

## Dealing with Impure *Logismoi*

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Note: Abbot Sergius is the author of the very popular book, *Acquiring the Mind of Christ: Embracing the Vision of the Orthodox Church* (St. Tikhon's Monastery Press).

Typically when I go out to talk with people, the main thing I like to talk about is the *neptic* tradition in our Church—the understanding and practice of *watchfulness*—which is, as far as we know, the only way to purity and holiness. So I think this is a good time to talk about the nuts and bolts of this tradition. It's such an important part of the holistic vision of our Church, a vision that's so *complete*. There's always an answer to every question; there's always a good answer to every problem. It has a completeness that I've yet to find anywhere else on planet Earth. It has the ability to bring peace to the heart and the mind of those who are seeking.

Now, when we think of the word in the Greek for chastity and purity, it's the word *sophrosune*. This is the word for that wholeness and integrity which the Lord seeks from us, which He asks us to seek in our own lives. In essence, it's the descent from the head into the heart. This spiritual work, to not only find the heart but to abide in the heart, involves combatting thoughts that are often not very good.

The *neptic* tradition begins with the Lord's own words: "What I say to you, I say to all: Watch!" (Mark 13:37). This wonderful word is prevalent in the Gospels. It's given to the Disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the Lord asked them to watch and pray, lest they enter into temptation (Matt. 26:38).

The more we put into our efforts to be watchful, the more we see that this *watchfulness* is really the key to purity of heart.

And so what I thought I would do is refer to St. Hesychios in the *Philokalia*, Volume One, in his wonderful text about watchfulness. And before I say anything else, I'd like to read to you directly from St. Hesychios – his eloquent and very succinct thoughts about this. He says:

Watchfulness is a spiritual method in the *neptic* tradition of our Church, which, when meticulously practiced over a long period of time, will completely free us, with God's help, from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words, and evil actions.

And there is in the *Philokalia* the saying that if we keep all the commandments in our thinking, in our thoughts, we will by default keep them in our actions as well. Learning to keep God's commandments in our head, in our brain, in our heart, is really the beginning of keeping them outwardly. And we don't just do things for their own sake, or to be good; but rather we do them for the purpose of communion with God. For the commandments are the way into the life of God, into experiencing Him, into experiencing the vision of God.

St. Hesychios goes on:

*Nepsis* leads, insofar as it is possible, to a sure knowledge of the incomprehensible God. It helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries. It enables us to fulfill every one of the divine commandments of the Old and the New Testaments, and it bestows upon us every blessing in the age to come. This watchful state is, in a true sense, purity of heart – a state blessed by Christ when He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Because of its spiritual nobility and beauty – or rather, because of our unfortunate negligence – this state is now extremely rare. Because of its own spiritual nature, watchfulness can only be "bought" at a great price. But once established in us, it guides us to a true and holy way of life. It teaches us how to activate our soul correctly, and how to keep a firm guard over our senses.

The great Lawgiver Moses – or rather, the Holy Spirit through Moses – teaches us how to acquire this virtue, and how to perfect it, when he says, “Be attentive to yourself, lest there arise in your heart a secret thing that’s an iniquity” (Deut. 15:9, LXX). Here the phrase “a secret thing” refers to the first appearance of a thought (*logismos*). This the Fathers call a “provocation,” introduced into the heart by the Devil. And as soon as this thought appears in our intellect, our own thoughts tend to chase after it and enter into impassioned intercourse with it (“On Watchfulness and Holiness,” *Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 162).

So this idea of watchfulness in the Fathers – this key to any sense of the knowledge of God, which brings us to dispassion – the Fathers call *hesychia*, or stillness. St. John Climacus says that stillness is the mother of dispassion. So if we’re talking about chastity, which is a rather lofty state, the way to it, the beginning of it, according to St. John Climacus, is stillness – stillness, with humility and obedience.

But this understanding of stillness is not just something for St. John Climacus on Mt. Sinai. Rather, it’s something we all need to practice at some level during all of our life, in order not only to continue our journey towards our heart, but also towards the freedom from the passions that we all seek. As the Fathers tell us, nobody really wants to sin, even though we may be habituated towards it sometimes, or people may become identified with their sin. But the reality is that nobody really wants to sin, according to the Fathers.

