

## Sermon Notes

**The Spiritual Vision of Evagrius**Jerry Truex; November 13, 2011

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**I. Introduction**

Today we complete our series on vices and virtues. Today I'm going to offer you a map of the spiritual life, especially as it pertains to vices and virtues.

I'll present Evagrius' vision of the spiritual journey or battle, his view of the soul, and a description of the eight evil thoughts/vices. Then, I will focus on greed as an example of one of the negative thoughts and offer Jesus' counter-teaching to greed. I conclude with a few thoughts that have helped me in the spiritual battle for the mind.

**II. Spiritual Progress****A. Evagrius' Spiritual Map**

Evagrius (345-399) was a desert father, who wrote voluminously about the spiritual life. He understood the spiritual life as journey from one stage to another. The spiritual life is not stagnant. Where there is life, there is growth.

Generally speaking, Evagrius saw a two-stage movement (see chart in appendix).

- In **stage one**, a person employed *ascetical practices* (*praktikē*) in order to relinquish vices (evil thoughts) and realize virtue or the character of Christ.
- In **stage two**, a person employed "pure prayer" or contemplation which led to a mystical *knowledge of God* (*gnōstikē*).

**B. Ascetic Practices**

Looking at the chart, we're going to focus on the first stage, the ascetic practices.

The adjective "ascetic" derives from the ancient Greek term *askēsis*, meaning *practice, training or exercise... a way of life*. Christians have used the term to designate the spiritual struggle to overcome vices, attachments, and ungodly behavior in our transformation to Christlikeness.

The scriptures talk about that transformation in a variety of ways:

**2 Cor. 3:18.** And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (NRSV)

**Col. 3:9-10.**<sup>9</sup> ..... seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices<sup>10</sup> and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. (NRSV)

Evagrius' writings provide a detailed vision of that transformation process from the old self to the new.

### **C. The Battle Ground: The Soul**

Looking at the chart (see handout/appendix), notice the movement from left to right, from relinquishing vices to realizing virtue, from the old self to the new. Notice on the left we have Evagrius' eight evil thoughts (*logismoi*; λογισμοι); in the middle the human soul; on the right eight corresponding virtues.

**Three-part soul.** Looking at just the lower left part of the chart, notice that Evagrius borrows Plato's three-part view of the human soul: Rational (spirit), passionate (psyche), and appetitive/desires (body).

For each of the three parts of the soul, Evagrius identified eight categories or types of evil thoughts and eight corresponding virtues. The soul is caught in spiritual warfare, an interior struggle between the flesh and the spirit.

**Gal. 5:16-17.**<sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.<sup>17</sup> For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. (NRSV)

Evagrius thought that reducing or eliminating the eight evil thoughts (of the flesh) meant taking on new thought patterns, new behaviors, namely, the virtues (of the spirit). The eight thoughts were reduced or eliminated with certain ascetical practices, including thought control, prayer, reading scripture, fasting, and living the simple life.

**Goal of the ascetic practices.** Looking again at chart, notice the goal of ascetic practices was *apatheia* (ἀπάθεια), which literally means "without passion."

However, Evagrius uses *apatheia* to refer to a person's "freedom from being controlled by the passions," freedom from the attachments or addictions that enslave us. I translate *apatheia* with *equanimity*, meaning "a calm steadiness under stress."

**Goal of equanimity (*apatheia*).** Notice that the goal of equanimity is love. Evagrius thought that it was possible to love *only when* the eight evil thoughts were greatly reduced or eliminated.

Why? Because the eight thoughts turn us toward self-gratification, self-protection, and self-promotion... all of which prevent us from loving God and others. Of course this makes sense. Too much focus on one's ego-self separates us from God and others and making love impossible. The only kind of "love" that is generated by the ego-self is self-serving, manipulative "love," which is no love at all.

## D. Eight Evil Thoughts

Let's look briefly at the eight evil thoughts or demons.<sup>1</sup>

- First, Evagrius knew that "thoughts happen." He knew we can't control the thoughts that pop into our head any more than we can control the emotions that suddenly happen.
- Second, Evagrius was concerned with his monks "making use" of evil thoughts, inviting them in and entertaining them as if they were good buddies.

