

Do Not Neglect the Little Things
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Suppose you were to visit a tree farm with the some friends, and the owner took you on a tour of his operation. You first go to the fragile little seedlings, and inexplicably the owner asks you to pull one out of the ground. After questioning him, you comply and not surprisingly the seedling is removed without effort. You proceed to the saplings and the owner requests that you remove one of these as well. You again yield to his request, however odd it seems, and uproot one of the smaller saplings noticing, of course, that this time it took a pretty good tug on the plant to dislodge it. Observing that you selected one of the smallest saplings, he challenges you to try your strength on a larger one. You're able to accomplish this feat as well, though with great effort and not without some residual aches and pains. Finally he directs your attention to the mature trees and asks if you might also try your hand at uprooting one of these. Certain that he is joking you nonetheless attempt the herculean task. Unable to even budge the tree, he allows you to invite your friends to assist. Try as you might, however, the tree remains firmly rooted even with all of you heaving on it.

Abba Dorotheos of Gaza, the great sixth century ascetic and guide of souls, told just such a story to illustrate a profoundly simple point about our lives. He explains:

So it is with our evil desires: insofar as they are small to start with, we can, if we want to, cut them off with ease. If we neglect them as mere trifles they harden, and the more they harden, the more labor is needed to get rid of them. But if they grow to any degree of maturity inside us, we shall no longer be able to remove them from ourselves no matter how we labor unless we have the help of the saints interceding for us with God. (*Sayings and Discourses*, p.174, Cistercian Publications, 1977. All subsequent page references are to this text.)

The task of uprooting fragile seedlings is easy, but our tendency is to let them grow. It's for this reason that Abba Dorotheos is constantly exhorting his disciples: "Do not neglect the little things" (p. 105). It's a hard maxim to follow. "*I am always telling you,*" he writes, "that bad habits are formed in the soul by these very small things--when we say, 'What does this or that matter,'--and it is the first step to despising great things" (p.131; emphasis added).

What are the 'little things' that Abba Dorotheos has in mind? One indicator for identifying them is given by the question "What does it matter if ...?" When we notice ourselves asking that supposed rhetorical question, or any of its many variants, we are facing a matter that we have deemed to be trivial. We are intimately familiar with such deprecating questions. What does it matter if I eat this little snack? If I take a quick look at the internet? If I cut my prayers short this evening? If I don't put away these tools (or books, or garden equipment)? If I ignore the fast today? If I stretch the truth just a little bit? If I don't confess this inconsequential sin? If I just don't say it to their face? If I feel sorry for myself a little just this once? If I do it correctly next time? This type of internal self-talk permeates our lives, and it is precisely what Abba Dorotheos

warns against.

Why should we be so concerned about such little things? What makes them important? Abba Dorotheos describes how subtly the practice of trivializing the little things affects our conscience.

When we begin to say, 'What is it if I say just these few words? What does it matter if I eat this morsel? What difference if I poke my nose in here or there?' From this way of saying, 'What does this or that matter?' a man takes evil and bitter nourishment and begins presently to despise greater and more serious things and even to tread down his own conscience and so, at last destroying it, bit by bit, he falls into danger and finally becomes completely impervious to the light of conscience. (p. 105)

We regard such little things as trivial precisely because we don't believe, at least in the moment of action, that they will lead us down the slippery slope to "despising greater and more serious things." We don't believe that such small actions stifle, or even diminish, our inner resolve to act differently in the future. However, just the opposite is the case. It is precisely the small actions and thoughts that most significantly contribute to strengthening or weakening not only our inner resolve but also the very values after which we strive to pattern our lives. That is to say, our conscience is gradually either darkened or enlightened, enslaved or liberated, by our disposition toward these *seemingly* trivial matters. I say 'seemingly' because, as Abba Dorotheos writes, "There are *no* 'little things'--for when it is a question of bad habits, it is a question of a malignant ulcer" (p. 105; emphasis added).

While it may be difficult to accept this principle so strictly in the realm of our moral and spiritual development, we are very familiar with it in practical matters. We know how easy it is, for example, when we are using our tools to say "What does it matter if I just leave these tools here? I'll be back to finish this task tomorrow." Before long our tools are scattered all over the house, and we can no longer find the one we want. To make matters worse, we become quick to blame our spouse or our children since 'we always put away the tools properly.' Or, considering another common occurrence, suppose we're trying to lose a few pounds but we find ourselves saying 'what does it matter if I have this little snack or this extra dessert or this second helping, just this once?' We know how successful that is! Just as it is with these sort of common and everyday examples, so also it is with the little desires, thoughts and actions to which Abba Dorotheos draws our attention.

Consider, for example, something as trivial as glancing at a clock to see what time it is while we're praying our morning prayers. Noticing the time on the clock, it occurs to us that the kids have to be ready for the school bus in forty minutes. Plenty of time, but our mind goes to the items that need to be done to get them ready; now our mind has shifted to the day's to-do list, which in turn invites the unpleasant reminder that yesterday when we checked in on our aging father he was a little ornery because we don't stop in more often. And so it goes. Our mind is scattered, churning through the day's events while our mouths are continuing with "Our

Father,” When we come to our senses and realize that ‘our mind has been wondering,’ as we often put it, we may feel self-disappointment, frustration or guilt. But we seldom stop to reflect on how the chain of thoughts was initiated -- by something so trivial as looking at the clock. Even now, upon reflection, we may fail to believe that this was the critical turning point since surely we should be strong enough to notice the time without letting our minds be scattered. Abba Dorotheos’ contention is that *we are not*. The first step in letting God change our lives is coming to the realization, *embracing the reality*, that we are not strong enough to resist ‘the little things.’ “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5), our Lord says, and he means to include these seemingly trivial things.