So, about this understanding of *hesychia* – I was in San Francisco, at the house of a member of the Russian aristocracy, who had been an art teacher at the university level, and she was telling me about a few things. She was in her seventies, living in retirement. She looked at me and said, “You know, every time you go to a parish, make sure you tell them about *hesychia*.” This older lady, this Russian aristocrat, looked at me and reminded me of probably the most important thing that we could be talking about right now, and that’s *how to be quiet* – how to listen to God, how to be present to God, how to get some space between our own thoughts and

ourselves; and through that stillness to be able to look upon the face of God, and through this to be changed into the same image.

I often think about this wonderful woman, since I go out to parishes quite a bit. And as I talk with people, the thing that seems to be most difficult to understand is not only how to pray (because we often don't give it much effort, or much place in our lives), but even more specifically, as we enter into that life of prayer, the life of the Church's prayer, is how to learn to stand before God with a watchful, attentive heart, being "all eye" like the Cherubim (cf. Ezek. 10:9-12), listening and receiving what God has for us and wants to give us – His life, His grace, and His energy.

If we could only just stop for a moment, each day, to have that perspective! I remember I was on Mt. Athos one time, at Elder Aimilianos's monastery, and the one word that I got at the monastery was very clear, and very to the point. It was simply, "Receive."

God has so much to give, and yet so often we are so busy telling Him what we want; or maybe we're doing good things in the church, being about the Lord's business. Yet every day, the consistent practice of standing before God in silence is the most necessary thing. As Mary shows us in the Gospel, she's sitting at the feet of Jesus, just receiving and listening – listening to Christ's words. And her sitting at His feet shows her subjection to Him, as she listens in attentiveness and humility.

As we sit in subjection at the feet of Christ in our daily life, all we have to do is *receive*. It's all there! Our task is simply to make that space in our heart, so that God can give us all of His life, all of His love, all of His mercy, all of His grace. It's up to us to make that place, to make that space. Yet so many things in this world crowd it out.

In the Patristic consensus, there is the observation that one of the greatest evils that we may encounter in our daily life is *distraction*. Distractions are not necessarily bad. But in that same Gospel passage, we hear that Mary chose the good part that was not going to be taken away from her. Not only is sitting at the feet of Christ the necessary work, but just listening, receiving, being attentive to God in silence.

This really isn't too hard, if you get into the habit of doing it. It's not that bad! It's something we can habituate ourselves to; it's not something impossible.

That Gospel passage has the same message for that busy part of us. It says that Martha was *distracted* by many things. It didn't say that serving is bad! But *that word* was in there! She was *distracted* by her serving. And that distraction is what pulled her away from Christ, from receiving the good part that would not have been taken away from her.

As we look at our own lives, the Fathers always talk about reconciling Martha and Mary. The reality is that it's OK to do both, as long as we're not distracted by what we do, and as long as we have a heart that's alive to God at all times during the day – morning, noon, and night. Whether we're on our bed, or whether we're at our workplace, or whether we're in our prayer corner, or whether we're at church, to have our heart alive to God is the key. The beginning, the middle, and the end of the *neptic* and watchful tradition of our Church is to be present to the Lord, to continue the dialogue with Him, by His help.

And every time an evil thought comes to us, we say, "Lord, without You I can do nothing. I am Thine; save me!" Just like Peter saying, "Lord, I'm sinking!" (Matt. 14:30).

This is the dialogue that we have with God. And St. Theophan the Recluse says this is what routs evil thoughts. For all the impurity of our world, the difficulties of all the ethical and moral situations that we're in – really, it's the formation of the heart, which only comes through encounter with the living God, that's the key, leading us to understand not only what God wants of us, not only how to proceed towards God, but this also even enables us to do His will for us.

So we have this stillness – this *neptic*, watchful tradition: being able to just sit with God. And then something is imparted to us. The life of God, the love of God, the *phronema* (the mindset and ethos) of God, are all somehow given to us. And we have our understanding given back to us – like the

demoniac man, who when he was insane, out of his right mind, Jesus comes and heals him. And after he's healed, he's sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind (Mark 5:1-15).

Only God can give us a right mind. There's no way we can force this upon people, or say to them, "You need to have a right mind!" How can you give someone a right mind? Christ Himself must give us this mind. And it must be renewed in us every day, because otherwise we'll lose it. It's not something we have by virtue of being great people. This is not about being good; it's about being in communion with God, which will lead us to good.

