old sins and to renew their power over our lives. Without getting us to commit any new sinful deed, he can nevertheless disrupt our prayer, and thus our communion with God. He can interfere with the peace which God wills to give us. So if we allow the past to remain outside our Christian life and practice, unreconciled and healed by grace, then the passions will keep coming back to haunt us. We will never be free of them. They may remain under the surface much of the time, but so long as the root is there, we remain at their mercy.

Since we lack the control of our thoughts which would forever keep the memories out of mind, our defense is to rob the thoughts of their power by bringing them from outside our life with God to within it.

How are we to find God's healing grace? In a word, we must apply the love of God, which is the foundation of all our Christian practice. Basically this comes down to forgiveness, because the common element in all the memories which arouse us at the time of prayer is that we have not allowed them to be redeemed by God. If we harbor resentments for past wrongs, we have not forgiven as we ought. If we are troubled by the memory of our own sins, that is because we have not accepted God's forgiveness for ourselves. When we get angry or depressed or envious, we show that we have not renounced the sin and its desire, and let it go. So it continues to have power over us.

When the memory is one of hurt, then we must forgive the one who hurt us. We must let go of the hurt, allowing God's love to swallow it and take its burden from us. We may still hurt; there may be a scar (even the resurrected Jesus had scars, after all). But it will no longer be a spiritual or emotional burden. It will lose its emotional baggage for us: a scar is not a bleeding wound. The memory will no longer provoke us as once it did. God has the power to do this for us, if we will let Him. Jesus has been through it all. Even though He did not commit sin (as we do), He has taken upon Himself the weight of sin. In dealing with our memories, we can share them with Him with the assurance that He knows from His own experience exactly what we are going through. In our difficulties we can lean on Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The problem is that too often we are unwilling to seek or even allow the healing of memories. Instead we cling to the hurt, desiring some revenge or claiming that it is too great a hurt to forgive. Sometimes we think that we have forgiven but unknowingly delude ourselves. If the memory arouses the old passions within us then we have evidence that we have not yet succeeded in thoroughly forgiving (or accepting forgiveness) and letting go. Some memories take time to heal. What is important is that the wounds are in the process of healing and not remaining open and bleeding.

If the root of the memory is our own mistake, then we must learn to accept God's forgiveness, by an act of will if necessary. God loves us even though we are sinners. That is exactly how He loves us: while we were yet sinners, Christ died on the Cross for us. Our pride gets in the way, of course. We think we ought to make ourselves worthy of His love. But when we insist upon it, we in effect refuse His love, preferring to defer our acceptance of it until we think we are worthy. And this will keep us from ever being free of the memories of our past sins.

It is especially important for us to be aware of our passionate memories, and address them in our prayer. For they are not just inconvenient obstacles to our desired quiet in prayer. They are also indications of more serious problems in our Christian lives which are in need of attention. Like the pain which draws our attention to a bleeding wound, or our guilt which forces us to deal with sin, the passionate distractions in the time of prayer push us to bring more of our life into conformity with Christ. They show us that something is out of order, and through the inconvenience of disrupting our prayer, push us to do something about the root problem.

When we find ourselves overcome by memories, then is the time to bring them to God, to focus upon Him who has promised to refresh us when we labor and are heavy laden. Asking Him to take over and bear that which we cannot means that we must also be willing to let go. Then we will come to the point where the memory will no longer distract us from God. For the facts of the past cannot hurt us, when they have been subjected to the merciful love of God. It is only when they remain outside His love that the memories can lead us astray.