### 1. Gluttony (*γαστριμαργία*)

For Evagrius, the thought/demon of gluttony (*γαστριμαργία*) refers to the temptation to overstress the bodily pleasure and comfort. It is the temptation to think too much about the body, the stomach, the lack of bodily comforts, and worry about long illness.<sup>2</sup> The corresponding virtue is temperance or abstinence.

### 2. Impurity (*πορνεία*)

The thought/demon of impurity (*πορνεία*) refers to sexual temptations. It is the desire or temptation to use another person's body for one's own self-gratification; the temptation to have sexual relations with someone other than one's spouse. The corresponding virtue is chastity.

### 3. Love of money (*φιλαργυρία*)

Philarguria (*φιλαργυρία*) literally means "love of money." The thought/demon of *philarguria* refers to greed or avarice. It is the attachment to possessions. The corresponding virtue is charity or generosity.

<sup>1</sup> On the eight thoughts, see Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 7-14 and George Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science: A Look at Moral Evil and the Thoughts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010) 20-31.

<sup>2</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 7.

#### 4. Sadness (λύπη)

The thought/demon sadness (λύπη) refers to “a type of depression brought on by wishing things were different that they are.”<sup>3</sup> It is wishing for the “good old days” and the realization that they are gone and cannot be recaptured. The corresponding virtue is joy.

#### 5. Anger (ὀργή)

The thought/demon of anger (ὀργή) refers to indignation against a wrongdoer or a presumed wrongdoer. It is an attachment to control and when control cannot be maintained, anger results. For Evagrius, anger “causes the soul to be savage all day long,” and especially interferes with prayer. The corresponding virtue is patience, because a patient person is free wanting to control the situation.

#### 6. Acedia (ἀκηδία)

The thought/demon of acedia (ἀκηδία) refers to apathy. It is boredom and restlessness that comes with avoiding the task at hand. “Acedia is that of a distracted monk, who will look for anything else to do except that which is to be done.”<sup>4</sup>

To expose acedia for what it is, Evagrius called it the “noonday demon,” and wrote:

He attacks the monk about the fourth hour [viz. 10 a.m.] and besieges his soul until the eighth hour [2 p.m.]. First of all, he makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all, and that the day seems to be fifty hours long. Then he compels the monk to look constantly towards the windows, to jump out of the cell, to watch the sun to see how far it is from the ninth hour [3 p.m.], to look this way and that ....<sup>5</sup>

The corresponding virtue is perseverance.

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<sup>3</sup> George Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science: A Look at Moral Evil and the Thoughts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010) 26.

<sup>4</sup> George Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science: A Look at Moral Evil and the Thoughts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010) 28.

<sup>5</sup> George Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science: A Look at Moral Evil and the Thoughts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010) 28.

## 7. Vainglory (κενοδοξία)

The thought/demon of vainglory (κενοδοξία) refers to a desire for fame or prestige. Evagrius thinks that vainglory destroys all the other virtues, because it seeks a reward from humans, rather than God—it's blowing one's trumpet when one prays, gives, or fasts (Matt. 6:2-18). The corresponding virtue is "freedom from vainglory."

## 8. Pride (ὑπερηφάνια)

The thought/demon of pride (ὑπερηφάνια) refers to taking the credit for something and not giving God credit. "Pride is fundamentally the failure to acknowledge God as the source of all virtue and goodness in one's life."<sup>6</sup> The corresponding virtue is humility.

### III. Example: Love of Money

#### A. The Problem of Greed

What's wrong with harboring evil thoughts/demons? The problem is they lead to harmful behaviors that can destroy our self and our loved ones; they sever our relationship with God, who is the source of our being. They lead to attachments, addictions, and loss of freedom. When we lose that freedom, we become alienated, isolated, and miserable.

The "love of money" (φιλαργυρία) or greed is an example of such an attachment. It is an idolatrous attitude toward something of material value. Greed rests on mistaken assumption that *my* well-being or *my* prestige or *my* self-worth is linked to the sum of *my* possessions. This focus on myself alienates me from God, neighbor, and my own true self, "Christ in me" (Col. 1:27-28).

