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Judging

If a person judges somebody he is willingly allowing himself to defame others and hurt them. If we know the reasons behind judging others, we will be able to find solutions to the problem.

1. Train yourself to honor and love people in their presence as well as in their absence – if you have a good word say it, but otherwise keep silent. Be very careful not to criticise or analyse anyone, especially when you are not in a position to do so.
2. Train yourself to speak only about the virtues of others as far as possible – concentrate on the good points in the lives of the others and neglect the weak points
3. Find a solution for leisure – a working man does not have enough time to sit and talk with his neighbours about the faults of others. Substantial and useful subjects should occupy their leisure. How leisure is spent is extremely important.
4. Avoid listening to judgments – try as far as you can, not to hear what is said about the faults of others, and even if you do hear do not believe all that is said! It may be completely untrue, and even if it is true is it really your business?
5. Pray for the judged person that God may cover his sins – ask God for mercy in a positive way rather than in arrogance or despising.
6. Remember that on the last Day of Judgment God will judge you for your own sins, and not for the sins of the others.
7. Judge yourself and realise your wickedness – the humble considers all people better than himself. Remember “He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone” (Jn 8:7), and how the scribes and Pharisees dropped the stones when they realised that they were just as sinful as the adulterous woman.
8. Try to overcome judging others by love – as far as possible restore old love and positive relationships between people.
9. Remember that judging others causes harm to you as well the person you judge
10. Train yourself not to think evil of people, or judge rashly – examine the matter slowly, objectively and openly. Maintain innocence and compassion on the person.
11. Train yourself to tolerate those who offend you – we do not live a ideal world and when, not if, you receive offense disregard the fault as if it didn't happen and move on with your life without judging.
12. Be very careful if you judge – God is the ultimate judge and to be safe and careful, leave the judgment for Him. Do not let judging others be a nature in you, but rather have minimal passing judgment.

Chapter 10 - Discernment

by Hegomen Athanasius Iskander

The final installment of his book, Practical Spirituality, includes how to discern what thoughts are from the devil, as well as advice on how to make decisions.

Discernment of the spirits is one of the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:10. The Bible exhorts us to discern the spirits, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.” (1 Jn 4:1) It was the gift King Solomon asked God to give him, “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad.” (1 King 3:9) Saint Antony ranked discernment as the virtue that should be coveted more than any other, because without discernment, the practice of other virtues may not be pleasing to God.

DISCERNING OF THOUGHTS:

There are many thoughts that move within the human soul. These thoughts may have

one of three origins:

1. From man himself, as we are told in Psalm 94:11: “The LORD knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity.”

2. From God (the Holy Spirit abiding in us) as we are told in Matthew 10:19-20: “But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you.”

3. From the devil as we are told in John 13:2: “And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him.” and also in Acts 5:3: But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?” Discerning the origin of the thought can be very difficult since a thought can be coming from God, to be quickly followed by a thought coming from Satan. An example of this is shown to us in Matthew 16:

And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. (Matt 16:16-17)

From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men. (Matt 16:21-23)

As you see, in St. Peter's mind, a thought from God was quickly followed by a thought from Satan. St. Peter could not discern the origin of the thoughts because he had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Although the Bible exhorts us to “try the spirits whether they are of God,” we are not given an exact method for discerning the thoughts. Again we have to go to the Desert Fathers seeking their experience in this matter. Here is a summary of what they say:

1. Examine the thought to see if it is filled with the fear of God.

2. Is it filled with goodness towards every one?

3. Does it agree with the witness and actions of the Lord and the Apostles?

4. Does the thought evoke peace and tranquillity? or is it surrounded by anger, bitterness and turmoil? The most pious thoughts should be suspected if they deprive us of our inner peace. Many a time we are lead to believe that we are being moved by the zeal of the Lord while we are actually succumbing to anger, condemnation and partiality. This happens to us time and again because we neglect this important step of examining the feelings surrounding the thought. An example of how God speaks to us is given to us in 1Kings 19, God wanted to talk to Elijah the prophet, and we are told, A great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (1Kg 19:11-12)

The voice of the Lord is a still small voice, not a great wind that breaks the mountain, or an earthquake nor a fire. A thought that is surrounded by feelings of pride, stubbornness, selfishness, confusion, anxiety, violence, envy and partiality, then it is certainly from God. Thoughts that are from God fill us with serenity, joy and humility.

