

November, 2000 Exercise and Asceticism

I did my exercises this morning. Not much, really. A few sit-ups, push-ups and stuff like that. I don't really like exercises all that much. I prefer to get my exercise by working around on our land. But I have found that work on the land brings with it sudden surprises. All of a sudden I find myself lifting a very heavy rock. All of a sudden I am shoveling gravel for three hours. Or winter comes and I am using a crosscut saw on pinyon logs for long sessions. My exercises function as an injury prevention program. If I stay in generally good shape and make wise decisions when I work, I will have a better chance of enjoying this land when I'm seventy years old. Like I said, though, I don't really like it. Those last three push-ups come hard. I would really rather be sipping on a hot drink in front of the fire. Perhaps you know what I mean?

Well, today as I doing my exercises and thinking up reasons to cut them short, I bumped into an insight that is worth sharing with you. It's all about asceticism.

"Asceticism" is taken from the Greek word *ascesis*, meaning "practice," "training" or "discipline." It is used in classical literature to describe the training of athletes (so you can see it was appropriate to learn something about asceticism while doing exercises). But the word is also used by Greek philosophers to describe the practice or "training" in the virtuous life. For example, the ancient Cynic philosopher Musonius Rufus, in his essay "On Training" writes,

With regard to training (*ascesis*), then, one aspect of it would be a matter of the soul alone, while another would be shared by both the soul and the body. Now then the training common to both will be employed whenever we adapt to cold, heat, thirst, hunger, plain food, a hard bed, abstinence from pleasure, and the endurance of strenuous labor. For through these and other things, the body is strengthened and becomes unfeeling and hard and useful for every task, and the soul is strengthened, being developed, on the one hand, by endurance of toil toward manliness, on the other by abstinence from pleasure toward self-control.

The Jewish philosopher Philo, writing around the time of Jesus, uses the term to describe the discipline of a community of Jews called the Therapeutae. He states, describing the life of this community, that "the interval between early morning and evening is spent entirely in spiritual exercise (*ascesis*)." He lists Scripture reading, meditation, and the composition of hymns as part of this exercise. The term is used shortly after Christ by Christians to speak of "preparation" or training for martyrdom.

The notion of asceticism received its most significant attention, however, in the context of the development of Christian monasticism. Even before AD 312, when Christianity was accepted by the Roman government, many Christians emphasized disciplines of fasting, sexual abstinence, withdrawal from social contact, simplicity of possessions, and such as means of living out their Christian faith. Some kept these disciplines in the context of their own homes. Others travelled to isolated places and lived alone. Still others gathered in communities to encourage one another in a life of spiritual practice. The heroic self-renunciation of some of

these early monks is legendary, ranging from the exemplary to the absurd. Antony, the father of monasticism, isolated himself for years from contact with society in order to seek God and battle with demons. He emerged from his isolation to embark upon a powerful healing and teaching ministry. Ethiopian Moses lived in his cell (a small, isolated, primitive prayer-room) for six years remaining standing all night long in prayer, becoming a respected advisor to many. Mygdonia and Tertia fled their husbands, abandoning the security of marriage for the austerities of monastic practice. Simon of Stylites, in one of the most well-known stories, sat on top of a pillar for forty years. I find myself responding to these stories with a combination of admiration and wonder (what does sitting on a pillar for forty years have to do with Christian living?). Nevertheless, by such means--exemplary and absurd--many Christians sought to conform their lives to the image and will of Christ.

Through the stories and the wisdom of these men and women, the “ideal of asceticism” was (and is) communicated throughout the Christian world. Perhaps we could call the ascetical movement an early Christian revival; within a matter of a few decades after the foundation of Pachomius’ first monastic community, the number of those associating with early ascetic communities was in the thousands. By raising up the ideal of asceticism, Christians were encouraged not simply to believe the faith, but to practice it. Disciplines of fasting, vigils, simplicity, solitude and the like received significant attention in these circles. The lives and teachings of the early Fathers and Mothers of monasticism were revered as models of authentic Christianity. Reflection on ascetical life achieved a high level of sophistication, as the lives of those who modeled authentic ascetical practice (such as the story of Antony above) were compared with those who fasted merely to impress others, or who practiced self-renunciation to the point of injury, madness, or death. And even if some of the stories appear excessive to us, the ideal of asceticism even in its most moderate forms faces many of us today with a significant challenge (pardon me, while I take a sip of mocha).

The ascetical ideal, first raised in the context of early monasticism, has impacted the church throughout its history. The scent of the ascetical spirit can be detected in a wide variety of movements. At least because of this widespread impact, the student of Christian spirituality must come to grips with the ascetical impulse in Christianity. But I think there is another reason for struggling to understand asceticism. For in trying to understand asceticism we are brought face to face with the fundamental question of our own role in becoming conformed to Christ. Through hearing those who have, with great hardship, ordered their lives around Christ, perhaps we too may gain help to bring order to our own chaotic lives.

