

Sermon Notes

Interior Combat and the Virtuous-Spiritual Life

Pastor Jerry Truex; October 16, 2011

A. Introduction

Today, as we continue our series on virtue and vice, I would like to talk about one of the goals of human life from Paul's perspective, namely, the recovery and expression of the image of God. Second, I will argue that the recovery of the image of God involves training the mind. Third, I would like to share some of the thoughts of John Cassian, who was a well-known 4th century monastic teacher and, in particular, his thoughts about greed.

B. The Goal of Human Life

According to Paul, the goal of human life is for people to reflect the divine image. It is not that people are to be absorbed into God as we find in Hinduism or Neo-Platonism, the goal is not lose one's identity or individuality, but to reflect the divine image as fully and as faithfully as possible.

All human beings are created in the image of God. There are no exceptions. However, not all human beings reflect the likeness of God. We are created in the image of God so that over our lifetime we might reflect the likeness of God and conform to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). We hear this from Paul when he tells people to cloth themselves with "the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (Col. 3:14).

Col. 3:5, 8-11. ⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).... ⁸ ... get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, - circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all (NRSV)

Col. 3:5, 8-11. Νεκρώσατε οὖν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, πορνείαν ἀκαθαρσίαν πάθος ἐπιθυμίαν κακὴν, καὶ τὴν πλεονεξίαν, ἣτις ἐστὶν εἰδωλολατρία ⁸ ... ἀπόθεσθε καὶ ὑμεῖς τὰ πάντα, ὀργὴν, θυμὸν, κακίαν, βλασφημίαν, αἰσχρολογίαν ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ὑμῶν. ⁹ μὴ ψεύδεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ ¹⁰ καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν, ¹¹ ὅπου οὐκ ἔνι Ἕλλην καὶ Ἰουδαῖος, περιτομὴ καὶ ἀκροβυστία, βάρβαρος, Σκύθης, δοῦλος, ἐλεύθερος, ἀλλὰ [τὰ] πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός.

This is a familiar text for us. Paul argues that people are to remove or renounce certain vices and practices, which is nothing less than *relinquishing the old self* (the false self) and *realizing the new self* (the true self). This is inner renewal or inner transformation.

The early church mothers—called Ammas (spiritual mothers)—were in agreement with Paul about the importance of *relinquish the false self* and *realizing the true self*.

“Amma Theodora [4th century Egypt] said: A teacher ought to be a stranger to love of domination, a foreigner to vainglory, far from arrogance, neither deceived by flattery, nor blinded by gifts, nor a slave to the stomach, nor held back by anger, but rather should be patient, kind, and as far as possible humble. He ought to be self-disciplined, tolerant, diligent, and a lover of souls.”¹

Notice that Amma Theodora tells her sisters to be a stranger to vices, but to welcome the virtues.

What is one of the results of this *inner transformation*? Look at Col. 3:11 again. The *inner transformation* results in a *social transformation*. Humans are no longer divided along racial, ethnic, or class lines, but rather “Christ is all and in all.” The image of God—which none other than the character and being of Christ—is brought to fullness in each human being, which results in a new humanity.

Relinquishing the old self and *realizing the new* is the essence of spiritual growth, but does not happen automatically. Each individual must choose to “put on” the virtues, the habits and character of Christ. Notice the imperatives in Col. 3:5, 8: “Put to death” the old patterns. “Get rid” of all such things. Notice the implied imperatives in Col. 3:9-10: “Strip off the old self. Put on the new.

Paul is using the metaphor of getting dressed every day. Clothes don’t just fall out of the closet and onto your body. Every day you have to think about what you’re going to wear. You have to make conscious choices and repeated decisions to put on appropriate clothes. Over time it becomes a habit. You don’t even have to put much thought into it. Putting on the virtues and character of Christ is like that. It involves our mind and our will, and it can become a blessed habit.

B. Renewal of the Mind

There’s one key element to the transformation process that Paul insists on over and over. It is the role of the mind.

¹ Yushi Nomura, *Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 88.

Rom. 12:1-2. ¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (NRSV)

Rom. 12:1-2. ¹ Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ παραστήσαι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ, τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν. ² καὶ μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ, ἀλλὰ μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον.

Present/offer (*parastēsai*). Paul says that we need to present/offer our bodies to God. The word “present/offer” is a translation of the Greek word *parastēsai*. *Parastēsai* refers to placing something or standing something alongside something else. It can be translated “stand” or “present” or “give”—to show up and be there for God.

