

## 04. Detachment and Humility





## John of the Cross on Detachment

‘The only desire God permits in his dwelling place is the desire to carry out his will perfectly, and to carry the cross’(Ascent I.5.8).

We need ‘a remarkably vigilant care and interior determination concerning what to do or what not to do in order to please God’(Dark Night II.16.14).

Just as a bird held back by the lightest of cords cannot fly (see Ascent I.11.4), so one single attachment, however slight, is enough to hinder us drawing near to God (see Dark Night II.9.1).

All desires are to be directed towards God through love (see Dark Night II.11.3-5). All our energy is to be directed to the glory of God, seeking to do God’s will in all things.



Attachments can be at the level of feeling.

‘Seeking oneself in God is something entirely contrary to love. Seeking oneself in God is the same as looking for God’s consolations’(Ascent II.7.5).



‘I should like to offer a norm for discerning when gratification of the senses is beneficial and when it is not. Whenever, upon hearing music or other things, seeing agreeable objects, smelling sweet fragrance, or feeling the delight of certain tastes and delicate touches, you immediately at the first movement direct your thought and the affection of your will to God, receiving more satisfaction in the thought of God than in the sensed object that caused it, and you find no gratification in the senses except for this motive, it is a sign that you are profiting by the senses and that the sensory part is a help to the spirit. The senses can then be used because the objects sensed serve the purpose for which God created them: that God be more known and loved through them’(Ascent III.24.5).



We can also be attached to our way of understanding things

‘All that can be grasped by the intellect would serve as an obstacle rather than a means, if a person were to become attached to it’(Ascent II.8.1).

We can even be attached to past graces.

Even these are but steps on a ladder. We must leave the step behind if we wish to climb (Ascent II.12.5).



‘You should not bear being attached to anything, whether it be to the practice of meditation, or to anything, whether sensory or spiritual, which delights you, or any way of thinking. You should be very free regarding everything, because any thought or discursive reflection or satisfaction upon which you may want to lean would impede and disquiet you, and make noise in the profound silence of your senses and spirit, which you possess for the sake of this deep and delicate listening’(Living Flame 3.34).



‘Detach your senses from everything, which is all you yourself have to do apart from simple loving attentiveness. You should not use any force except to detach the soul and liberate it, so as not to alter its peace and tranquillity’(Living Flame 3.65).

In the final paragraph of Book I of his Ascent John writes:

‘In self dispossession the heart is at rest. It wants nothing. Because it is grounded on Jesus not on itself. It does not matter whether it feels elated or dejected.’

John gives a graphic description of what happens to a log of wood in a fire, using it as a metaphor for the suffering we experience as we are purified of our attachments by the fire of God’s love drawing us to Himself (Dark Night II.10).



Asceticism is different for each person

God knows what each person needs to let go in order to draw close to Jesus and so enjoy divine communion. For the rich young man it was material possessions. For the scribes it was pride in their learning. For others it was their negative sense of themselves, and for others their inflated ego. Essential to asceticism is that we are not the ones to decide. We must wait on the inspiration of grace. The goal is to do God's will.



When Peter saw Jesus walking on the water, he did not dare to leave the boat of his own decision. He wanted to go to Jesus and so he prayed: 'If it is you, tell me to come to you across the water'. It was only when Jesus called him that he knew that he could leave the boat and, keeping his eyes on Jesus, walk towards him (Matthew 14:28-31). The science of detachment is a science of love. Only God has the wisdom to know what it is that we need to let go, and when we are ready to do so.



‘If you wish to become my disciple, you must deny yourself’(Matthew 16:24).

The purpose of detachment is that we might be free to make a whole-hearted gift of ourselves to God.

‘When Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, See, God, I have come to do your will”’(Hebrews 10:5-7; Psalm 40:6).





As a young woman, Mary knew that left to herself there was no way she could carry out the mission revealed to her by God. God was offering her an unprecedented intimacy. He wanted her to conceive the Word-made-flesh. This could happen only if God himself embraced her and breathed into her his own creative Spirit. God offered her this special love. God could give it only if she consented. He did not ask her to do anything, but rather to allow him to love into her his only Son. Her response was perfect: 'Let what you have said be done to me'(Luke 1:38).



To be so open to allow God to achieve his loving purpose in us, we need to hold everything that is not God so reverently that we are willing to let it go the moment God calls us to do so. If our hands are tightly clasped how can we hold them open to receive God's gift? How can we remain free to embrace God when he offers himself to us?



## Detachment : The Way of Silent Love, 84-86

‘There is no peace without detachment. There is no detachment without effective renunciation. There it is, the hard saying! Our passions carry us towards what is pleasing and delightful, towards what we love. Thus they cause us to avoid what is unpleasant and hurtful, the things we fear or hate. The way of resurrection is the way of death, a curtailment of life, a mortification of the senses etc etc. Today, as always, we don't want it. But listen to Christ: If anyone would follow me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me ... There is no other way.



## Detachment : The Way of Silent Love, 84-86

In speaking of detachment I am afraid of giving too much importance to what is of little consequence. Certainly detachment from things is an essential element of the spiritual life. This does not mean that we are obligated to make a continual effort of the will to be detached. A continual preoccupation such as this is unhealthy and sometimes results in a negative attitude and bitterness that has little to do with Christian simplicity and joy. And in the end it puts too much emphasis on secondary matters. To be continually preoccupied with denying ourselves something is to feed the desire to possess and give it importance ...