My search for understanding of the ascetical ideal has, in recent years, has taken the form of a dialogue between the New Testament and the early monastic community. You see, the New Testament is rather quiet about spiritual disciplines, about ascetical practice. It is not silent: Paul speaks of training like an athlete (1 Corinthians 9:23-27; 1 Timothy 2:3-6). Jesus, when speaking of fasting, uses the phrase “*when you fast*” (Matthew 6:16). And there are other passages I could list. But, while it is not silent, the New Testament is not particularly loud regarding the use of ascetical practices as means of Christian growth. It is not common to find

passages emphasizing specific disciplines like solitude, vigils, and fasting. Indeed, Paul appears to discourage ascetical disciplines when, in his letter to the Colossians he stipulates, Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement . . . . Why do you submit to regulations, “Do not taste, do not handle, do not touch”? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. They have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence (Colossians 2:18, 20-23).

So, what then do we say about spiritual disciplines, and especially about the more severe ascetical practices of the early monastic period? Are they marks of the ideal Christian life, or at least the best means of reaching that ideal life, as the ascetical tradition might claim? Or are they dangerous detours, giving the appearance of holiness, while actually being impotent to effect authentic change, as the passage above appears to claim?

Here is where my exercise-insight enters.

Let’s say instead of my usual regiment, I went to the local Gold’s gym. I did the weight room thing. I pumped this and I hefted that. I did just what the body-building community recommends, without consulting a personal trainer who really knew my needs. Now I may come out having an appearance of strength (and, as a by-product of the exercise itself, I may find a general improvement in some areas), but simply by following the imposed regulations of the body-building community I might not find myself better able actually to spend hours digging gravel without injury. For example, without aerobic exercise, my heart might not be able to endure the strain of long hours of hard work. In a similar manner, the Christians at Colossae allowed themselves to be wowed by a few influential believers, who in turn imposed their own preconceived notion of spiritual exercise (*ascesis*) upon the rest. This artificial regiment had the effect of making those who followed it appear spiritual, but it may not have actually addressed the particular spiritual needs of the individuals involved. This approach pays more attention to the politics and the particulars of spirituality. And this is what Paul condemns.

But what if, in my quest for injury prevention, I had visited a personal trainer, or a physician who was able to give wise advice concerning the needs of my body? What if I followed the wisdom and direction of a quality guide, who knew my personality, my diet, my work habits and my potential? This trainer would know the fact that my body has been habituated to a more sedentary life. This trainer would know what muscles needed work and would know how to train them so that I would be able to accomplish what I am called to do. This trainer would be able to advise me so that I could re-habituate my muscles to work and not collapse, strain, or tear.

Paul is well-aware that initial conversion to Christ does not automatically bring perfection.

Paul repeatedly encourages believers to persevere, to increase, to strive for maturity. Just because we have experienced the awakening of our heart toward God; just because we made a commitment to Christ, does not mean that we are no longer in need of some re-habituating (just because I want to lift heavy rocks or have a commitment to lift them does not mean that my body is necessarily habituated to accomplish this). Indeed, we find that we are still plagued with attitudes and habits that are contrary to Christlikeness. Christians are constantly weakened: by “the flesh,” by the “the old man,” by “sin.” And we are not merely weakened by the flesh in general, but by the “works” of the flesh, by the “deeds” of the body, and by the patterns of sin.

Humans develop habits. As experience builds upon experience, certain tendencies or patterns of thinking, feeling, relating, and acting are formed. Our life becomes “habituated.” We question and learn within the framework of the culture(s) in which we have lived. Our joys and desires reveal a certain predictability to those who know us (when do you tend to cry?). We establish patterns of relationship and action which structure the way we navigate our lives (do you have any distinctive gestures?). And these habits are developed somewhat differently for each individual. Insofar as we are separated from Christ, our habits of feeling, thinking, acting reflect a dis-orientation from God and prevent us from doing and being all we are meant to do and be. For example, our thoughts are not framed from within a Christian world-view, preventing valuable perspective on things; our habits of avoidance (action) keep us from those places where we might draw near to God, preventing our own renewal; our addictive or aversive emotional patterns cause us to lose control over our lives, leading to our own destruction. And, like all habits, our sinful patterns are somewhat unique for each individual.

When we make a fundamental choice of faith to follow God and we receive the renewal of the Holy Spirit something happens deep in our heart. Our heart is softened and we become re-oriented to God. We have the sensitivity and the interest in the things of God: the Scriptures, the life of Jesus, the ministry of the Spirit. And this renewal of spirit is experienced uniquely for each individual. Yet our habits of feeling, thinking, and acting still remain. And insofar as they are built on dis-orientation from God they still reflect and perpetuate that separateness. The vices of our lives are thus experienced as forces fighting against our new orientation in Christ: the works of the flesh, the deeds of the body, the old self.

