

PHILOKALIA

Summary of the 200 texts: Concerning Spiritual Law of St. Mark the Ascetic.

The 200 texts of Mark, the Ascetic, concerning spiritual law were to my surprise different than what I expected from an ascetic of the 5th century. This ascetic, probably a disciple of John Chrysostom, wrote a law for spiritual life with a language that does not contain strict ascetic endeavors, which are suitable only for ascetics. He wrote small texts that are understandable and achievable by seekers of the general public. His words are theology simplified based on voluntary and involuntary suffering that leads to deification, the goal of theology. They reflect the simplicity of the Scripture which was practiced and embodied in the life of our saint, Mark the Ascetic.

These 200 texts are also not texts of teaching in a sequential order similar to the divine ladder, where the seeker must take the first step of the ladder in order to climb and reach the last step. The texts were thrown as seeds wanting a ready soul to obtain and bury them in its depth in order to cultivate the harvest. These texts, though they are 200, are roaming around few points that are needed as a spiritual law to lead a spiritual life. St. Mark insists on teaching these points for the well being of the seeker that he may cultivate the fruits of his work. The seeker has to learn, know and apply the spiritual law in his life in order to benefit from his deeds.

Knowledge

Mark the ascetic repeats the words 'ignorance' and 'knowledge' many times in his texts. Knowledge is a very important tool in order for the seeker to do the commandments of God. The ignorant will not understand and will not learn the scriptures and therefore will be unable to fulfill the commandments. Knowledge teaches more knowledge (171). It is in proportion to his knowledge of God and the mystical works, that the seeker will submit his faith, deeds (86), virtues (40) and thoughts (87 & 89) to God in order to walk and to advance in his path towards God's ultimate grace, deification (30).

First of all, the seeker has to know that God, the Holy Trinity, is the beginning, the middle and the end of every good (2). He is the One who opens the eyes of the heart for acquiring spiritual knowledge through the experience of practicing prayers and reading

the scriptures (7), which allow the seeker to discern between the son of David and Son of God (14). He is the provident Giver and Governor of every good (3, 5), which may escape the notice of the ignorant, the ungrateful, the senseless and the idle (47).

This basic knowledge allows the seeker to become a transparent tool of God through his good deeds (86). God will be revealing and manifesting His graces through the deeds of the seeker.

Humility

Humility is the status of the soul that is acquiring the knowledge of God. The humble person preserves God's gifts (8). He applies the reading of the scriptures to himself (6) and incarnates them in deeds (85, 86). He becomes the blind man asking for mercy and the follower of the most perfect doctrine (13, 15-16). His mouth declares the truth (9) and does not blaspheme (11) but the person who pretends humility he (,) misrepresents the truth (35). The humble receives God, the Logos (130), and he goes through transformation for he will be warned to flee from the wrath to come (129). He becomes wiser than the wise (79).

Wisdom and knowledge may puff up the seeker but they do not harm the humble one (83) and will not bring shameful desire to him (95). The mind of the humble is always vigilant and illumined (101) which will save him from vainglory, the root of all evil (100, 105), and from dishonor (137). It allows him to see that God governs everything with justice (108).

Suffering

St. Mark insists that the seeker should go through suffering, temptation and tribulation for the welfare of his spiritual path (187) for through little suffering he escapes greater suffering (188). Suffering is one of the spiritual laws that the seeker should endure and accept patiently and willingly (44, 164) for the sake of the truth of Christ that brings future blessings (73, 114, and 156) when it comes. The seeker who undergoes tribulation will receive good things (42). He finds help that matches with his tribulation (43), which then becomes the cause of the destruction of his sins (67, 134) and his purity (49) if he avoided greed when enduring his afflictions (51).

The time of involuntary suffering, afflictions and temptations brings back to the seeker the remembrance of God (56, 57) that helps him to acquire tried virtues (66) and to testify piously his true love to God (65, 88). They are part of the fallen life and not the result of one's sin (174). In any situation the seeker can overcome suffering with prayer and patient endurance (189).