It is a term used in the context of worship. Paul is alluding to the worship God in the Jerusalem Temple, where the people of Israel brought their sacrifices and presented/offered them on the altar. But he has changed two vital elements.

- It’s not animals and grain, but the Christian him- or herself that is offered.
- It’s not a sacrifice that is killed, but one that lives.

So Paul is saying we need to *present/offer our whole self* as living sacrifices.

Spiritual/reasonable (*logikos*). The second thing to notice is the phrase, “spiritual worship” (NRSV). The word “spiritual” is from the Greek adjective, *logikos* (λογικός, ἡ, ὄν). *Logikos* literally means “rational”; it’s where we get the word “logical”. So the KJV translates this phrase as “your reasonable service”. However, the word is also used to refer to what is non-material or “spiritual”. So the NRSV translates this phrase as “your spiritual worship.”

The point here is that when we offer ourselves to God, it must be directed by our reasoning minds, our spiritual mind. It is an action not directed by our feelings, but it is an intentional, volitional, and planned action that happens whether we feel like it or not. Worshiping God in this way is not driven by spontaneous emotions, but by consistent well-thought out efforts.

Be transformed (*metamorphousthē*). The word for “be transformed” (μεταμορφοῦσθε) is where we get the English word *metamorphosis*. The image that comes to mind, of course, is the process by which a caterpillar makes a chrysalis from which a beautiful butterfly emerges.



Paul wants the butterfly in us to emerge, and that butterfly is Christ. Metamorphosis is an amazing process with a dramatic result. In the same way, when we move away from our false self toward realizing our true self, it is an amazing and dramatic event.

Minds (nous). Notice that Paul does not say, “renew your feelings” or change how you feel.” Rather, he says, change how you think. Renew your “mind,” the *nous* (νοῦς). The word mind or nous refers to our thinking faculty, our intellect, our attitudes.

Cognitive behavioral psychology tells us that if we change the way we think, we will change the way we feel and behavior. If we learn to think differently—if we become convinced that that peace and reconciliation is better than expressing anger and retribution—then it will show up in the way we behave.

In other words, our mind is the battlefield where learn to get rid of vices and acquire virtue. Spiritual warfare—interior combat—takes place in your mind, in your thought life.

2 Cor. 10:3-5. ³ Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments (logismos) ⁵ and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought (noēma) captive to obey Christ. (NRSV)

2 Cor. 10:3-5. ³ Ἐν σαρκί γὰρ περιπατοῦντες οὐ κατὰ σάρκα στρατευόμεθα, ⁴ τὰ γὰρ ὄπλα τῆς στρατείας ἡμῶν οὐ σαρκικὰ ἀλλὰ δυνατὰ τῷ θεῷ πρὸς καθαίρεσιν ὀχυρωμάτων, λογισμοὺς καθαιροῦντες ⁵ καὶ πᾶν ὕψωμα ἐπαιρόμενον κατὰ τῆς γνώσεως τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ αἰχμαλωτίζοντες πᾶν νόημα εἰς τὴν ὑπακοὴν τοῦ Χριστοῦ,

Again, a similar thought is expressed by 1 Peter 1:13.

1 Peter 1:13. Therefore prepare your minds (dianoia) for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. (NRSV)

1 Peter 1:13. ¹³ Διὸ ἀναζωσάμενοι τὰς ὀσφύας τῆς διανοίας ὑμῶν νήφοντες τελείως ἐλπίζατε ἐπὶ τὴν φερομένην ὑμῖν χάριν ἐν ἀποκαλύψει Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

James 4:7-8 gives us a strategy for resisting the darkness thoughts that cloud Christlike thinking.

James 4:7-8. ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded (dipsychoi). (NRSV)

James 4:7-8. ⁷ ὑποτάγητε οὖν τῷ θεῷ, ἀντίστητε δὲ τῷ διαβόλῳ καὶ φεύξεται ἀφ' ὑμῶν, ⁸ ἐγγίσατε τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐγγίσει ὑμῖν. καθαρῖσατε χεῖρας, ἁμαρτωλοί, καὶ ἀγνίσατε καρδίαις, δίψυχοι.

The early church fathers and mothers understood the importance of drawing near to God when involved with spiritual/interior combat. Listen to what Abba Agathon said.

