

5. A Free Heart

This is the second virtue that, according to Teresa, is essential for anyone who wants to live a life of genuine prayer. As with love, so here, it is important that we be guided by obedience, for the focus is not to be on what *we* decide to let go. In fact it is frequently our own will that we need to renounce. What matters is that when God calls us to a more intimate love, we are ready to let go whatever it is that is holding us back from responding. John of the Cross reminds us that a bird cannot fly if its leg is tied, however thin the thread that secures it. Even the slightest attachment must be broken (*Ascent* I.11.4). So it is with us. Teresa warns us:

Take great care to renounce self-will. This is most important if we do not want to deprive ourselves of the holy freedom of spirit which we seek in order to soar to our Creator unburdened by the leaden weight of the earth (*Way of Perfection* 10.1).

If we decide what to let go without carefully listening to the inspiration of God, we might let go the very thing that ‘awakens love’ – something against which Teresa warns us (*Spiritual Testimonies* 26).

This need for detachment applies to prayer as to every other aspect of our spiritual journey. There is a danger that we might go to prayer seeking our own satisfaction. John writes:

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).

We can also be attached to our way of thinking. Once again, we have John warning us:

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).

Even past graces are meant only as steps leading us to God. We must be ready to leave the steps behind if we wish to climb. Let us listen again to John:

You should not bear being attached to anything, whether it be to the practise 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).

Letting go is different for each person

We are made in God’s ‘image and likeness’(Genesis 1:26). God is communion in love and God’s will is that we share in the communion enjoyed by Jesus, who invites us: ‘Come to me’(Matthew 11:28), and who prays: ‘May they be one in us, Father, as you are in me and I am in you’(John 17:21). God gives us many things in love, but we must not confuse the gift with the Giver and we should not become so attached to God’s gifts that we continue to hold them tightly when God is asking us to let them go in order to grow into closer communion. How can we embrace God with open arms while refusing to loosen our hold on what is less than God? We know the difference between giving gifts and giving ourselves. We also know that we can focus on another’s gift and miss out on a deepening of our communion with the one giving the gift. It is no different with our relationship with God.

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 some it was their negative sense of themselves, and for others their inflated ego. Essential to detachment 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 was not thinking of leaving the boat. He was wanting 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).

It is essential that we keep our eyes on Jesus and that we follow his call and not turn the focus on ourselves. When the servants in Jesus' parable suggested that they go and dig out the weeds that were growing in among the wheat, the master told them to leave that to him (Matthew 13:29). They did not have the wisdom to discern wheat from weed, and they might dig out wheat by mistake. Similarly, if we were to take charge of our own detaching we might do ourselves harm. We might even fall into pride, congratulating ourselves on the success of our self-denial.

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.

The gift of the self in love

God's will is to purify us completely so that we can receive the gift of God's self and live, without distraction, in divine communion. If our offering of self is to be such as to leave God free to do with us what God wills, we must be ready to let go whatever is revealed to us as hindering this communion. This is the denial of self on which Jesus insists: 'If you wish to become my disciple, you must deny yourself' (Matthew 16:24). Jesus goes on to say how important is our real self. He does not want us to deny that, for our real self is beautiful, being created in the image of God. Nothing, not even gaining the whole world, is worth anything if it means forfeiting this self! For this is who we really are.

The self we have to deny is the self that we have built up in order to cope in a confusing world, a self that indulges in make-believe and that can hide behind masks of our own or other people's making, a self that we have developed in reaction to the imperfect love given us by people who are significant to us. We would do well to join with Paul in praying that what grows strong is our 'hidden selves', our real selves. This will grow in proportion to the love that we are open to receive and the love that we are open to give. Our communion with God is crucial. The purpose of detachment is that we might be free to welcome all the love that God is offering us, and be free to make a whole-hearted gift of ourselves in response.

The whole of the New Testament makes it clear that the sacrifice which Jesus offered to God was the sacrifice of himself. Whatever we may offer, if we do not offer ourselves it is not an offering of love. No one and nothing can substitute for ourselves when it comes to communion in love. In the words of Augustine: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you' (*Confessions* I.1). Jesus revealed that our longing for God is a response to God's greater longing for us. Because Jesus offered himself, he entered into perfect communion with his Father. In this he showed us the way.

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).

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 only happen if God embraced her and breathed into her God's own creative Spirit. God offered her this special love. God could give it only if she consented. God did not ask her to do anything, but rather to say Yes to welcoming God's gift. Her response was perfect: 'Let what you have said *be done to me*' (Luke 1:38).

We can also learn from Saint Paul:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11-13).

To be open to allow God to achieve God's 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 it is God who is being offered to us?

The key is to want only what God wants. However good something might be in itself, we must be ready to let it go if love calls us to do so. When alternatives present themselves to us we are to strive to hold them in equal balance till we discover which alternative is willed by God. When we know God's will we would do well to choose that alternative with all the energy we can muster.

We conclude our reflections on detachment with the poem of Teresa entitled *Eficacia De La Paciencia*:

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.