5. Does the thought come with a sense of urgency about it? Do you feel compelled to

do it right away? If so, then be very careful, for most probably it is from the Tempter. Stirrings of the Holy Spirit come to the soul gradually and gently and not impulsively. Saint Macarius the Great once had a thought to go and visit the monks in the surrounding area. He kept the thought within him examining it for two years lest it be from the devil!

You may do all these steps and still the devil can fool you! The most important test of where the thought is coming from is to reveal your thoughts to your Father in confession. The Fathers valued this more than anything in discerning the thoughts. Saint Macarius used to reveal his thoughts to Amma Sarah, one of the Desert “mothers” Saint Moses the Black used to reveal his thoughts to Abba Zacharias, who was 18 years old, but full of the Holy Spirit. Never trust in your own judgment especially concerning important matters. I personally learned this the hard way! Here is how it happened.

Long time ago in the early years of my priesthood, we were starting a new project in the church that caused a lot of controversy and alienated several members of the congregation. Two weeks before the start of the project, I had this thought constantly in my mind that love and harmony are better than projects. I thought that God was telling me to stop the project and try to reconcile the people that were against it. I spoke to the members of the Board about what I decided to do, when one of them told me, “Abouna, you taught us always to reveal our thoughts to our Father in confession before deciding anything, have you consulted your Father in confession?” I really felt ashamed that I forgot this very important step. I called my Father in confession and revealed my thoughts to him and he told me, “This thought is from the devil!”

He also told me that His Grace Bishop was going to be in town shortly, and that I should consult with him before making any decision. I went to meet His Grace and told him about my thoughts, and he told me, “It is from the devil” I felt really humbled. I asked him, how could your Grace and my Father in confession discern the thought and I couldn’t? He smiled and said, “We just have more experience!” The Bishop told me, “The devil wants to scuttle the project, so he stirs up controversy about it and then appealing to you in the name of love and harmony, he convinces you to stop it. But here is what you do, you go on with the project and in a short while the controversy will die when the people see the project come to completion.” That incident taught me a great lesson about never trusting in my own judgment without consulting. I hope it will teach you the same.

DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD:

Sometimes one gets into a situation when he is unable to take a decision easily. For example, you get accepted into two universities, one in your home town and the other is out of town but is more famous. Or you have a job but you get an offer of another job in another city and you can’t make up your mind. It is these situations when we sometimes ask, “What is the will of God for me?” Knowing the will of God can be very difficult, but not if we follow the methods of the fathers. But, before we get into this, let us ask ourselves, why is it important for me to know the will of God? Saint Paul tells us in Romans 12:2, that the will of God is good, and acceptable, and perfect. The will of God is perfect, it lacks nothing, it is good for me in satisfying my spiritual, physical, psychological and emotional needs. God knows the future and therefore he knows what will be good for me in the long term.

My own will, on the other hand, is anything but perfect. I probably look for benefit in the short term without considering the long term. And even if I wanted to consider the long

term I may not be able to, since I cannot predict what will happen to me even next week. It is for these reasons that a wise person should always seek the will of God in whatever he does.

But, how can I know the will of God? Theophan the Recluse tells us that in order for God to reveal His good, acceptable and perfect will to me, I have to renounce my self will. That means, I have to prove to God that I am really seeking His will. Sometimes we ask God to reveal His will to us but deep inside we have already made up our minds. Sometimes we seek the will of God, as long as it agrees with our own will. If we act in this way then God will not reveal His will to us.

Theophan the Recluse gives us this “parable.” He says, if you have a glass full of vinegar, and you want to put honey in that glass, you must first throw away the vinegar, wash the glass, put it out in the sun for a few hours until the smell of the vinegar disappears, and then put the honey in it. The vinegar here is our own will which is selfish, short sighted, and unlike the will of God, is not perfect, good or acceptable. The honey is the will of God. And, unless we bury our self will, God will not reveal His will to us, because we will actually be mocking God by asking him to reveal to us His will while our own will is already made up.

How do I do this? There is an exercise for this called neutralization of my will. The theory is this. I always have a bias either for or against anything I am considering. For example, if I get an offer for a job that will give me more money, I may have a bias towards that job, that will make me blind to the bad aspects of this job. Or, I may face a situation in which I am asked to accept something that I don't like, and that makes me overlook the many good features of that thing. These likes and dislikes are usually based on a first impression, that I usually re-enforce by ignoring the other side of the coin, and the remedy is to do the opposite.