We pursue money and material goods to bolster our egos, to win admiration and acceptance, to dominate others, or to ensure our future security.<sup>7</sup>

Example: Michael Milken was the junk-bond king of Drexel Burnham Lambert and earned a salary of \$550 million per year when he was indicted and convicted for violating federal securities and racketeering laws. Milken was rich beyond imagination, but he craved more and cheated to get it.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> George Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science: A Look at Moral Evil and the Thoughts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010) 30.

<sup>7</sup> W. Jay Wood, "Of Greed" in *Christianity Today* (January 2005) 34.

<sup>8</sup> W. Jay Wood, "Of Greed" in *Christianity Today* (January 2005) 35.

Greed can also take the form of stinginess, the unwillingness to part with money. One can be rich or poor and also be stingy, attached to money.

Example: Our stinginess can be rationalized in many ways. As we walk down the street, we see a street beggar rattling his cup of coins. We quicken our pace, avoid eye contact, give the beggar a wide berth, and we might hear our selves say: "I'm doing him a favor by not reinforcing his envious behavior. Or he might be scamming us or using it for drugs, so I don't want to give to that. Or I don't want to reinforce a welfare culture, and so forth."

As the last example points out, we camouflage greed. We try to justify it.

Jesus had a response to greed.

## **B. True Treasure (Matt 6:19-24)**

### **1. Store Up Treasure in Heaven (Matt 6:19-21)**

**Matt 6:19-24.**<sup>19</sup> "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup> but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (NRSV).

Jesus tells people not to store up treasures on earth. He has two reasons: (i) Moth and rust consume them or else thieves carry them away. (ii) One's efforts are better put into storing up treasure in heaven

Jesus wants us to invest in eternal things, not things that perish. Some Christians—like Anthony and St. Francis of Assisi—have thought that Jesus is telling us to give up all belongings.

However, Matthew is speaking about "treasure" (*thēsauros*) and not earthly goods in general. The verb "store up" (*thēsauidzete*) literally means "treasure up" and refers to accumulation, not simple possession.

Matthew is not against having possessions.<sup>9</sup> The type of poverty Matthew demands is "poverty of spirit," which is humility (Matt 5:3).

A key phrase is: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:21). By "heart" Jesus refers to the aim and purpose of our lives. Life is not about playing a monopoly game where the goal is to accumulate more than anyone else. Rather, our purpose to use our money for building the Kingdom of God? Life is not about feeding our narcissistic ego, a type of self-love that shuts out

<sup>9</sup> Following Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 140.

everyone else. Rather, life is about transcending our ego and having Christ consciousness.

The point is about *simplicity*: Jesus tells us not to feed our narcissistic egos by amassing material possessions (on earth), but rather transcend our egos by nurturing our Authentic Self (in heaven).

## 2. The Good Eye [= be generous] (Matt 6:22-23)

**Matt 6:22-23.** <sup>22</sup> "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy [open, generous] your whole body will be full of light; <sup>23</sup> but if your eye is unhealthy [evil], your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (NRSV).

The phrase, "the eye is the lamp of the body," is a problem. For us, the eye is a window through which light comes in. But, in the ancient world, the eye was thought to have its own light. Light goes out of the eye.<sup>10</sup> So Jesus is stating a basic physiology "fact" at that time.

But Jesus turns the physiological statement into a moral one. In Judaism, a "good eye" or "healthy eye" meant *generosity* (Prov. 22:9).<sup>11</sup>

**Proverbs 22:9** Whoever has a bountiful eye (אֵינַי: `ayin ) will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor. (ESV)

So Jesus is saying, "If your eye is healthy (generous; ἀπλοῦς), your whole body will be full of light or full of God."

In contrast, he says, "if your eye is unhealthy (evil, πονηρὸς)—selfish or ungenerous—then your whole body will be full of darkness or without God."

Jesus is inviting us to examine ourselves. Am I filled with light or darkness? Am I generous and in union with God? Or am I egocentric, selfish, and without God?

The person with the "healthy eye" is generous, has Christ consciousness, is nurturing the Authentic Self. In contrast, the person with the "evil eye" is selfish, doesn't have the mind of Christ, is feeding the narcissistic ego.

The point is about *generosity*: Jesus is saying, be generous to others and you will lay up treasure in heaven and find your Authentic Self.