But that first part, which Mary chose – that attentiveness at the feet of Christ, that listening and receiving, somehow through just sitting with the Lord, whether it's praying with our prayer book, or using the prayer rope and the Jesus Prayer – somehow, as Fr. Zacharias of Essex says, this imparts the energy of watchfulness into us.

As we continue to use the Jesus Prayer, watchfulness is built up within us, so that we become like sentries, as Fr. Zacharias says, at the doors of the fortress-castle of our heart. Then we can see bad thoughts, bad thinking, wrong ideas – after a while, we can see them coming from a mile away. And then, all of a sudden, we're able to say to those thoughts, "Get out of here!" And they leave us! They run away! We're actually able to sense their approach, through this energy of watchfulness that's given to us, very simply, through the Jesus Prayer.

And remember, the Jesus Prayer is not some kind of end in and of itself. It's a *tool*, a *weapon*, by which we learn to still the heart and the mind, and stand before the face of God. It's not the end point; it's a tool; it's a beginning. But ultimately, as St. Theophan says, the most important thing is the inner turning of the heart to the Lord. This is what qualifies as being true watchfulness and true prayer.

So this is our task, as we consistently try to approach God in our own prayer corner, and even in the middle of our days, and at the end of our nights, as we approach God and give Him some space, through this work of watchfulness.

Elder Aimilianos says that the combination of watchfulness, the Jesus Prayer, and reading the Scriptures – which we should be doing often, so it becomes a living source of life for us – imparts God’s own energy and *phronema* to us.

The elder says there’s nothing more important than this vigilance, whereby when we do our prayer rule, we open the Scriptures, and we read them prayerfully, slowly, as much as we can do according to our prayer rule. We read them slowly, while we say the Jesus Prayer; and as we read, we drink in the words. This in and of itself will produce stillness, which will enable us to taste the presence of God, which will be able to rout the enemy, which will give us the strength to say “No” to the passions, which will empower us to understand how to approach people who have gone astray.

This is all a simple thing, but it’s *tough!* It’s difficult; it’s easier said than done. Fr. Zacharias says that when we close the door to our room to pray, there’s the desert. But it’s in this desert place that we can stand before the face of God, trying to be attentive to Him.

Now, prayer is not really meant to be trying to hear words from Heaven. Rather, it’s more like seeking to be filled with God’s own life and grace, which inform the heart – really, *re-forming* the heart, and renewing it. As St. Paul says, “We all, as in a mirror, beholding the image of the Lord, are being changed into the same image, from glory to glory” (1 Cor. 3:18). And where is this happening, if not in the mirror of our own heart?

Also, it’s not necessarily the words we use when we pray, or even our attentiveness to God, that’s most important; but rather, like the Prodigal Son, it’s our return to our own self. St. John of Damascus says that before communing with God, we need to commune with ourselves. He says this in his homily on the Transfiguration. We must first come into communion with ourselves, and then into communion with God. There’s no other way to do it. As David says, “Stand in awe, and sin not. Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still” (Ps. 4:4).

Yet this work of communing with ourself, of abiding deeply within our own heart, and being present to our own thought-life, beholding what’s really

going on inside us – this is a big work in and of itself. But like the Prodigal Son, who had to come to himself before he could return to his Father, it's the same for us. We must turn to our own heart, abide in that place, and then speak to God.

And not only speak to God, but listen as well, understanding that prayer is a dialogue, and that there is reciprocation. It's not just me, saying my prayers, checking the box, and then going away. It's about being able to give God some space. Fr. Zacharias and Fr. Sophrony of Essex say that humility is about giving all the space to God. And if this begins in our relationship with our neighbor, it should apply to God as well. So we give Him some room to offer us something that's not of this world – something that's beyond word, beyond thought, beyond even the sense of this present age in which we live, for it's something above us.

So, giving space to God is part of prayer, part of the *neptic* tradition, part of the watchfulness that the Church's prayers, whether in the prayerbook, or the Jesus Prayer, or in the liturgical services, all have as their central core: this ethos of "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 45/46:10), as the Lord said to David—and through him, to all of us. It all starts in that place of stillness, wherein God's own life is imparted to us, which helps us overcome the world.

And at the very least, at the end of the day, we can struggle to have faith in this difficult period of our lives of acquiring grace, then losing grace, then reacquiring it, back and forth. For St. John the Evangelist, in his first epistle, reminds us that "This is the victory which overcomes the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4).

