



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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SPIRITUAL NARCISSISM

When we start to live intentionally Christian lives, trying to shape all that we do around Jesus, we run into a problem. We find that it is all too easy to be centered not on Him but on ourselves. In a way this is inherent in the Christian life. For we are responsible for ourselves, for what we do as Christians. We are individual Christians, each a person made in God's image, and made precious in all our individuality by His love. The problem is to practice our Christian faith with due attention to God's handiwork within each of us, but without getting preoccupied with self. Our goal is Christ-centered religion, with self understood in terms of Christ. So often it is the other way around: we understand Christ in terms of self.

There are two things which force us in the direction of self-centeredness. The first is that Christian life legitimately requires some attention to ourselves. We cannot live Christian life in the abstract, but only as the individuals we are, with our particular personality and gifts, in our situation in the world -- age, family, job, and so on. When, for example, we form a rule of life for ourselves, we must of necessity look at our life in all its details. We are focussed on self. Or in the necessary matter of regular self-examination: it is self examination, and can lead to a preoccupation with self. How often we have looked at our sins only to get depressed, angry at ourselves for our lack of progress. This is preoccupation with self. We are upset because we have not done better. We place ourselves at the center of our spiritual lives. For if we expected God to make us perfect, we would be penitent and not angry with ourselves.

The nuts and bolts of Christian discipline can also become a snare for us. It is all too easy to make the Daily Office, our fasting, our special Christian service, all the little (and big) concrete things we do day by day to practice our Christian life, into works which make us proud of ourselves -- thus focusing in on self. This is the Pharisaic error, and it is a temptation to all those who commit themselves to some form of Christian discipline. We do these things to help form the will, so that we live more and more completely for God rather than self. But if our enemy cannot get us to stop the

disciplines altogether, the next best thing he can do is to pervert them. They are perverted when we do them in the wrong way: not as acts of love, but as works which we think earn us God's favor. Then instead of training the will, our efforts simply feed our pride. Instead of leading our attention heavenward, they bind it to earth.

The second, and ultimately more serious, root of preoccupation with self is original sin. When man fell in the Garden of Eden, he became self-centered: this is what Satan promised when he told Eve that she and Adam "would become as gods." We each perceive ourselves to be the center of the universe. We even expect the world (and other people as well) to revolve around us, to cater to our needs and desires. Christianity requires repentance, turning about (as John the Baptist taught): turning from our old self-centeredness to acknowledge the true Center, God. Our Christian practice is devoted to carrying out our conversion, so that we become ever more and more centered on God and less and less on self.

Our fight with spiritual narcissism is a long-term endeavor. It is part of growing up as Christians. As children grow up they must learn to become other-centered. Those who do not are insufferable as adults; in their self-centeredness, they are unable to acknowledge that others are equally centers with themselves. The same growth happens in Christians as we grow from spiritual childhood into adulthood.

In particular, we must learn that the spiritual life is not there for us but for God. We sometimes think (especially when we first start out) that all our disciplines go to give us great spiritual experiences, or to keep us feeling good, or to give us insights into things, or even to make us impressive Christians to our friends and fellow parishioners (or even the parish priest!). In fact, the aim of it all is to glorify God. It is not for us at all, though we benefit immensely from it. It aims at the true service of God, service which we cannot render as unredeemed sinners. As human beings, we are to glorify God, admitting that He is our Creator and we His creatures.

So we must approach the spiritual life not for what we can get out of it, but because it is true. Moreover, if we are doing it for what we get out of it, we will be tempted to give it up if we don't seem to be getting what we want from it. When we find ourselves in trial (as all Christians will from time to time), we will not have the foundation to persevere.

How are we to avoid narcissism? The battle begins with self-examination. As with our usual self-examination we look for sins and faults. We especially look for pride, for that is the sin which sets us against our Lord, making ourselves the source of our good works and salvation rather than receiving them as His gift.

