

Seeing God, And Being Seen By Him
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As Jesus was entering Jericho He gave sight to Bartimaeus, a blind man who was begging along the side of the road. There was a large crowd following Jesus at that time, and when they saw that the blind man was healed they all gave praise to God (Lk 18:35-43; Mk 10:46-52). Surely this created quite a stir in the town, increasing people's curiosity about who this Jesus was. But Zacchaeus was not a mere curiosity seeker. St. Gregory Palamas notes that even as the blind man was longing to be released from the bondage to his physical ailments, so too Zacchaeus was longing to be released from the bondage to his spiritual ailments, from the blindness that greed produces. He longed to see the one who alone could take away his sins, the one who alone could open his spiritual eyes. St Gregory Palamas beautifully describes their meeting:

He who knows the hearts of men also sees the desire in Zacchaeus' heart, looks up, and speaks to him, and calls him by his name, although he had never set eyes on him before, in order charitably *to show His face, to make Himself known* out of kindness, to the man who longed for Him, and to make it clear that Zacchaeus not only loved but was loved." (*Homilies*, # 62, p. 513)

That moment when Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus looking down at Him, that was an eternal and mystical moment, beyond what words can describe. It is the moment for which we all yearn; it is the transformative moment in which the Lord acts--not in some generic and abstract way, but concretely and personally in us. It is where heaven meets earth, where eternity meets time, where love casts out fear and stillness silences inner turbulence: seeing God, and being seen by Him.

Jesus recognized and responded to the desire of Zacchaeus' heart. St Gregory tells us that Zacchaeus did not run from his desire to see Jesus but rather ran from the crowd that was hindering his vision (*Homilies*, #62, p. 512). We all, created in God's image and immersed in the bountiful gifts of the created world, have within us that same longing to see Jesus. The Kingdom of God truly is within us (Lk 17:21)--and it is crying out for its King. The tremendous challenge for us is to run from the crowd, from the activities and associations that impede our vision of God, and to run toward those activities and associations that nurture and cherish those seeds of desire latent within us. We have a yearning to offer thanks and glory to God for His clearly visible presence in our world; yet we are so often inclined to suppress the truth that lies within (Rom 1:17-21). It is the suppression of this inner awareness that sullies our hearts when they so need to be purified. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8).

The tangible and practical way in which we run from the crowd, from those things that obscure our spiritual vision, is by ascetic effort. As Saint Paul says of himself, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (I Cor 9:27). The core of our ascetic effort is given in the Sermon on the Mount, in a text that we read on the weekend

prior to entering Great Lent: “*When you give alms, When you pray, When you fast,*” (Mt 6:2,5,16). Our Lord does not say *if*, but *when*. These three practices are essential to placing us in a position to have our spiritual vision cleansed. These themes continue to resound throughout the hymns we sing during Lent. Almsgiving attacks our greed and selfishness. Prayer battles our discouragement, despondency and unbelief. Fasting confronts our gluttony and lusts. Running from the crowd in these ways is how we put ourselves in a position to see God.

This threefold exhortation from our Lord, however, is intended not only to focus our attention on the importance of ascetic practices but also to warn us of the ever-present dangers surrounding these practices. “Beware,” He cautions, “not to practice your righteousness before men, in order to be seen by them” (Mt 6:1). Vainglory, the desire to be seen by others, is the relentless saboteur of our ascetic effort. We long to be seen by others, to be acknowledged, appreciated, thanked, liked. We live our mental lives with a quiet but incessant background conversation imagining what others are thinking of us. Indeed, our worse enemy is not what others are in fact thinking about us, but what we think they are thinking about us. This is a tremendous trap from which we are not easily extricated. St. John Chrysostom emphasizes this self-obsession with being seen by others.

Jesus roots out what remains: the most tyrannical passion of all, the rage and madness with respect to vainglory, which springs up in them that do right. ... For this disease is by no means of random birth; but when we have duly performed many of the commandments. It behooved therefore first to implant virtue, and then to remove the passion which mars its fruit. And see with what He begins, with fasting, and prayer, and almsgiving: for in these good deeds most especially vainglory is accustomed to make its haunt. (*Homilies on Matthew*, #19)

On the one hand, we are exhorted to practice almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and on the other hand we are immediately told how dangerous these practices are. St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov) expresses the dilemma of engaging in ascetic effort while avoiding its attendant dangers.

Bodily discipline is essential in order to make the ground of the heart fit to receive the spiritual seeds and bear spiritual fruit. ... Neglect of bodily discipline makes men like animals, who give free rein and scope to their bodily passions; but excess makes men like devils and fosters the tendency to pride. ... Those who ... put all their trust in bodily discipline, seeing in it their merit and worth in God’s sight, fall into vainglory, self-opinion, presumption, pride, hardness and obduracy, contempt of their neighbors, detraction and condemnation of others, rancour, resentment, hate, blasphemy, schism, heresy, self-deception and diabolic delusion. (*The Arena*, pp. 138-9)

It is a narrow way that leads between the self-indulgent life of the beast and the self-aggrandizing life of the demon, but the one who by God’s grace navigates this narrow way reaps the true reward.