Let us take an example. I have been accepted in a good university in my home town, but I have an offer from another university that is far from home. The lure of “freedom” makes me ignore the many negative aspects of going to study far from home. If you really want to know what is the perfect, good and acceptable will of God in this matter, I should neutralize my bias, by intentionally identifying and even magnifying the negative aspects of that far away university. For one, I will be far from my family and friends. I will feel lonely, with only strangers to talk to. There is no church near that university, but I will have to travel for hours to find a Coptic church. I will lose my Father in confession, to whom I could always come for help, but who will be far away from me, and so on.

Of course these negative aspects are true but you were ignoring them because of “freedom” away from home and parental scrutiny. Any one who is serious can do this exercise in a few days. The result will be that you will find yourself neutral to the two proposals, each one has its good and bad aspects.

The same can be applied to the situation where you get an offer of a job that promises thousands of dollars more, but at the expense of taking your children away from their schools, their friends and their Sunday School, and moving away from your service in the Church and from your Father in confession.

The first step then is to neutralize the bias by seriously identifying the negative aspects and giving them as much weight as the positive ones. Then and only then, you can go to God to ask Him to reveal His good and perfect and acceptable will to you. The next step is to go to your Father in confession and ask him to pray for you, so that God may

reveal His will to you. This act of submitting yourself to your Father in confession is an act of humility, a very necessary pre-requisite for God revealing His will to you. If you feel afraid that God will choose the one option that you do not favour, then you have not done your homework the right way, the bias is still there. And if you go to your Father in confession asking him to pray for you but, subconsciously, you wish that God will choose one option over the other, then you have not done your homework well. It may well be that God will actually choose the one option you favoured before you neutralized your will, as I will show you in the next example.

A young man that I knew in Egypt before coming to Canada, wrote me a letter complaining that although his parents and his siblings are all in Canada (as immigrants), he has been consistently refused permission to immigrate by the Canadian embassy. I wrote to him telling him, maybe it is not the will of God that you immigrate to Canada. I then explained to him how to seek to know the will of God and how to neutralize his own bias in this respect. He accepted my advice and started thinking about the benefits of not immigrating to Canada.

He told his wife, if we stay in Egypt, our house will be the place where my parents and siblings come when they want to visit Egypt. And, since we have good jobs here, we don't have to start from scratch if we go to Canada, writing exams only to be told that we do not have "Canadian experience." We could always visit Canada and enjoy being with our family, and thus have the best of both worlds. They both went re-enforcing this until they became convinced that staying in Egypt is not such a bad idea after all, especially if this is the will of God for them. In his next letter he wrote me, "The same day we felt free from the bias and it didn't matter anymore for us whether we immigrate or stay in Egypt, was the day we received a telephone from the Canadian embassy telling us we were approved and have to do the medicals in order to receive our visas.

The beauty about doing this exercise, is that every time you are faced with the same situation, you go back to the same routine. It will be very easy for you not to think too much about what you ought to do, but rather neutralize or "bury" your will so that the perfect, good and acceptable will of God may be revealed to you. There are some words of caution that I would like to tell you. Do not try to cheat! Sometimes we seek the will of God but when God reveals His will to us, we don't like it. Some people would go to another priest hoping that changing the priest may change the will of God!

The other problem is that we ignore the will of God completely and seek our own will, just praying to God to give us what we want. This can be disastrous especially in the matter of marriage.

The late Bishop Poemen of blessed memory once told me a story about a young man who always came to the Bishop because of marital problems with his wife. One day the Bishop in frustration asked him, "Have you prayed at all before marrying this girl?" and the man told him, "I prayed everyday for six months!" The Bishop asked him, "What did you say to God?" The man said, "I said, 'God please let me marry this girl!'" Accepting the will of God as the best option for me, is a difficult concept for many young people. One young woman told me once, "I will accept the will of God in every thing except for marriage!" And I asked her Why? She said, "Because I know that the will of God will be that I marry a deacon who teaches in Sunday School who will be boring to live with!" I told her, "Can't God choose for you a deacon who teaches in Sunday School who will be fun to live with?"