Then we must look a little more deeply, to see if there are unresolved situations which we are refusing to share with our Saviour. Anything which we keep to ourselves, fearing that God might ask it of us, or anything that we are afraid to look at in ourselves -- these will keep us from giving ourselves over to His mercy, and will keep us imprisoned in ourselves. For example, we may not be willing to ask God to help with a certain relationship -- for we may fear that He would not approve of it. Or we may keep to ourselves about a job or vocation, fearing that God may want us to do something we would rather avoid. The point is that all of who we are must be open to God. Otherwise we will always be self-centered.

Then we must look at our rule of life, the regular things we do as Christian devotion. We look at each item to see if we pervert it into an occasion of preoccupation with self. If I keep a journal: does this open me to God's works in my life, or close me in on myself? In my time of quiet: am I preoccupied with my feelings all the time? Or am I worried about whether I am really making any progress? Does it end up more focussed on self than on God? Do I read Morning Prayer more in order to impress my friends (and myself) than to worship my Lord?

No doubt we will find some instances -- perhaps some big ones -- of self-centeredness in our religious practice: the way we keep a journal or say the Daily Office or the way we regard our good works. Then we can proceed to deal with them. This does not mean giving up all Christian discipline! Some adjustments in the details of what we do may be in order. We may have undertaken too much, or something (a journal, for example) that is not essential and not really helpful to us in our particular situation. The counsel of a spiritual director can be very helpful in discerning the reality of a situation like this.

Often, though, it is not so much what we are doing as how we are doing it. The alternative to doing good things defectively is not (usually) to stop doing them but to do them correctly. If we find ourselves constantly distracted and judgmental at Sunday worship, the obvious solution is not to stop going to church, but to change the way we worship. This may well be harder than giving it up. Merely being on the alert will help some, though it is not always sufficient to eliminate the problem.

Most fundamentally, we must love God. Love takes us out of ourselves, and places our attention firmly on the Beloved. This is true love, of course, not the affection which is really self-interest: where we "love" others for what we can get out of them. This is the simple love which wishes only to please the Beloved, whatever the cost to us. If we have ever experienced this love on earth, it will help us to form our love for God. Our love for Him is based on what He has done for us: creation, redemption, life, His self-revelation,

our adoption as His children. As we understand the magnificence of His love for us, we begin to love Him back in the same way, though (initially at least) without the purity of His love for us.

We must keep this as the touchstone of our Christian lives: all that we do as Christians revolves around the love of God. Whenever that love is missing, there is a problem. Sometimes, of course, we won't feel much like loving -- and that's merely human. We cannot expect to maintain the emotion forever. But when the will is not motivated by love but by self-interest, then we must step back, look at what we are doing, and try to get back on course. When we are working through problems of self-preoccupation, it is helpful to keep this as a part of our regular self-examinations: how well do our devotions measure up to the standard of love?

There are some practical things which we can do to help this along. First, we can look at all our past episodes of self-dependence (those times when we went off on our own apart from God), and see that things always went wrong. This is not only a deterrent to doing likewise. It is also a lesson in God's fatherly mercy. He will bring us back to the straight and narrow by His loving discipline.

Second, the regular study of Scripture will help us to learn who God is. It helps give us a sense of Him as a Person. And if we can cultivate this sense of Him, we will be the better able to love Him in our prayer and devotion. Scripture (especially the Psalms and the Gospels) gives us true teaching of Him, which will form our experience of God in prayer.

Third, a sense of humor will help things along immensely. The ability to laugh at ourselves is a wonderful way to keep things in perspective when we are inclined to take ourselves too seriously. Humor, like true love, takes us out of ourselves, giving us the chance to be filled not with self but with God.

Finally, we must work at the prayer of quiet. There is no substitute for being quiet with God, not just on occasions of special need but regularly. It is an essential part of our love for Him: that we spend time with the Beloved, to listen, to share what is important to us, but also just to be. That is the time when we will fight out our narcissism: by working to love, by concentrating on His love for us, by opening ourselves to Him. In quiet we can be completely honest with Him -- and thus with ourselves. There we learn to love, simply and freely, giving ourselves, and preferring His gifts to all that we have done for ourselves. In this rich and splendid quiet, God will take from us the burden of Narcissus (who fell in love with his own image in the water), and give us in its place the freedom of loving the One who is alone worthy of our absolute love.