It is a repeated refrain of our Lord that those who practice their ascetic effort before others have their reward already, and will receive no reward from their Father in heaven (Mt 6:1,2,5,16). St Gregory states the matter rather soberly:

“To those who live for vainglory and not for Him, He will definitely say at the future judgment, in accordance with his words in the Gospel, “You received your reward during your lifetime,” just as Abraham said to that rich man in the flames, “Thou in thy lifetime receivest good things” (Lk 16:25). (SGP, Homily 7, p. 51)

Our Lord, however, promises that our Father in heaven will reward those who practice these things *without falling prey to vainglory* (6:4,6,18). Furthermore, He goes on to offer very practical guidance for how to combat vainglory: as much as possible, practice these ascetic works in secret. When giving alms, do not let your right hand know what your left is doing (Mt 6:3). When praying, go into your closet and shut the door (Mt 6:6). When fasting, don’t do or say anything to draw attention to yourself (Mt 6:17). This practical advice turns out to be much more challenging than at first glance for we quickly discover that we have lost motivation to perform the activities. We are no longer so interested in giving or praying or fasting when we are invisible to others’ eyes and ears. And in this way it is revealed to us just how vainglorious we are--how much we depend on being seen and appreciated for our most fundamental spiritual motivations. This, then, is where the ascetic struggle to purify our inner life truly begins. Having had our unrighteous thoughts and motivations brought to our awareness, we can now persevere in confessing these sins to God and letting him cleanse us from all our unrighteousness (I Jn 1:9).

As we noted earlier, if we are able to travel through this narrow way by engaging in ascetic practices in secret, navigating between beastly self-indulgence and demonic self-advertisement, then there awaits for us not a reward given by men but by our heavenly Father (Mt 6:4,6,18). What is this reward? St. John Chrysostom describes it for us:

Setting for him a great and august assemblage of spectators, and what He desires, that very thing bestowing on him in great abundance. “For what,” He asks, “do you wish? Is it not to have some to be spectators of what is going on? Behold then, you have some; not angels, nor archangels, but the God of all. (*Homilies on Matthew*, #19)

We will be seen, St. John says, not by men, nor by angels nor archangels, but by God Himself. How beautiful this is. In the quietness of our secret acts, where no one else can see us, we will experience the eyes of God on us. Our desire to be seen by others is not so much a desire that is to be destroyed as it is a misdirected desire that must be reoriented. It is the perversion of the desire to be seen by God. And the way to redirect our desire is to isolate ourselves from those contexts in which we seek after approval from anyone other than God Himself. If we are diligent on this path, it will be a tortuous process. But just as Zacchaeus’ longing to see Jesus caused him to run away from the crowd and be in place to be seen by Jesus, so too our longing to see God can move us to engage in the ascetic practices in secret and thereby come to experience the reward of the heavenly Father’s eyes upon us.

This interpretive insight is not limited to Chrysostom; St. Gregory Palamas echoes and elaborates upon it:

Let us imitate David, brethren, and not only turn our backs on lush and dissipated living, but undertake fasts, psalmody and prayers, *as if God were present and watching*. We know that

fasting, psalmody and prayer by themselves cannot save us, but carrying them out *before God* can. For *when the Lord's eyes are upon us* they sanctify us, as the sun warms everything upon which it shines. (*Homilies*, # 9, pp. 63)

This is yet another beautiful image: as sun warms everything it shines on so our Lord's eyes sanctify us. It is not our ascetic effort that purifies us. That is merely running away from the crowd and climbing a tree; it places us into a position to be seen by God, to have His eyes on us. But it is His sanctifying eyes that purify us, cleansing our spiritual sight, and opening our eyes to see Him. It is misleading to think of purifying ourselves so that we can see God. Rather, we strive with all the longing of Zacchaeus to put ourselves into a position to see Him, but only in time and by His grace do we become aware of His sanctifying eyes on us--we see Him because He sees us. It is a great mystery--no less so than it was for Zacchaeus.

St Gregory continues with practical and sober advice:

When our understanding gazes intently on God and, while looking towards Him, fasts, sings psalms and prayers, then we are carrying out these actions before God. If during prayer and psalmody our mind is sometimes directed toward God and sometimes slips away and floats about, it is necessary to realize that we have not yet dedicated ourselves completely to God and that the purpose behind our actions is not wholly in accordance with the law of the Lord. The more we fall short in righteous works, *the less we are able to remain in God's sight*. (*Homilies*, # 9, pp. 63-4)

St Gregory's point is not to make us discouraged, but rather to remind us that the process of purification is a long road. He calls us to recognize the indications of our incomplete dedication to God, to admit them before God, and to let that confession be the occasion for yet closer communion with Him. We need not be dishearten but rather encouraged to continue traveling the narrow way for the one who endures to the end will be saved (Mt 10:22; Mt 24:13; Mk 13:10).