<sup>10</sup> Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 143.

### 3. The Two Masters [= serve God] (Matt 6:24)

**Matt 6:24.** <sup>24</sup> "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (NRSV).

Here, Jesus makes a basic economic statement that everyone would agree with: A slave cannot serve two masters. Have you ever heard of a slave owned by two people? It doesn't work.

Then, Jesus turns the economic statement into a moral one: "You cannot serve God and wealth (*mamōna*)."

This amplifies the previous saying: "The 'healthy eye,' interpreted as the generous person, serves God. The 'unhealthy' eye is the one who, because of selfishness ... serves mammon."<sup>12</sup>

The point is about *loyalty*: Jesus tells us to be loyal to God and this is to lay up treasure in heaven and find our Authentic Self.

## IV. Combating Evil Thoughts

What can we do about combating evil thoughts?

**We have freedom.** Our control lies with what we do with our thoughts; how we react to it. Do we entertain the thought or dismiss it? That's our freedom of choice. Thoughts, like airplanes, fly over us, but we don't have to build an airport for them to land. Thoughts knock at your door and says, "Come out and play." Immediately you can close the door and say, "I'm not going there!" I have more important things to do. We have choice.

**Deut. 30:15.** *See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.* (NRSV)

**Question every thought (be alert).** Evagrius wrote: "Be the door-keeper of your heart and do not let any thought come in without questioning it. Question each thought individually: 'Are you on our side or the side of our foes?' And if it is one of ours, it will fill you with tranquility."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 145.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony M. Coniaris, *Confronting and Controlling Thoughts: According to the Fathers of the Philokalia* (Minneapolis: Life, 2004) 70.

**1 Pet 5:8-9.** <sup>8</sup> Discipline yourselves (νήψατε), keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist (ἀντίστητε) him, steadfast in your faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. (NRSV)

**Don't invite negative thoughts to enter.** We all know that thoughts happen. You don't control that. We can't control our subconscious and what it throws at us. Automatic negative thoughts (ANTs) come into our mind uninvited. Kill the ants quickly (see the pamphlet "Kill the ANTs that ruin your life.")

**We are spiritual warriors.** Pushing away negative thoughts fulfill God's will for us. We are in spiritual combat and we are to *take every thought captive to Christ*. We are soldiers in God's army. We are holy warriors. That's our mission in life.

2 Cor. 10:3-5. <sup>3</sup> Indeed, we live (περιπατοῦντες) as human beings (ἐν σαρκί) but we do not wage war (στρατευόμεθα) according to human standards (κατὰ σάρκα); <sup>4</sup> for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds (ὄχυρωμα). We destroy arguments (λογισμός) <sup>5</sup> and every proud obstacle (ὑψωμα) raised up against the knowledge (γνώσεως) of God, and we take every thought (πᾶν νόημα) captive to obey Christ. (NRSV)

Our mission is to struggle, to overcome difficulty and conflict, and it happens in our battle fields of our minds. That is our purpose. That is our life.

