

Self-Control

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded”

-James 4:7-8

Mankind is promised that by achieving the simple goal of reining in one's urges and desires, the bitter fight with man's archenemy is made an effortless endeavor and the final goal of reaching the Father is made a more attainable goal. Self-gratification stands as the fastest way to relinquish our friends and worsen our lives, while self-control is the gateway to inner peace. For instance, Saint Augustine fell from a position of inner peace and tranquility to bitter despair when he let his desires control him, but once he restrained his wild emotions he again rose to a blessed bliss. All of the Christian apologetics and teachings concur that a spiritual life accompanied with self-control is indomitable in its strength. Many grumble and groan of the difficulties that accompany control, but these obstacles are conquerable for Christ said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Reaching our final goal is achievable through steadfast perseverance and with help. Unlike the people of this world, the Coptic Orthodox Christians must toil relentlessly to restrain gluttony, lust, and anger to reach perfect serenity.

An acquaintance of mine once told me of a peer who, upon being told of his doctrinal choice to follow a vegan fast, initiated a three month long endeavor to torment my acquaintance with all the powers at his disposal. The peer struck my friend with temptations of every kind day and day out until finally upon seeing my friend's unyielding resolve quit his endeavor with a new respect for him. Fasting, diplomacy, and truthfulness is always met with opposition, and we must learn to accept this, but not be hindered by it. Alien to our secular world, fasting is and will always be seen as an unnecessary and trivial pursuit. Humanity has grown so wrapped up in their sovereignty over all the animals of the world and a

requirement to constantly show this authority by eating of the animals that they have fallen under the bonds of their very own kingship. So, this lens of disillusionment has lead humanity to see the humbled Christians of the world as weak, when they are the weak ones. Diplomacy and truthfulness are signs of frailty to a world of war and violence when in truth they are actually the strongest and greatest weapons at a Christian's disposal. The world incessantly attacks our pursuits for self- control with alluring parties filled with lust and gluttony and our attempts at diplomacy are met with incessant provocations that incite our aggressive desires. I know the inner struggle accompanied with refusing an invitation to the party of the year or silently ignoring torrents of insults from loathful people, but they can be relieved with a simple choice of befriending a spiritually superior group of friends or a decision to remove one's presence from a person of such enmity.

Restraint of one's desires, being the roots of peace and grace, stands as a common theme for countless of our fathers' writings. Saint Paul preached of an elevation of a despicable life controlled by sin and desires to a more fulfilling life of righteousness when he said, "and having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6: 18), Furthermore, in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter ten, we are promised "whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven." Moreover, we are assured by Peter of God's blessings if we can control our anger and love one when he proclaimed, "love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 8-9).

In addition to biblical assurances, patristic works attest to the immense rewards given to those that practice restraint. The Johanine Christian says in the Epistle to Diognetus, "The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle; and Christians sojourn in the midst of corruptible things, looking for incorruption in the heavens. The soul, injured by meats and drink, is made stronger, and Christians buffeted day by

day are even thereby made perfect.” Here we are told of inescapable tribulations, but are assured that these tiresome obstacles act also as catalysts to our pursuit of perfection. Drexelius likewise confirms the absolute need to go through tribulations when he wrote, “Our trust shines most conspicuously at that time when flowing blood proclaims wounds, when waves beat into the frail ship, when we are encompassed with difficulties.” The Church’s early fathers stood fast in their belief of a necessity to run the hard race to cross the final finish line because they took up this endeavor themselves and experienced firsthand the delight only felt by one who has truly reached perfect restraint.

In the current day and age ignoring desires for food, lust, and hatred have grown nearly impossible, but not fully unattainable. I always felt the constant inclination of the Bible and Church fathers to always speak in extremes, as something being completely righteous or fully evil, as a major impediment in my quest for self-discipline. I am constantly faced in my readings with a polarization of despicable evil and pure innocence when the world nowadays has pushed these opposites closer together into a lukewarm grey. This stands as a valid excuse for laziness regarding decisions at first glance until we look deeper into God’s teachings. God speaks in such manner, a drastically divided dual path of good and evil, because he demands such in his people, for he said “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16). God wants us to refuse the grey decisions in our lives for the purely white ones because they are the only way to Him.

It is common for man to say within themselves “this act in which I am to do is evil, but my emotions have taken control of me.” Sigmund Freud, the Father of Psychoanalysis, theorized of a division of the mind into three parts, the Id, the Super Ego, and the Ego. He believed that the Id, the sector containing all of our carnal lusts and desires, constantly warred against the Super Ego, the segment pertaining to our morals and self- control, thus forming the Ego. He believed a human being

that was completely run by their Id was prone irrationality and senselessness in everything he did because of the illogic accompanied with uncontrolled emotions. Freud deemed a man that lacked a proper restraint of his Id was doomed to lose himself to a life of absurdity and emptiness.

Achieving self-control stands as an arduous task, but if we work on our quest step by step, and with the aid of dedicated advisors the mission becomes a bit less unattainable. When seeking aid in this mighty endeavor one must not go far, for a person's family acts as a perfect source of help through experiences in such tribulations that are faced when persevering towards self-control. In addition, our priest stands as our strongest guide and greatest coach in our journey because of his direct access to God during his dealing with us. Furthermore, the sacraments of the church are essential to reaching our goal of self-control because of their position as the consecrated rewards given to us by God. Above all aides in our lives stands the Ultimate Helper, Jesus, in his undeniable support in our pursuits. Christians must always keep to heart what Paul said and what we should also say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)

It is absolutely dire that we organize our lives with restraint in mind, rather than with wild emotions running free. There is no excuse for ignorance of signs of self-gratification and the morals of a self-controlled person, for the Holy Spirit within us stands as a constant reminder of the selfish and selfless choices we make. To begin our journey towards true willpower we must shed the evil friends of old like Saint Augustine did when he returned to an exalted life. Furthermore, we must remember to keep our spiritual advisors and aides close so that we cannot sway in our path, just as Saint Moses the Black stayed close to Saint Isidorus and Saint Macarius the Great and hearkened to their teachings and instructions. There will be tribulations and obstacles along the way, and Christ warns us of this saying, "small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:14), but in this warning stands also a blessing for all that choose the untrodden road. The world stands as a more

than able adversary in our struggle for self-control, but we must remain steadfast and resolute in our complete refusal to accept self-gratification as a bond master over our bodies. I once accepted that a life lost to recklessness and self-indulgence was inevitable until I took up my armor and accepted to strive for a life of self-control, and now nothing matches the divine bliss that I share with God.