I once asked a contemporary spiritual elder how to stop thinking about people looking at me. He replied with such loving gentleness, "Oh Father, no one is looking at you. The only eyes that are on you are God's. And He's looking at you from inside your heart." I didn't know at the time that this spiritual insight was the continuing echo of earlier holy fathers, with a little addition: that God looks at us from inside our hearts. The ascetic fathers often understand Christ's command to enter one's closet to pray as a command to enter the closet of one's own heart. Separating ourselves from others to pray is simply to remove ourselves from the distractions that make finding our heart so difficult. So it is here, in the heart, when we can free ourselves from outer and inner disturbances, that we can meet God: see Him, and be seen by Him.

Even though I yearned for such a truth to be true of me, my focus was sadly on the distraction, "What do you mean no one is looking at me? All sorts of people are!" In time, however, I recalled an interpretation from St. John Chrysostom in quite a different context--or maybe not so different at all. In commenting on the Lord's description of His return, saying "the sun shall be darkened" (Mt 24:29), St

John has this to say:

But how does He come? The very creation being then transfigured, for “the sun shall be darkened,” not destroyed, *but overcome by the light of His presence*; ... “Then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in Heaven;” that is, *the cross being brighter than the sun*, since this last will be darkened, and hide himself, and that will appear when it would not appear, unless it were far brighter than the beams of the sun. (*Homilies on Matthew*, # 76.3)

What a stunning and powerful image St. John provides. The sun does not burn out, but its light cannot even be noticed in the presence of the radiant and bright beauty of our Lord’s appearing. The light of God’s presence outshines everything else, and everything is overcome through the divine light. So too, when we enter our closets and experience God’s eyes on us, His sanctifying gaze darkens the gaze of all others, and extinguishes our thoughts about their thoughts, overcoming the tyrannical passion of vainglory.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us run with Zacchaeus from those things that obstruct our vision; let us secretly climb into the closet of our heart; and let us patiently wait for our heavenly Father to come and shine His sanctifying eyes upon us -- from within our hearts. Let Him alone fulfill the deepest longings nestled within us.

STUFF I REMOVED

Being rewarded *openly*

Let your light shine before others in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify God.

The Lord has sown seeds in our heart in diverse ways, but the purity of our heart is so often compromised by its hardness, rocks and weeds. These are not conditions that nurture and cherish the seeds. What are we to do to cultivate the soil in our hearts? St Ignatius (Brianchaninov) answers:

The man who would take it into his head to cultivate his land without using farm implements would have a heavy labour expenditure and would labour in vain. Just so, he who wants to acquire virtues without bodily discipline will labour in vain and waste his time without reward and without return, will exhaust his spiritual and physical powers, and will gain nothing. (*The Arena*, p. 138)

By “bodily discipline” St. Ignatius means practices like almsgiving, praying and fasting. **(not quite right--he doesn't include almsgiving and prayer among *bodily* disciples.; transition???)**

The mind is cleansed and adorned by prayer and knowledge, anger by meekness, and desire by chasity. But fasting and self-control lull the stirrings of the body and quench the raging of anger and desire. They make the understanding like a clear, cloudless sky, cleansing it from the rising vapors which result from large quantities of food and the melancholy which they cause.” (SGP, Homily 9, p. 61)

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*. 25 And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for* an imperishable *crown*. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. 27 But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (I Cor 9:24-27)

Paradoxically, these ascetic practices more often than not operate by heightening our awareness of the impure urges within us. They are like heat applied to silver that brings the dross to the surface. What we do with the dross once it is on the surface determines whether this process is a purifying process or not. One in which we refuse to run from our desire to see Jesus but rather run from these <blanks> that cloud our vision.

Listen to the words of our Lord elsewhere; vainglory impedes our belief: “How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (Jn 5:44).

Vainglory obstructs our confession: “[M]any even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (Jn 12:42-43). And, as St John of the Ladder writes, vainglory is so hard to avoid(?):

Like the sun which shines on all alike, vainglory beams on every occupation. What i mean is this. I fast, and turn vainglorious. I stop fasting so that I will draw not attention to myself, and I become vainglorious for my prudence. I dress well or badly, and am vainglorious in either case. I talk or I hold my peace, and each time I am defeated. No matter how I shed this prickly thing, a spike remains to stand up against me. (p. 202)

Zacchaeus desired to see Jesus. His efforts put him into a position not only to see Him, but to be seen by Him. This occasioned a profound and life-changing encounter; one that is available to all who are willing to position themselves as Zacchaeus did.