



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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SELF-EXPECTATION

What we expect of a situation affects how we respond to its outcome. If we enter a race where there are a lot of fast runners, we may expect only to finish in the middle of the field. If we come in last, we are disappointed. If we come in third, we are pleased -- even though we didn't win.

To take another example: the political polls leading up to a primary election may tell who is ahead and who is behind. But sometimes even the candidates who are behind will express pleasure because they are not as far behind as people thought they were. To interpret the polls one needs to know not only the figures, but also what the candidates expect out of them.

Our response to a given situation is determined partly by the situation and partly by our expectations. This is true for our Christian lives as well as for the other areas of importance to us. We need to ask ourselves, "What do we expect of ourselves as Christians? What results do we look forward to in the life of prayer?" And then, having answered those questions, we must ask how this affects our Christian endeavor, and if our expectations are in line with the faith we profess.

There are two basic errors in Christians' expectations of themselves: expecting too much, and expecting too little. Strangely enough, the two are not mutually exclusive, and can exist in one person at the same time.

The first error is to expect too much of ourselves. At first sight, it may seem impossible to expect too much of ourselves in our Christian practice. After all, is there not always room for improvement? Are there not always bad habits, selfishnesses, negligences within us? Are there not opportunities for greater Christian service, for prayer, for Bible study and spiritual reading -- opportunities which we fail to take?

We must frankly answer, "Yes" to all of these. But two points must also be made. First, we may not be called to certain sorts of Christian service, even though they are good services in themselves. In His mercy, God may have other things in mind for us. So just because we see something that would be good to do does not necessarily mean that we should do it (or else feel guilty for not doing it).

The second point concerns our expectations. This is not the question of whether we can do more, but whether we expect ourselves to do more. Do we as a matter of course expect to be able to do all these things? If we habitually get upset at our failures to do more, then most likely our expectations are out of line.

If we expect complete success in our spiritual activities, we are liable to be disappointed. We are yet imperfect and lack the power to make ourselves perfect. Even with the best of intentions we find that we are incapable of praying as much as we think we should, of praying with due attention, of thinking well of our neighbor, and so on. The old man is strong within us, and try as we might we are unable to overcome it. Our prayers are beset with distractions. Only with the greatest vigilance can we maintain our daily prayers. And we find ourselves falling into the old petty, sinful habits at the least provocation.

So what happens when we fail to live up to our expectations of ourselves? Probably we get angry with ourselves for our failure. We may upbraid ourselves, and then set ourselves back on course. With renewed vigilance, we think that we can succeed where we have just failed. Then the next time we fail, the anger recurs, and we make the resolve once again. After several such episodes, we begin to get depressed about the whole enterprise. We wonder if success is possible. We get down on Christian life, and go off bemoaning our failures: despair.

Since despair is obviously not a very happy state for a Christian, it must indicate that something is wrong. The problem here is that we expect to make ourselves holy. We get frustrated when our expectations are not met. But they are not in line with reality. The reality of being a Christian is that God saves us. Left to ourselves, we are merely sinners, incapable of attaining the righteousness we need to live at peace with God, and abide with Him in heaven. Thus we are wrong if we think that we can make ourselves righteous. It is a mistake to expect that of ourselves.

When we have high expectations for our Christian lives, we must be careful that we are not expecting to be able to accomplish them ourselves -- which is what we usually do. If we expect to be able to pray without distraction, we are in for trouble. If we try to satisfy the expectation by our own efforts, we are doomed to failure

(leading to anger, impatience and depression). Distractions will come, and we will think we have failed. But there is no solution to such a problem apart from God's grace. Though we may have received our ideals of Christian life from Him, we were not taught that we should be able to accomplish them by ourselves. Our expectations, though reasonable from one perspective (we must be holy as God is holy), lead us astray when we expect to satisfy them ourselves. Only when we expect God to satisfy them (with our cooperation, of course) will they lead us in the right direction.

The other problem is with those who expect too little of themselves as Christians. These are people who know their own weakness all too well. They are willing (perhaps too willing) to put up with it. They have resigned themselves to the fact that they will never be saints, indeed, that they will never even be close to sainthood. So they are willing to put up with their sinful habits, with distractions at prayer, with a generally inadequate prayer life, on the grounds that they will never be perfect anyway. They may even justify it by saying that God doesn't expect us to be perfect -- if He did no one would make it to heaven. They dismiss the examples of the saints known to the Church as exceptional people in exceptional situations, people who are nothing like ourselves.

People in this category are not all bad. Some aspire to a certain worldly goodness -- avoiding gross immorality, being nice to people, giving faithfully (if not sacrificially) to the Church and charity, and so on. They have in fact accepted this standard of goodness as a substitute for the standard of holiness given us in Scripture. They might even be taken aback if someone suggested to them that there is more to Christian life than what they are doing. For they have a sense that Christianity is here to make people good, when in fact it is here to proclaim and make present the Kingdom of God.

For others, this situation of low expectations is simply a matter of sloth. They do not want to commit themselves to the sort of enterprise which is involved in whole-hearted Christianity. They sense that this would involve some significant changes in their lives: how they spend their time, allocate their resources, treat other people, and so on. When you don't expect to become holy, then you can put up with a lot of things. If, for example, you get impatient with other drivers, you may excuse this by saying that it is not a very big sin, and you'll never be a saint anyway, so why worry about it? Our low expectations can lead us to sloth and negligence.

If, on the other hand, you expect to be made holy (eventually) then you know every selfishness will have to go sometime. Then it is only a matter of when. You will not be able to put up quite so easily with the bad habits that you now recognize. You may realize that

it will be a long-term project to stop being impatient with other drivers, but you will be ready to make a start -- or at least ready to think about making a start.

This shows the root problem of low expectations: the lack of love. We will want to eradicate all our bad habits (even impatience with poor drivers) because we love the Lord, and we do not want anything in our lives that will offend Him. Our basic motivation in Christian life is the love we receive from Him, and the love we wish to return to Him. Our love springs from the gratitude we feel for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life, and especially our redemption by our Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross.

Love knows no bounds. Thus it will not sell our Lord short by expecting Him to accomplish in us anything less than holiness. He will make us as holy as He is holy. He will accomplish it. It is His power that will do it, since we are clearly incapable of making ourselves sinless. Low expectations are in fact a matter of doubting that God is really powerful, that He can actually redeem us, sanctify us and making us ready for the full force of His presence in Heaven. It is an insult to God.

So how are we to shape our expectations of ourselves so that they will be neither too great nor too slight? It is a matter of judging and loving ourselves just as God judges and loves us. We must learn to think of ourselves as redeemed sinners. In Him everything is possible. On our own we are nothing. When we think of ourselves, we must acknowledge that we are sinners beyond our own redeeming. And at the same time, we must recognize that God wills to save us. We must hold both at once -- that is the hard part.

But if we learn to do it, then our expectations of ourselves will fall into line. We will expect of ourselves nothing: apart from grace we are weak and doomed to failure. But we will also expect complete success of God. We will believe from the depths of our hearts that He is able and willing to make us holy as He is holy. We will give ourselves over to His power and love. We will look forward to the fulfillment of His promise, to our eventual sainthood. But we expect this result with a certain peace and patience, trusting its accomplishment in God's good time, and in His way. The setbacks that come from time to time we will be ready to take credit for, finding the cause in the residue of our fallenness.

Our expectations will be formed by our Christian image of ourselves as redeemed sinners. As Christians we expect nothing of ourselves and everything of God. We will live in complete dependence upon Him, knowing that we cannot do for ourselves. At the same time, we will know His mercies toward us, and live in thankful love toward Him.