

On the Need for Discernment in Our Spiritual Struggles

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There are basically two approaches we can use in developing our spiritual life. One method is to draw closer and closer to the Lord through prayer and true obedience to Him; in time more and more of our actions and words will be transformed and we will become new creatures in Him. Our old, sinful actions will fall away as we are transfigured into His image. The other method is to work hard to obey the rules for Christian behavior, to deny ourselves, and in general to force ourselves to speak and act as Christians should. Over time these behaviors may become habits, and we will see our actions and words changed into those befitting a Christian.

Now, if one more closely examines these two approaches from the basis of Holy Scripture, one can see that the first approach is the way our Lord Jesus Christ set out for us and is also the only way that really works. The second approach is basically that of the Pharisees and of human religious systems, and it does not work. In the first method, we are being transformed by God's love for us and our love for Him into what He wants us to be—the image of His beloved Son Who obeyed His Father in everything even unto death. This, and only this, is humility. In the second method, we are using our own willpower to act like Christians (or Jews or Moslems or whatever religion we are following); but the end result is not to produce a person who obeys God, but rather one who has strengthened his own self-will. And this, of course, is pride. So the results of the two methods are diametrically opposed.

The Church gives us times of self denial, like Great Lent, not so much that we might develop our willpower, but so that we will shift our focus away from the distractions of the world and think more about our God and His love for us. We aren't called to give up secular things "because it's good for us" or "because they're bad," but so we can concentrate more on God. If we are to develop the love for Him which transfigures us and eventually burns out the desire to sin because sin cuts us off from the One we love, we must think about Him and talk to Him all the time, not just for a few minutes in

the morning and again in the evening. Consider the great Saints like Papa Nicholas Planas, Elder Joseph of Optina, Elder Ieronymos of Aegina, and others. They tried to talk to God in prayer all the time. They also practiced great asceticism, but not because it would earn them standing with God, or bring them merit, or because things in the world were “evil.” Rather, they denied themselves things so as to avoid entanglements in the world which might keep them from prayer and from thinking about God. And the more they prayed and drew closer to God, the less they were interested in the worldly things which might distract them from Him.

If we have made a valiant effort to keep the fasting and other rules, by the time Pascha comes we may be tired of working so hard and ready for a break. And if we over relax our self-control, we will see our hard-earned “virtues” disappear, since it is beyond our fallen human ability to change ourselves by our own efforts. But if we have taken advantage of the reduced distractions Great Lent offers—less focus on food, lighter bodies from avoiding heavy foods and alcohol, fewer passionate and secular distractions, more services and more focus on compunction in the services—to come to love God more and so to become a little more like Him, then we may even find that we don’t want to go back to all the secular activities, and other things that we had before, since they might tend to distract us from our beloved Saviour. And if we have come to love God more, that won’t be taken away from us after Pascha. In fact, thinking about the events of Pascha should even add to our love for Him.