Another young man who attended a retreat where we spoke about the will of God in

my marriage, stood up objecting violently to what I was proposing. He told me, "When it comes to marriage, I want to be the master of my own destiny!" I told him in response, "If you ignore the will of God in the process of choosing your spouse, you will become the master of your own disaster!" I like to give to our young people this parable; your life is like a boat where two people have to work, one has to row and the other has to hold the rudder (the device that directs the boat to turn right or left). A wise person would hand the rudder to the Lord and say, "Lord, hold the rudder and I will row!" Unfortunately, many times we insist on holding the rudder and we want God to row! One benefit of accepting the will of God as your preferred option is that, whatever life brings your way, you will have no fear, knowing that if God willed this for me, it is certainly good, perfect and acceptable, even if -in the short term-I don't like it.

Beware of False Humility

by H.H. Pope Shenouda III

Humility is a living virtue that we must cultivate in our daily spiritual life. Many times, we practice a false humility, where we openly humble ourselves to gain the compliments or praise of others. We must be watchful again this false humility, for it is rooted in pride.

Humility is not just a word. It is a life that has its spiritual rules. It is related to a great number of virtues that cause humility, or that are caused by it. We have to meditate upon all that, and know the means which would lead us to humility and to its practice.

First of all, let us know the true humility, and keep away from false humility. There are many who use expressions of humility, while they are very distantly far away from the spirit of humility.

They would say that they are weak sinners, while they absolutely do not bear anything like this to be said to them. They would bow their heads in front of others, while their hearts and their thoughts, never bow.

Once I was astonished to read the front article of a coptic magazine. The writer was speaking about the humility of the Christ our Lord during his baptism; and how he bowed in front of John the Baptist who is incommensurably less than Him; and that, in order to fulfill all righteousness. Then the writer finished his article with the expression: "O God, give us too, to bow in front of those who are less than us, in order to fulfill all righteousness!" And yet, if this writer believes in his depths that the others are less than himself, would his bowing be counted as humility? How can that be, while the heart inside is exalted over the people he looks upon, belittling them? This is false humility.

There is a story which Jean Cassian told about Saint Serapion the Great:

Once a wandering monk visited him. When the saint invited him to begin the prayers or the meditation of the Bible, he replied that he was not worthy. When he invited him to sit down on the mat instead of sitting on the ground, he also replied that he was not worthy. Then the saint advised him to keep in his cell, and not to ramble here and there. Then he grew intolerant, and his face became red and he was like a lion. Then said Serapion said to him: "My son, humility is not that you vainly blame yourself. But humility resides in tolerating the blame that comes to you from others."

The wisdom spoken by the saint is evident to us when we see someone depicting a trait in himself that he does not believe he really has, just to have puff himself up. Or he would describe himself as a weak sinner, in order to make people say that he is humble, and so, he would gain the praise of others. But if these qualifications were said about him, he would be angry; and if he knew that people would believe the false

description that he purports about himself (such as "I am a terrible person. I am an unworthy servant..."), he would absolutely never say such things.

As for you, let real humility be yours, with the interior true conviction that you are so, that you possess the defects which you say about yourself.

Saint Isaac said guard against using expressions of humility as a means to pride: "If you deprecate yourself in order to be honored, the Lord will expose you... And if you censure yourself aiming at truth, the Lord will make his creatures open in front of you, the door of his glory of which He speaks from eternity, and they would glorify you and glorify the Creator, because in truth you would be to His image and His resemblance."

The Wisdom of the Fathers on the Virtue of Humility

Once a brother asked saint Pachomius, the father of communal monasterial life, saying: "Tell us about a vision from the visions which you see, so that we may profit by it."

The saint replied: "Those who are like me, a sinner, are not given visions. But if you want to see a brilliant vision from which you can truly profit, I shall guide you to it. If you see a humble man with a pure heart, that would be greater than all the visions; because through that vision, you would see the invisible God. Do not ask for a better vision." (That is, he means that he sees the image of God in that man.)

Saint Augustine said, "You want to acquire everything. Ask for that by means of humility. When the canaanite woman said: "Yes Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table", she heard his word: "O woman, great is your faith!" (Matt. 15:27-28).

And also when the centurion said: "I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof", the Lord said: "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" (Luke 7: 6-9).

Let us hold on humility. If we have it not till now, let us learn it. If we have it, let us not lose it.

Saint Ebraxius said, "The tree of humility which raises up, is lowliness". He also said, "Imitate the publican, so that you would not be judged with the pharisee."