Commandments & Virtues

St Mark distinguishes between fulfilling the commandments of God and virtues. He says that although virtues and the fulfillment of what is commanded receive from one another occasions for good (193), virtue is one and is manifested in many fulfilled commandments that are pleasing to God (194, 195). Every person may find the hidden God and proportion to his fulfillment of the commandments (30, 32, 34, 190), but it is perfected only through God and not through human virtues (30, 31, 33) for the Lord is hidden in His commandments (190).

God is the providential giver and the Governor of everything good (3, 5, 47). He is the source of every virtue (40) and the perfection of every commandment is hidden in the Cross of Christ (31). So every virtuous act is accomplished through God (41) and ends up in spiritual consolation (48). Therefore, the seeker should offer totally his life and the purpose of his deeds, movements and actions according to the words of divine scriptures (85) and God's purpose (64). He should not hesitate of what to do, but he should go ahead and do anything he remembers for the hidden things will be revealed to him (59, 60, 84), and because God sees the actions according to the intentions of the doer (184); God causes the outcome of the actions to be in accordance with justice (71, 108, and 117).

The spiritual law of St Mark teaches also the virtuous man how to preserve his virtues. He asks him to denounce his passions, pleasure and all the actions of vice (100, 101, 105 and 109) and not only his worldly possessions (96, 98, and 106). He should even censure them at the stage of predisposition (138, 178, 179, 180, 182, and 183) for it is the door for sin (139, 140, and 141). He also should not listen to gossips, villainies and idle talks or associate with those who speak them (152, 153, 154, and 173) because from a voluptuous heart arise pestilent thoughts and words (162) which blind the virtuous from seeing the

causes of his sins (165, 168) and from getting entangled in the intricate net of vice that is overpowered by evil (170, 172).

Prayer

St Mark gives the virtuous more tools to keep his conscience pure, for by giving heed to the conscience, he will be cured (69). He says that good conscience and pure prayer need each other for a good conscience is found through prayer, and pure prayer through the conscience (198). Prayer is an important tool to start any work, though many methods are available, but none is harmful (22). Prayer can turn an evil work to become good (23). The virtuous will increase his remembrance of God while he is praying and God will save him from forgetting to pray and doing evil (24, 25). Prayer will allow him to endure what befalls on him (19, 92, and 113) and will rally with the one who is negligent (64).

Repentance

St Mark speaks also about repentance, and reproof beside prayer for sin is a burning fire that is quenched by diminution (136), and if it is kept unblotted it carries the seeker to greater evils (127) and an unquenchable fire. The sinner cannot escape God's notice (52, 53). He has to show himself to the Master (53) in order to receive correction from God and his conscience (70), or his soul will stay chained in the prison of passions at the time of departure (20, 112). The enemy, evil, controls the person who does not repent and causes him suffering against his will (91) for the will of the person will not be in harmony with the will of God. The will is not in peace and thus it suffers (148) and through prayer and repentance the repentant will escape evil (92) and will please God, even though he has been derided by the foolish (133).

Mark the Ascetic's spiritual law is probated around justice (91). This gives heed to suffering and personal fulfillment of commandments and virtues, although he attributes and believes that God is the beginning, the middle and the completion of every good. The enemy and the faithful are acting and reacting according to the justice of the spiritual law. The prior attacks the latter and pushes him either to the suffering of repentance or the eternal suffering, while the latter may become lost and blinded by his passions or virtues

if he does not endure the tribulation and injustice in proportion to his faith (44) in Jesus Christ who should become everything to him who believes (4).

St Mark counts on the person's faith, knowledge, humility, suffering, prayer, repentance, virtues and deeds for him who wishes to keep the spiritual law. The person has to earn his points and endure his voluntary or involuntary struggles in order to be delivered from his passions and receive peace by the action of the Holy Spirit (192).

Submitted with God's grace by Deacon Jean El-Murr