

Gateways into the Heart

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St. Philotheos, an ascetic in the tradition of St. John of the Ladder, refers to the heart as the ‘noetic Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem is the city of peace. The heart, however, is often likened to a city with much chaos in it. “What comes out of the mouth,” our Lord says, “proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Mt 15:18-19). And concerning these corrosive elements in the city of the heart, King David says “In the morning I will slay all the sinners of the land, cutting off all the workers of lawlessness from the city of the Lord” (Ps 100:8, LXX). The city of the Lord, as the holy Fathers of Orthodoxy understand King David’s words, is the heart which has been filled with sins and lawlessness--thieves that are stealing our inner stillness, preventing our heart from being the true city of peace, the noetic Jerusalem, the city of the Lord in which He reigns. How, practically, do we slay the destructive forces of our heart, replacing them with the peace that only Christ can give? St. Philotheos instructs us on how to enter our heart, slaying these thieves of inner stillness, by passing through three gates.

The First Gate: Silencing the Tongue

The first gate of entry to the noetic Jerusalem — that is, to attentiveness of the intellect (*nous*) — is the deliberate silencing of your tongue, even though the intellect itself may not yet be still. (Philotheos, “Texts on Watchfulness”, #6, *Philokalia*, Vol. 3)

Our tongue has to be silenced, and that only happens with deliberate effort. It doesn’t come easy. This voluntary silencing won’t *immediately* calm our nous, Philotheos counsels us, so we should not grow discouraged as we are learning to pass through the first gateway to the heart. Stopping the chatter, however, is a necessary precondition to inner stillness. So long as we feed the desire to speak, the desire will strengthen within us and become increasingly difficult to control. If, on the other hand, we consciously and purposefully restrict our needless talk, we weaken the desire to fill ‘dead space’ with our sound waves. We become better listeners and discover that the ‘dead space’ is filled with a life-giving, still, small voice.

Jesus warns us about our practice of useless words in a surprisingly stern way: “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned’ (Mt 12:36-37). The Greek word for ‘idle’ is *argon*, which comes from the word *ergon*, meaning ‘work’, preceded by an ‘a’, meaning ‘not’. Idle words are words that don’t do any work. They come out of our mouth, but they have no purpose, no goal; they don’t accomplish anything of value. Yet, our Lord teaches, they condemn us. Why? St. Philotheos is giving us one such reason: because we are using them to avoid facing our inner turmoil, to avoid the hard work of finding and

entering our heart--the meeting place with our creator and redeemer. We cannot be justified without Him, and yet we cut ourselves off from him--thereby condemning ourselves--by empty words that hide us from the kingdom of God within (Lk 17:21).

This is insightfully and practically illustrated by a saying from the Desert Father Abba Peter the Egyptian. One of the brothers came to him and asked, "When I am in my cell, my soul is at peace, but if a brother comes to me and speaks to me of external things, my soul is disturbed." Abba Peter replied by telling him, "Your key opens the door." The brother didn't understand so Abba Peter explained, "When someone comes to see you, you say to him, "How are you? Where have you come from? How are the brethren? Did they welcome you or not?" Then you have opened the brother's door and you will hear a great deal that you would rather not have heard." The brother admitted that that is exactly what happens, that it is his own questions that are the cause of the talkativeness of his visitors, which in turn undermines his inner peace. (Abba Peter the Pionite #2; see the entire saying for Abba Peter's solution for retaining peace in the midst of conversations.)

The Second Gate: Controlling Food and Drink

The second gate is balanced self-control in food and drink. (Philotheos, "Texts on Watchfulness", #6, *Philokalia*, Vol 3.)

Just as we need to stop filling the air with empty words as a way to avoid the soft words of the Savior, so too we need to cease filling our stomachs in response to unconstrained desires for food and drink, which often are simply our way of dealing with anxieties, worries, tensions, hyperactivity, and so on. St. Paul warns that for some of us our belly is our God (Phil 3:19). What does he mean? That our desires for food and drink control us instead of us controlling them. For example, we turn to food and drink for comfort, instead of to Christ, when our inner lives are agitated. So long as we continue to live in this undisciplined state, we prevent ourselves from passing through the second gate toward the heart where peace can reign.