## Detachment : The Way of Silent Love, 84-86

The true contemplative doesn't need to make a constant effort to mortify the senses. Only love is necessary, the heart turned to God and the things of God; or rather he realises that things are leaving him and detaching themselves from hi. He quickly forgets them, so fascinated is he with the discovery of the wondrous Mystery. Let us not be like the fearful people who, on the mountain did not take their eyes from their feet for fear of stumbling and were thus unable to revel in the broad horizon and vast expanses. Let us be bold enough to be joyful. Christ and the love of God are worth it.'



‘Let nothing disturb you  
Let nothing frighten you  
Everything is passing  
God alone does not change  
Patience obtains everything  
The one who clings to God wants for nothing  
God alone is enough’(Teresa Poesias 30).



## John of the Cross on Humility

‘Spiritual humility is opposed to the first capital vice, spiritual pride. Through this humility acquired by means of self-knowledge, a person is purged of all those imperfections of the vice of pride into which she fell in the time of her prosperity. Aware of her own dryness and wretchedness, the thought of her being more advanced than others does not even begin to occur as it did previously. On the contrary she realises how better others are.’(Dark Night I.12.7)

‘To be humble is to hide in your own nothingness and to know how to abandon yourself to God’(Other Counsels 5).



## Teresa of Avila

‘Set your eyes on Christ ... There you will learn true humility and self-knowledge gained in this way will not make you cowardly.’

(Interior Castle I.2.II).

‘Humility, however deep it be, neither disquiets nor disturbs the soul; it is accompanied by peace, joy and tranquillity.

Although we are distressed by our sinfulness ... this distress is accompanied by an interior peace and joy of which we should not like to be deprived.

Far from disturbing or depressing the soul, it enlarges it and makes it fit to serve God better.

Distress can disturb and upset the mind and trouble the soul ... When you find yourselves in this state, cease thinking, so far as you can, of your own wretchedness, and think of the mercy of God and of God’s love and his sufferings for us’ (Way of Perfection 39).



## Anthony Bloom 'The Courage to pray'

'The word humility comes from "humus" – fertile soil ... capable of making good use of the rubbish we tip into it, capable of transforming our refuse into wealth, of accepting every seed, giving it body, life, growth, to become fully itself without denaturing it ... Like the rich silent, creative earth, we should offer ourselves to the Other'(page 11).

'An attitude of self-surrender which is at the same time extremely active: self-surrender, because like the earth, humus, we give ourselves without reserve; active, because we are ready to respond to God's every suggestion, every call'(page 12).



## Anthony Bloom 'The Courage to pray'

- Humility requires self-knowledge.

This does not come through focusing on ourselves.

Rather we have to learn to see ourselves as God sees us.

This requires contemplation where we come to see that, with all our limitations and sins, we are loved unconditionally by God.



# Humility

Humility is an attitude of mind and heart, learned from Jesus, and inspired into a person by Jesus' Spirit, whereby a person recognises himself/herself as God's child, sharing the life of God's Son, and living, therefore, in total dependence on God's loving providence.

The humble person delights in this dependence, knowing that God is a Father, and can be totally counted on as a source of life, love and hope.



It is the real me that God is inviting into prayer, the real me precisely as I am now. It is not the me that I used to be. It is not the me that I would like to be. It is not the me that others think I should be. It is the real me whom God is wanting to draw into deeper communion with himself.



Of course, if I respond to this grace, I will not remain the same. How could such a love enter my life without changing me? But it is the real me, here and now, who is being invited into this intimacy. This is a very consoling truth. We do not have to be different to attract God's attention. We do not have to earn God's love. Whatever kind of mess I may be in, God is wanting to love me, here and now. When we doubt this, we have the prodigal son, Mary of Magdala, the thief on the cross, the leper and dozens of others from the gospels to reassure us that it is so.



## Who am I?

- I am a creature held in existence by the love of God my creator.
- I am someone dear to the heart of Jesus.

‘I have come that you may have life and have it to the full’(John 10:10).  
Because he believes in me, I can learn to believe in myself, I can learn to believe in the designs which God has for me. Jesus’ love for me encourages me to dare to live. We remember Jesus’ own promise:

‘If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you’(John 14:23).

- I am a temple of God’s Holy Spirit:

‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’(Romans 5:5).







The key to discovering how I can love is found in being attentive to the actual ways in which God has graced me in my life, and to the actual ways in which I am wounded by sin.

We must never lose sight of our own or other's mystery, for we cannot fathom our own being because we cannot fathom God. If we fail to respect the mystery of the sacred, we are, as Anthony Bloom observes, like a person digging 'to find the source of a spring, the point where the water begins, the point just before which there is no water. In this case it is possible only to destroy not to discover'.



Genuine humility flows from a consistent commitment to the truth, especially the truth of God seen in the light of the revelation in Jesus, and the truth of oneself seen in the light of faith. God will always offer us his love, but he can do so only to the level of our humility, otherwise we would be in danger of the worst evil – distorting grace.





Matthew 11:28-29