

DIALOG WITH A 20TH CENTURY STARETZ

On Turning to God When We Have Sinned

Q. Why is it so hard to turn to Jesus right after you have sinned?

A. It comes from the habit of looking for your peace in what you do yourself. If your habitual disposition is to feel good when you possess order and peace in yourself, then the experience of sin would disrupt that. It would be the moment of crisis because at that point you would get despondent. What is behind this is a wrong understanding of how grace works. Grace works by moving your will to do what you can't. To get an increase in grace you have to be able to do what you can't do! If you're always able to do what you can, there would be no need for grace and no increase in grace. The increase of grace is the reality of yourself doing something which you in yourself can't and won't do. It's like Peter walking on the water. When you live by grace you live by faith. When Jesus said: "Come over to Me" to Peter, how is that essentially different from your experience after you have sinned? Jesus says "Come over to Me" and you don't believe you have that capability in yourself. The principle is that He calls you, and when you come you're living by faith and you have an intellectual grace which enables you to do what you can't do by yourself.

Q. Then why don't we do that? Why don't we heed his voice?

A. There is a certain luxury of spirit whereby you want to luxuriate in what is within your own capacity. You know by faith that after you have sinned, Jesus is calling you. That is why when Peter gave up, Jesus said, "O ye of little faith," because Peter was unwilling to operate by the power of Jesus instead of by his own power, which was powerless.

Q. We have a tendency to always want to take delight in ourselves. Is that always bad?

A. Taking delight in yourself—you are aware of this when you are aware that you want something illicit. Also, you are aware that you want a kind of euphoria in yourself... But this does not mean that you should get scrupulous when God allows you to enjoy something. Only practice can give you a proper sensitivity to this. St. Paul says: "I use the things of this world as though I use them not." The more you live by faith the more you become aware of yourself as an instrument. Being an instrument, you take your delight in the way God uses you, like a violinist taking delight in the music. As soon as you become aware that you're taking this delight in yourself, that you want it for yourself, you should go back and renew your union with Jesus. What else could you do?

With a Pelagian conscience you would think: "This is wrong, I have to change it." But you can't change it because that is the way you are—so you go to Jesus trusting Him to do what you know you don't even want to do in yourself. You can't change that Pelagian conscience by working on it directly. You can change it the way you take out an appendix, by letting the surgeon operate! And you don't try to anesthetize yourself either.

Q. But something in all this must depend upon us, no?

A. Jesus said, “Without Me you can do nothing.” The most important use of your free will is to be united more and more with Jesus in the realization that in yourself you don’t even desire virtue. The false conscience would make you preoccupied with what you thought was wrong and what you had to change in yourself, and so it would convince you that you don’t want what you do want. Habitual sin, however, shows you there is something in yourself that wants whatever it is. If you know you want it, how can you will to stop it? It is like going north and south at the same time.

Q. Can we never delight in ourselves and what we do?

A. Yes, of course you can. When you are united with God, he wants you to delight in your goodness, and it is important for you to remember this. Otherwise the life of faith would be puritanical. God wants you to experience the achievement of doing good but He doesn’t want you to make that achievement your end. Remember, he said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven.” When you put God first and the more you desire that, the more He can let you achieve things, because He is not going to let you be seduced by them. So you should be able to accomplish more and to take delight more in what you accomplish, but your delight is really in God.

It is like the voice of Mary in the Magnificat: “My soul does magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior because He has regarded the humility of his handmaiden. For behold henceforth all generations shall call me blessed for He who is might has done great things to Me.”

Q. So any delight we take in ourselves should really be a delight in what God is doing in us?

A. Consider the case of a child working with its father, say in building a model. The child needs the father’s help on a particular operation and when the father provides this help and the operation works out well, the child takes a natural delight in the accomplishment, but is fully aware that his father made it possible. When a child withdraws from his father and still wants to take delight, then the end is to take delight in yourself. In the right spirit, the child wants the father to help. This is the image of what your relation to God should be also.

The reason you need a father like that—a spiritual surrogate father if nothing else--is because by yourself you don’t have the sufficient foundation to believe in the Goodness of God. How else shall anyone gain that experience first-hand, as not just an idea of goodness, but as actual experience of it? When that child makes a model with his father and experiences his father’s help, that experience of his father’s goodness naturally disposes the child later to believe in the Goodness of God. You experience God’s goodness in the measure that you are open and disposed to experience it. The experience of a father’s goodness, or a surrogate father’s goodness, helps create that openness. If one’s natural father failed in that respect, when one is older one may seek a spiritual

father, especially a priest who will help you now to deal with personal difficulties, and through this experience open you to the goodness of God. But a father like this is only a means, never an end of idol. His effect on you should bring you closer to God who is your true end.

Remember Jesus words, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." What we seek in this is the Life. As soon as you get into yourself and think, "Yes, Jesus is the Life but I have to get to Him," then you're concerned with the truth you can create and the road you can take. But Jesus is saying: "I am the doctrine and I am the road by which you come." Remember, the Truth about God isn't the way to God. It's as though He were saying, "I am the map (Truth) and the road (the Way), and the end to which you are going. Jesus is the End and the only way to get to Jesus is Jesus. The more you are convinced of that the less you'll look for other roads and other ways. You have to believe there is nothing you can do to prepare yourself to go to God. You just go! Once you try to make yourself ready, God can only let you fail.

The reality behind sin is that we want to take delight in ourselves. Impurity always comes out of frustration with everything else. The really important thing is to take delight in someone who can function for you as a spiritual father, and in order to take delight in him you have to know that he loves you. Your most important work is to convince yourself of the truth that he does. If you omit that, everything else is nothing. In the same way if you don't meditate on the Goodness of God and His Love for you, you won't be peaceful. All this talk about mental health.... This is mental health, taking delight in your father and taking delight in yourself as you're united with him and God.