## V. Conclusions

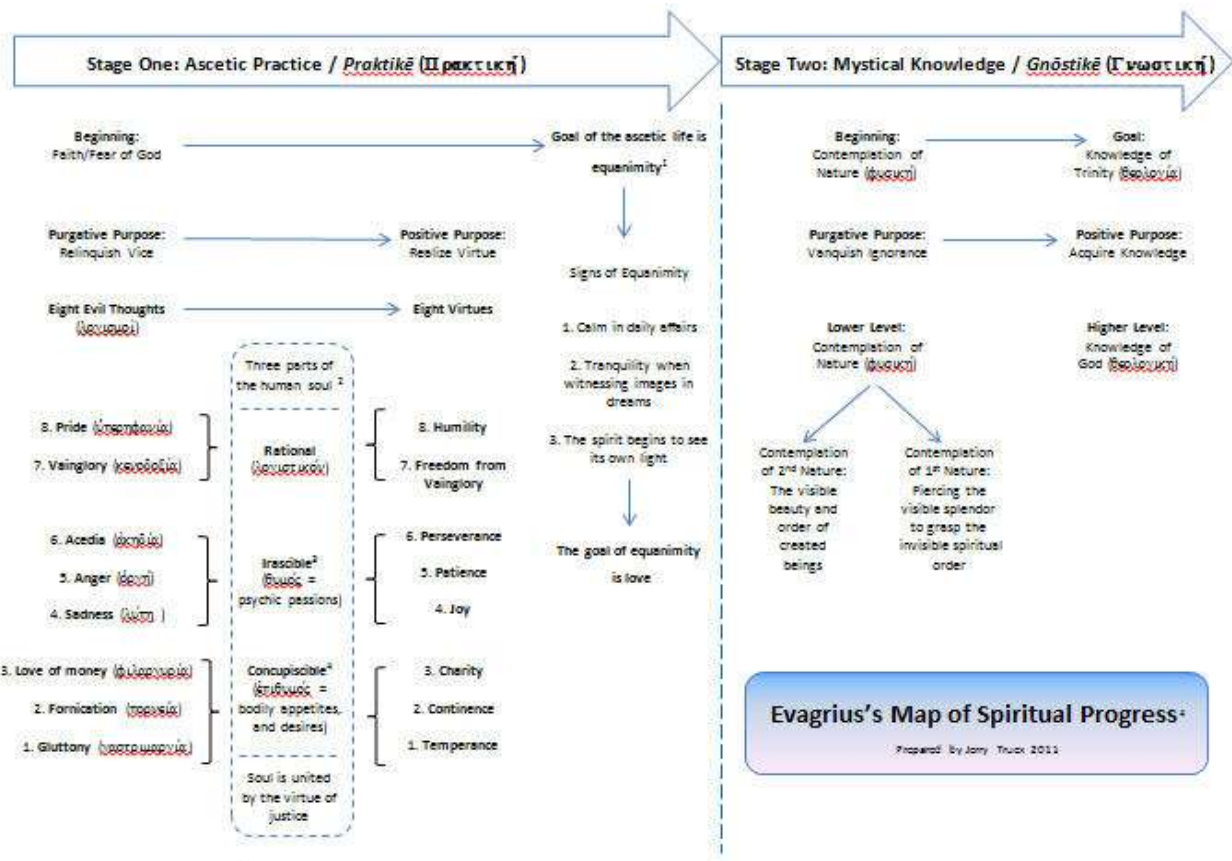
Today, I presented Evagrius' vision of the spiritual journey or battle, his view of the soul, and a description of the eight evil thoughts and the corresponding virtues. Then I focused on greed as an example of one of the negative thoughts and offered Jesus' counter-teaching to greed. Jesus taught:

- Simplicity—don't amasses material possessions on earth
- Generosity—be generous with others and you will lay up treasure in heaven
- Loyalty—give your loyal and allegiance to God alone

I concluded with a few thoughts that have helped me in the spiritual battle.

### Appendix

Here is a small photo of Evagrius' vision for spiritual progress. The actual chart in pdf format is available on at [www.mcswichita.net/sermons](http://www.mcswichita.net/sermons).



**Evagrius's Map of Spiritual Progress\***  
Prepared by Jerry Truax 2011

<sup>1</sup> translate apatheia (ἀπαθεία) as "equanimity," meaning "a calm steadiness under stress." Apatheia is often translated "passionlessness," because it literally means "without passion." However, Evagrius uses apatheia to refer to a person's "freedom from being controlled by the passions." He says that apatheia is "a quiet state of the rational soul; it results from gentleness and self-control" (Evagrius, 31(α)(α)(α)).  
<sup>2</sup> Evagrius follows Plato's model of a three-part soul: (i) rational, (ii) spirited or passionate, and (iii) appetitive or drawn to meat needs.  
<sup>3</sup> Harmless, Desert Christians, translates ἰσχυρὸς as "irascible" (easily aroused to anger). According to 3(α)(α) and 3(α)(β) Desk Lector, ἰσχυρὸς refers to a state of intense anger with the implication of passionate outbursts.  
<sup>4</sup> Harmless, Desert Christians, translates ἐπιθυμητικόν as "concupiscible" (pertaining to concupiscent or lust) provoking lustful desires.  
<sup>5</sup> This chart is a revision and modification of the one offered by William Harmless, Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism (New York: Oxford, 2004) 146. |