

St. Symeon Metaphrastes: On Worldly Desires



St. Symeon Metaphrastes (11th century), Royal Court administrator, monk, and author/compiler of the *Lives of the Saints* (a famous 10 volume Greek Menologion)

From "Paraphrase of the Homilies of St. Makarios of Egypt", Homily 3:
"Patient Endurance and Discrimination," by St. Symeon Metaphrastes
in

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54. Just as the blessings promised by God are unutterably great, so their acquisition requires much hardship and toil undertaken with hope and faith. This is clear from Christ's words: 'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me'(Matt. 16:24); and: 'He who does not hate father and mother, brothers and sisters, wife and children, and even his own soul, cannot be a disciple of Mine' (Luke 14:26). Most people are so lacking in intelligence as to want to attain the great and inconceivable blessings

of the kingdom of God, and to inherit eternal life and reign for ever with Christ, while living according to their own desires--or rather, according to him who sows within them these clearly noxious vanities.

55. Those who reach the goal without falling do so through hating themselves and all worldly desires, distractions, pleasures and preoccupations, for this is what 'denying oneself' amounts to. Hence everyone expels himself from the kingdom by his own choice, through not embracing suffering and denying himself for the sake of the truth, but wanting to enjoy something of this world in addition to that divine longing, and not surrendering the whole inclination of his will to God. This may be understood from a single example. On examining himself a man realizes that what he is so eager to do is wicked. At first he feels doubt about it in his heart. Next the measure and balance in his conscience make it clear inwardly whether the bias inclines to love for God for love for the world; and after that he proceeds to outward action. If for instance someone happens to have fallen out with his brother, then he examines himself, as we have said. At first he finds himself hesitant about whether to speak or not to speak, whether to return the insults hurled at him or to keep silent. At this point the man still remembers God's commandments, but he also thinks about his own reputation and has not fully chosen to deny himself. If a bias in favour of the world tips his heart's balance even slightly, an evil word will at once be on the tip of his tongue. When this happens with the intellect stretched inwardly like a bow he attacks his neighbour with his tongue and even with his hands--indeed, the evil can proceed so far that wounds result, or even murder. Thus it is possible to compare the starting-point of the slight movement in his soul with the terrible consequences to which it led. In this way every sin and malpractice, whether adultery, theft, greed, self-esteem or anything else, occurs when the will of the soul is beguiled and coaxed to evil by worldly desires and pleasures of the flesh.

56. Even good actions are frequently carried out for the sake of empty glory, and on this account they will be judged by God in the same way as theft, injustice and other major sins. 'God has scattered the bones of those who

seek to please men”, (Ps. 53:5. LXX). The devil being wily, versatile, tortuous and inventive, seeks to gain our allegiance and service even through our own good actions.

57. Whenever anyone loves something belonging to this world, it will burden his mind, dragging it down and not allowing it to rise up. In such people the weight, bias and balance of the will, that is, of the heart, are inclined to what is evil. It is in this way that torment and trial afflict the whole human race, whether they are Christians living in cities or on mountains, in monasteries, in the country or the desert. For if one is willingly enticed by what one loves it is clear that one has not yet dedicated all one’s love to God. Whether one likes possessions, or gold, or serving one’s stomach, or indulging in fleshly desires, or wordy wisdom designed to gain men’s praise, or authority, or honours from men, or anger and wrath, or words, or acting as a teacher for the sake of men’s esteem--in each and every case to give oneself to a passion is manifestly to love it. One person surrenders himself to sluggishness and negligence, another delights in extravagant clothes, another in sleep, another in silly jokes: whatever the worldly thing, big or small, by which one is bound and held fast, it prevents one from raising oneself up. Clearly, we indulge ourselves in whatever passion we do not resist and fight against bravely: like some shackle it binds us and drags us down, degrading the mind so that it does not dedicate itself to God and worship Him alone. The soul that truly directs its desire towards the Lord focuses all its longing on Him, denying itself and not following the desires of its own nature.

58. Example makes it clear that man is destroyed by his own free choice: for out of love for some worldly thing he throws himself into fire, is drowned in the sea and gives himself into captivity...