It's so imperative to understand, as we reach towards these high principles, these high things which God calls us to, that it's only by His mercy and grace that these things happen. Yet it's also through our faith, by which we continue to look to God and say, "Yes, Lord! I believe You're able to do this in my life. I'll follow You. Wherever I'm at right now, I will continue to follow You."

This consistent, complete "Yes" to God, which we offer every single day, trying to put Him first in our life – this is like the rudder of our soul,

which continues to guide our boat that often goes astray amid the waves of life. But if we go astray, that rudder will help keep us centered, no matter how far off course we get. The life of faith that we have in the Church – not only our dogmatic Faith, but also our interior faith, our personal connection to God – is all by the grace of the Church, through the Eucharist, through Confession, through all the ways God conveys His life to us, which enable us to have the faith that knows that “God is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). And as St. Paul says, “Faithful is He Who calls us, Who also will do it” (1 Thess. 5:24; cf. Phil. 1:6).

It’s God Who has to do it in our lives. It’s His part to offer us His great grace, and it’s our part to say “Yes,” and accept it.

Here are a few more thoughts from St. Hesychios:

Just as a man blind from birth does not see the sun’s light, so one who fails to pursue watchfulness does not see the rich radiance of divine grace. He cannot free himself from evil thoughts, words, and actions, because of which he will not be able to pass the lords of hell when he dies.

Attentiveness is the heart’s stillness, unbroken by any thought. In this stillness the heart breathes and invokes, endlessly and without ceasing, Jesus Christ, Who is the Son of God and God Himself. It confesses Him Who alone has the power to forgive sins; and with His aid it courageously faces its enemies. Through this invocation, enfolded continually in Christ Who secretly divines all hearts, the soul does everything it can to keep its sweetness and its inner struggle hidden from men, so that the Devil, coming upon it surreptitiously, does not lead it into evil and destroy its precious work.

Watchfulness is the continual fixing and halting of thought at the entrance of our heart. In this way, predatory and murderous thoughts are marked as they approach, and what they say and do is noted. And we can see in what specious and deluding forms the demons are trying to deceive the intellect. If we are conscientious in this, we can gain much experience and knowledge of spiritual warfare.

In one who is trying to dam up the source of evil thoughts and actions, continuity of watchful attention in the intellect is induced by fear of hell and fear of God, by God's withdrawals from the soul, and by the advent of trials which chasten and instruct. For these withdrawals and unexpected trials help us to correct our life, especially when, having once experienced the tranquility of watchfulness, we neglect it.

Continuity of attention produces inner stability; and inner stability produces a natural intensification of watchfulness; and this intensification gradually and in due measure gives us insight into spiritual warfare. This, in its turn, is succeeded by persistence in the Jesus Prayer, and by the state that Jesus confers, in which the intellect, free from all images, experiences complete quietude (*Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 163).

This is all from St. Hesychios, from his discourse that's entirely devoted to watchfulness proceeding from stillness. And this watchfulness is the key to knowledge of God and freedom from passions.

Of all the actions that may have been discussed at this conference, if watchfulness had been the primary work, we probably would not be having to delve into the various issues that we're talking about today. But it's up to us. St. John Climacus talks about how ultimately this kind of purity and chastity is only granted by God – not only through stillness, but ultimately through humility. It's that divine and life-giving humility that Christ imparts to us through the difficult multiple trials of our life which enables us to become free from the passions.

And it's also through our faith in the Lord Who's able to do all things; as the troparion in one of the services says, "Grant me dispassion by faith." St. Peter of Damascus says it was the faith of the thief that "bought" him Paradise – and it will also be the same for us.

So, we always have to take heed to ourselves. And we need to realize that it's through the difficulties of our life, especially through the indignities, that we are cleansed. This is one of the things the Fathers, especially St. Mark the Ascetic, talk about – how it's ultimately the dishonors that cleanse

the soul from lust. So whenever we're dishonored, whenever we're humiliated, whenever we're in a low place, we need to remember that humility is being offered to us, which St. Mark says we should accept as a gracious gift – a cup from which we should drink deeply, because it will cleanse us of the passions.

This is the way of the *neptic* Fathers – humility, and obedience to the Lord and to His commandments, and especially to the tradition of the *neptic* Fathers, who offer us stillness. And through the mercy of God, hopefully we all will continue to try to enter deeply into this place where we try to meet the Lord, not only to speak to Him, but also to listen attentively, receiving grace, and the life which frees us not only from the passions, but also from death, and grants us eternal life. Amen.