If we are willing to concede the humbling truth that we are not able to control our mind, let alone our actions, once we neglect the little things, how are we to respond in such situations? In commenting on Psalm 136, Abba Dorotheos writes:

Then [the prophet in the Psalm] adds, ‘Happy the man who takes your little ones and dashes them against a rock’--as if he would say: Happy the man who seized the things generated from you, ‘the enemy,’ i.e. the evil thoughts, not giving them a chance to grow strong in him and constrain him to evil deeds, but immediately, while they are still in their infancy, before they are fed and grow strong against him, flings them down on the rock, which is Christ. In other words he utterly destroys them by taking refuge in Christ. (p.175)

We recognize this Psalm as providing the text for the penetrating hymn that we sing during Matins on the three Sundays preceding Great Lent: By the waters of Babylon. In these comments, we are given profoundly important and practical words for daily living. First, as is his repeated focus, stop thoughts when they are infants. The more trivial they seem the better since it will then be easier to halt their progress. The more we concede power to the slight urges, the more we trust in ourselves to thwart their advance. This self-confident pride becomes fertilizer to the young seedlings taking root in our minds, and thus we enter the downward spiral toward despising ever greater things.

Secondly, we are not sufficient for controlling our own tempting and distracting thoughts, *even when they are infants*. Maybe we can repress them, or hold them at bay for a while, but ultimately our only recourse for a genuine deliverance from their control is to dash them on the rock, which is Christ. We destroy them *not by battling against them ourselves*, but by taking refuge in Christ. He, and He alone, is our sanctuary and shelter, our hiding place from the enemy’s attacks. A simple “Lord, have mercy” or “O Lord, preserve and protect me; help me” will be sufficient if we turn to Him when temptations are truly infants.

Sadly, however, most of us already have developed habits of neglecting the little things, and it is hard for us to notice when we are drifting away from our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ. By the time we recognize that our mind is wandering in prayer, the state of the cares, anxieties and passions has already become a strong adolescent, not easily opposed. By

the time we notice that our thoughts are controlling us, instead of us controlling them, we have already uttered a critical or self-serving word, withheld encouragement and support to a person in need, or turned to food for comfort instead of turning to God.

Nevertheless, progress can be made. As soon as our conscience alerts us, we must respond. Prior to that, we are powerless. But at that critical moment, we can turn to Christ. As gradually and imperceptibly as we have let our conscience become blind to our drifting, so too it will be enlightened as we take refuge in Christ immediately on becoming aware of it. Over time we will, by God's grace, become aware of our straying thoughts earlier and earlier in the process, and thus they will be able to be removed with greater ease.

We cannot, however, expect that we will cease being tempted. All of the holy fathers are in agreement that we cannot completely prevent the originating thought, what they call the provocation. Maybe we see an unseemly billboard while we're driving down the road or overhear a rumor about someone. We are not able to preempt what has already entered us. Yet, once the thought is within us, it is up to us what we will do with it. If we entertain it, it will start to control us. If we bash it against the Rock, we will be delivered from its power.

Our souls are all too often scattered in this hectic and turbulent world, pulled to and fro by our subtle thoughts and desires. Yet they can be returned to us if we are willing to persevere, "for by your patient endurance you obtain your soul" (Lk 21:19). Once we become aware of how much our little urges and actions influence our patterns of thoughts and behavior, they seem like annoying little pests incessantly swarming around us. It is for this reason that Abba Dorotheos stresses the importance of constant and enduring vigilance in this battle. Consider the words he uses in this exhortation:

Let us be *zealous*, brothers, to guard our conscience for *as long as we are in this world*, and not to neglect its promptings in *anything*. And let us not tread it under foot in *the least thing*, for you can see that from *the smallest things*, which of their nature are worth little, we come to despise the great things. (p. 105; emphasis added.)

Zeal for opposing even the smallest of temptations needs to remain with us 'for as long as we are in this world.' While we may experience a measure of progress, there is no completion of the battle in this world. St. Anthony soberly reminds us, "Without temptation no one is saved," and each person should "expect to be tempted to his last breath" (*Sayings*, 5,4), as our Lord Himself was tempted to His last breath. The undertaking can be discouraging for we fail often, but Jesus instructs us "to pray at all times and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1).

Thus, when we find ourselves asking "What does it matter if ...?", we now know that *it matters a great deal*. As our holy father Dorotheos concludes:

Therefore, brothers, see to it that we do not neglect little things; see to it that we do not despise them as of no account. *There are no 'little things'*--for when it is a

question of bad habits, it is a question of a malignant ulcer. Let us live circumspectly, let us give heed to trivial matters when they are trivial, lest they become grave. Doing what is right and what is wrong: both begin from small things and advance to what is great, either good or evil. (pp. 105-6; emphasis added)

By God's grace, may it be for good.