Saint Anthony said, "Love humility, because it covers all sins."

Saint Barsenophius said, "Acquire humility, because it breaks all the snares of the enemy."

Saint Isaiah said, "Love humility, because it guards you against sin."

Saint Pacomius said, "Walk in the way of humility; because God does not let the humble go back unsatisfied. But he lets the proud fall down, and his fall would be hideous. Beware of the haughtiness of the heart, because it is the most horrible vice."

He also said: "Be humble in order to be joyous; because joy goes with humility. Be humble so that the Lord would protect you and strengthen you; because He says that He regards the humble. Be meek, so that the Lord would fill you with wisdom, knowledge, and understanding; because it is written that "The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way." (Ps. 25:9)

Saint John the Short said, "You must first of all be humble; because this is the first commandment about which our Lord said 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matt. 5:3)

Saint John Saba (also known as the "spiritual old man" said, "My brother, wear humility at all times; because it clothes your soul with Christ who gives it."

Saint Isaac the Syrian said:

"Love humility in all your arrangements, and you will be delivered from all the unknown snares, which always exist outside the ways of the humble."

"Do not ask to be honored while you are internally filled with wounds. Hate dignity, and you will be dignified. Do not love it, lest you would be offended. Dignity will run away from him who runs after it; and she will go after him who knowingly runs away from it, and will recommend his humility to everybody."

"Be lowly when you are exalted, and do not be haughty when you are disdained. Humiliate yourself, and belittle your value to all people, and then you will be elevated above the chiefs in this world. Be illiterate in your wisdom, and do not feign wisdom while you are illiterate."

"O miserable man, if you want to find life, persevere in faith and humility; so that by them, you may find mercy, aid, and a voice from God in your heart; and if you want to acquire these two (faith and humility), begin by holding on being uncomplicated; and walk in front of God in simplicity and not in understanding."

Saint John Saba said: "The prophet says: 'Woe to him who is wise in his eyes. Therefore be like a slave at the hand of his master, and not like a brother beside his brothers. Be rather in the jobs which others disdain doing them, and be the last to arrange and array things. Always wear humility. and it will make you an abode of God.'"

He said also: "As a young man must fast and be devout, so old men should be humble and conceding; because they are always associated with suspicion and vain glory, and they need spiritual warfare more than corporal warfare." Also; "A treasure which is hidden underground, does not diminish, and there is no fear from thieves about it; and the treasure of knowledge which is inside the heart, cannot be stolen by the thoughts of vaine glory."

Saint Ephrem said, "Just as a body needs clothing, alike in hot or cold weather, so the soul always needs the apparel of humility. Humility of mind is a spiritual property chose to walk nude and without footwear, rather than to be denuded of it; because the Lord covers those who love humility."

He also said: "When you see yourself crowned with virtues and exalted in them, at that time you need humility of mind the more, in order to lay sound foundations for your knowledge, and the building would stand firm and unshaken. Do not exalt the condition of your soul; because a severe trial may happen to you, and then those who think well of you, would be reprimanded. Love humility because it is an indestructible hedge in front of the enemy, and a rock of offense which breaks the stratagems of Satan."

Saint Macarius the Great said: "Fasting without prayer and humility, is like an eagle with broken wings."

Saint Isaac said: "If you walk well in the deeds of virtue, and do not feel the taste of its assistance, then do not be astonished from that; because if man does not humble himself, he will not receive the reward of his deeds. The reward is not given for the action, but for humility; and he who has lost humility, has lost his pain and his action."

He also said: "If you pass by all the dwellings of virtue, you will encounter no rest from your pain, and no delivery from the schemes of your enemies, until you arrive to the dwelling of humility."

Saint Anthony said, "If we forget our sins, God will remind them to us; and if we remember our sins, God will forget them for us."

Beware of forgetting your sins, lest you become self-satisfied and have thoughts about yourself, or become just in your eyes.

If dignity and self-justice combat you, say to yourself: "I do not deserve anything because of my sins; and

if God, because of the greatness of his love and mercy, has covered my sins from people, yet I know them well and I do not forget them, lest I become vainly proud."

Saint Isidore said, "The honor of humility is great. The fall of the proud is very horrible. I advise you to keep humility, so that you would never fall."

Saint Augustine said: "Humiliate yourself to the humble God, so that you would be exalted in your glorious God."