Paul, aware of the continuing effects of sin in the believer, encourages his readers to make an aggressive confrontation with the habits that prevent Christlikeness. He minces no words in his letters. “Consider yourselves dead to sin,” he recommends (Romans 6:11). “Walk according to the Spirit and do not [or you will not] fulfill the desires of the flesh,” he urges (Galatians 5:16). The Ephesians are reminded, “You were taught to put off your old self, . . . and to put on the new self” (Ephesians 4:22-23). And again Paul states, “we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:12-13). Frequently Paul lists sample habits which are characteristic of such dis-orientation (for example Galatians 5:19-21 and Ephesians 4:25-32). “Consider yourselves dead,” “put off,” “do not fulfill,” “put to death”:

this is the language Paul uses to describe the role of the Christian in our own re-formation. The Apostle encourages believers to make conscious and aggressive choices against the habits that lead away from God, and to make equally aggressive choices toward the Godward re-orientation of our feelings, thought, actions and such.

Indeed, if we look further in Paul's letter to the Colossians, we find him using the same kind of language. Whereas, as mentioned above, he discourages them from ascetical practices which are merely expressions of religious showmanship or spiritual presumption (Colossians 2:16-23), in the next chapter Paul encourages them both to fundamental orientation to God ("set your hearts on the things above" 3:1-2), and to take aggressive measures concerning their own sinful habits. "Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature," he commands (3:5). "Now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these," he urges (3:8). And he lists examples of the kinds of "such things" he is thinking about: anger, rage, slander, falsehood, sexual immorality, greed (3:5-9).

Paul does not, however, prescribe specific spiritual disciplines for his congregations. That is because the work of putting to death the vices and fostering the virtues of life work requires much more sensitivity than Paul can provide through this letter. The determination of the most appropriate means of grace for each individual is a work of each individual in the context of a loving community under the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. I think this may be why the New Testament is soft on ascetical practices. The New Testament is clear on the need to eradicate vices from our lives, but is shy to prescribe particular disciplines. For to determine particular disciplines for all would result in taking the eyes of Christians off the real matter (relationship with God and a life lived in conformity with that relationship), and putting them on secondary matters (particular practices). I am confident that the New Testament desires Christians to practice, to train, to discipline themselves (*ascesis*) for union with God. I am also confident that the New Testament expects that we will choose specific means--practices, disciplines, and such--in order to realize this union. Many of these disciplines--for example, prayer, study, service, simplicity, worship--are encouraged throughout the New Testament in a general way. But the application of "training," the use of specific personal means of growing in holiness should be inspired and empowered by the Spirit in the context of a loving community. The Holy Spirit then, with the contribution of other believers, serves as our "personal trainer." God knows our hearts, our habits, our weaknesses, our possibilities. As we yield ourselves to the leadership of God, as we "walk in the Spirit," we will be "led by the Spirit," identifying those practices and finding empowerment to persevere in those practices which become instruments of life for us.

Some disciplines of the spiritual life assist us in ordering our lives toward God by aiming at a particular target: they are designed to alter the patterns of a particular vice. Fasting addresses gluttony, sexual abstinence addresses sexual impurity, solitude and secrecy address vainglory, simplicity addresses greed, submission addresses pride. Thus Evagrius of Ponticus writes, "Reading, vigils and prayer—these are the things that lend stability to the wandering mind. Hunger, toil and solitude are the means of extinguishing the flames of desire. Turbid anger is

calmed by the singing of Psalms, by patience and almsgiving. But all these practices are to be engaged in according to due measure and at the appropriate times” (Praktikos §15). At times we will, like ascetics throughout history, need to make a serious break with the objects of our vices: perhaps one struggling with greed will need to radically simplify his life or to make a commitment to living with the poor, one struggling with depression (one of the seven deadly sins) will need to commit herself to hours of singing psalms and thankful meditation, and so on. At times we may think (and others will think) our actions to be absurd, but who can predict the impact of our surrender to God? Even Simon of Stylites, at the end of his life, led a large following of disciples under his pillar. But most of the time we will not be called to such extremes. The means and the measure of our asceticism will be less radical.

Nonetheless, because we are involved in *re*-habitation (as with physical exercise) we will feel a stretching of ourselves. We are simply not used to extended times of prayer, to enduring malignment, to “doing without.” At times we will be doing what we don’t want to do, but, as the saying goes, “no pain, no gain.” At first it will feel painful, difficult, boring, uncomfortable. Perhaps it will always feel that way. I’m not sure I will ever *enjoy* sit-ups or receiving criticism. But perhaps the confidence that the discipline will ultimately serve God’s glory and our own benefit can bring a kind-of joy in the midst of the pain. Perhaps this is why James encourages us to rejoice in trials (James 1:2-4).

I began this NewsLetter with a comment on the beginning of Advent, a time of “watching.” St. Peter of Damaskos, a Father of the Eastern church, emphasizes the role of watching in our spiritual “exercise”:

We should also and at all times keep a watch over our bodily activities as if they were plants, and should always give attention to the virtues of the soul and study how we can acquire each virtue. We should learn about this from the divine Scriptures and from saintly men; and what we learn we should through our actions zealously and in labour of soul guard as a treasure, until we have firmly established our virtue in question (on “Spurious Knowledge” in *The Philokalia* III, 195).

I think there is more to spiritual disciplines than training for virtue. I think there is more to ordering our lives than spiritual disciplines. Perhaps someday I will write about these matters. But I hope that this one little insight from my exercises will stimulate your own “watching.”

May God the Father bless you with the riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.