Returning to the metaphor for the heart as a city, the Desert Father Abba John the Dwarf instructs us in this way:

If a king wanted to take possession of his enemy's city, he would begin by cutting off the water and the food so that his enemies, dying of hunger, would submit to him. It is the same with the passions of the flesh: if a man goes about fasting and hungry the enemies of his soul grow weak. (Abba John the Dwarf, #3; *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Benedicta Ward, p. 86)

If we want to slay the heart's enemies, fasting is *the* foremost prescribed Orthodox practice. Roughly half the days of the year we are asked to restrict in some way what we eat; to have our food and drink consumption not be a matter of our will, but of the will of Christ speaking through His Church. In following the fast, we are fulfilling His words that after the bridegroom goes, his followers will fast (Mt 9:15; Mk 2:19-20; Lk 5:35). If we think of this topic in the context of confession, it seems common for us not to bother confessing breaking the fast, or we trivialize our failure as relatively minor and unimportant. We think, "What difference does a little cheese on Friday matter?" So long as we focus on the food, and not on the desire, we will feel comfortable letting ourselves off the hook. But the sin is not the eating of cheese *per se*; that is simply the occasion in which we're controlled by our desires and passions. And if we think that *they* (our desires and passions) are 'no big deal', then why don't we bother to control them? The deeper reality about our lives is that we hide behind the thought that restrictions on food are inconsequential in order to avoid admitting the power our desires have over us.

Less emphasized, but no less important, is the consistent patristic teaching that we *never* eat to satiation, to fullness, but rather always get up from the table with a slight hunger remaining. They say this should be true even on Pascha itself, for the Feast of Feasts especially is not a time to satisfy the desires of the flesh but the desires of the heart. (See, e.g., St. John of Sinai, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 14; St. John Cassian, *The Institutes*, V.9,20,23.) In this way, every day we remind our body that it does not control us, but we control it. As Abba John the Dwarf instructs, we are not feeding our desires but training them to submit to us, to our self-control which is the fruit of the Spirit manifest in us. Accordingly, our inner turbulence caused by uncontrolled desires is exposed and slain, and the pathway into our heart is further opened.¹

The Third Gate: Ceaseless Mindfulness of Death

The third [gate] is ceaseless mindfulness of death, for this purifies intellect and body. (Philotheos, "Texts on Watchfulness", #6, *Philokalia*, Vol 3.)

Mindfulness of death sounds like such a morbid thing. How could it possibly be helpful to us? How could it contribute to purifying the nous and the body? Listen to how St. Philotheos continues, how he describes his experience of keeping death ever before his mental gaze.

Having once experienced *the beauty* of this mindfulness of death, I was so wounded and *delighted* by it -- in spirit, not through the eye -- that I wanted to make it my life's companion; for *I was enraptured by its loveliness and majesty, its humility and contrite*

¹ The first two gates are succinctly expressed by Abba Tithoes: "A brother asked Abba Tithoes, 'How should I guard my heart?' The old man said to him, 'How can we guard our hearts when our mouths and our stomachs are open?'" (Abba Tithoes #3, p. 236 of Benedicta Ward's Translation).

joy, by how full of reflection it is, how apprehensive of the judgment to come, and *how aware of life's anxieties*. It makes *life-giving, healing tears flow* from our bodily eyes, while from our noetic eyes rises *a fount of wisdom that delights the mind*. This daughter of Adam -- this mindfulness of death -- I always longed, as I said, to have as my companion, to sleep with, to talk with, and to inquire from her what will happen after the body has been discarded. But unclean forgetfulness, the devil's murky daughter, has frequently prevented this. (Philotheos, "Texts on Watchfulness", #6, Philokalia, Vol. 3; emphasis added.)

Far from the gloom that we associate with death, Philotheos experiences focusing his attention on death and judgment as putting everything in proper perspective. His sheer and abundant joy testifies to the reality that he noetically sees, sees with the heart, the transformative presence of God in the ultimate brokenness of this world: death. He experiences the joy of purification that St. John teaches in his First Epistle.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies Himself as He is pure. (1 Jn 3:2-3)

Longing to see Christ prepares us to see Him as He is so that we might then be like Him. In practice, this purifying hope in Christ's return often takes place as a corrective to temptations or sins, as the Desert Father Abba Sisoës describes.

A brother asked Abba Sisoës, 'What shall I do, Abba, for I have fallen?' The old man said to him, 'Get up again.' The brother said, 'I have got up again, but I have fallen again.' The old man said, 'Get up again and again.' So then the brother said, 'How many times?' The old man said, 'Until you are taken up in virtue or in sin. For a man presents himself to judgment in the state he is found.' (#38, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Benedicta Ward, pp. 219-220)

If we keep in mind that Christ is coming for us at any moment, we will be strengthened to withstand temptations, be encouraged to get up after having fallen, and most importantly of all, be cultivating the attentiveness that leads us through the third gateway into the heart.

Let us, then, by the prayers of St. Philotheos, strive to enter the heart through these three gates: silencing the tongue, controlling the desires for food and drink, and being constantly mindful of death. In this way we slay the passions that rob us of our inner peace and that dislodge us from our true home: the city of the Lord, the noetic Jerusalem.