The brothers asked Abba Agathon [3rd century Egypt]: Father, which of the virtues of our way of life demands the greatest effort? he said to him: Forgive me, but there is not effort comparable to prayer to God. In fact, whenever you want to pray, hostile demons try to interrupt you. Of course they know that nothing but prayer to God entangles them. Certainly when you undertake any other good work, and persevere in it, you obtain rest. But prayer is a battle all the way to the last breath.²

C. Thoughts Matter: Practicing the Spiritual Life

Let me introduce a Mary Margaret Funk. She is a Benedictine Sister and the Executive Director of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. She has written numerous books on the monastic life, including:

1. *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 2002).
2. *Tools Matter for Practicing the Spiritual Life: the Jesus Prayer, Ceaseless Prayer, Fasting* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

She organizes her book, *Thoughts Matter*, around the teachings of John Cassian (360-435 AD). Cassian was an important early church father, who taught the Way of Jesus to brothers and sisters living in the Egyptian desert during the 4th century.³ According to Cassian, all Christians must make three renunciations:⁴



St. John Cassian

1. Three renunciations

First, we must renounce our former way of life—the dominant values and practices of our culture—so we can move toward our heart's true desire, namely, God. Second, we must renounce our mindless (evil) thoughts that take us away from God. Third, we must renounce our images of God so that we can enter into contemplation of God as God.

2. Renouncing Eight Mindless/Evil Thoughts

I want to focus on Cassian's second renunciation. Cassian's teaching was very simple: He invited people to seek God by knowing and stabilizing their thoughts. He thought that the serious seeker must undergo training to redirect the mind in order to follow Christ.

² Yushi Nomura, *Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 105.

³ Cassian wrote 36 books, the twenty-four *Conferences* and the twelve *Institutes*, and also founded two monasteries in Marseilles, Southern Gaul, one for men and one for women.

⁴ Mary Margaret Funk, *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 9.

Cassian learned and then taught “to redirect his thoughts, either by rethinking them or by placing a prayer alongside the thought.”⁵ He also discovered that evil thoughts clustered around eight themes: thoughts about food, sex, things, anger, dejection, spiritual apathy, vainglory, and pride.

These eight evil thoughts—which lead to vices—recur constantly and they recur in every person of every era. These eight thoughts were later reconfigured by Gregory the Great into Seven Deadly Sin with pride as the root of all sin.

D. Example: Renouncing thoughts about things

Now, as an example, I want to focus on one of the evil thoughts that Cassian addresses, namely, *philargyria* (φιλαργυρία), which means the “love” (*philos*) of “money” (*argyria*). But it’s not just about the love of money; it’s also about our preoccupation with thinking about things/possessions, which includes money.

From Cassian’s perspective, we don’t own anything. At best, all we do is use something. However, we desire to obtain, use, and hold onto more and more things. We are sometimes overwhelmed with thoughts about buy and getting things. We often want and get things we don’t need or even use. Its human nature, but that tendency, according to Cassian, prevents us from “knowing and seeing God”.

It points to our personal attachment to things. The proper relationship with things is to use them with the permission of the Creator. The proper attitude is to use things, but not horde or presume that anything we have belongs exclusively to us. We have things, take care of them, use them, but we don’t own them.

In Cassian’s experience in the desert monasteries of Northern Egypt, a monk received everything from the monastery and owned nothing. No one owned anything, but had everything for his or her use. For the monk, renouncing the former way of life meant renouncing all ownership of anything. Cassian believed that *philargyria* was a learned behavior, so it could also be unlearned.

[Read pages 57-58 in *Thoughts Matter*, which presents Cassian’s writing on “the train of thoughts” that lead to greed (*avarice* or *philargyria*) which, in turn, leads to a host of other problems and vices.]

Cassian recommends that the way out of this type of train of thought that leads to all kinds of negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, is to “reflect on the memory of God.” By that he meant that a person should become aware of creation and be grateful. Cassian uses

⁵ Mary Margaret Funk, *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 15.

the phrase, "memory of God," because God is not out there. "God is closer to us than we are to ourselves."⁶

E. Conclusions

In summary, I have argued that one of the goals of human life is the recovery and expression of the image of God. I argued the recovery of the image of God involves training or renewing the mind. Lastly, I shared some of the teaching and thoughts of John Cassian regarding one of the eight evil thoughts or vices, and how we might fight and win the battle against greed, also called *philargyria* or *avarice*.

Discussion.

⁶ Mary Margaret Funk, *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 64.