

Gentleness with Ourselves

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12
Psalm 34
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

There are numerous sites on the internet offering concrete steps to holiness. There is a website offering “18 Steps to Holiness,” and another offering “12 Steps to Holiness.” Other websites offer 10 steps, 9 steps, 8 steps and 7 steps to holiness (apparently, no one is offering 11 steps to holiness). Still other websites offer 6 steps, 5 steps, 4 steps, 3 steps, and 2 steps to holiness. Initially, I drawn to the “Two Steps to Holiness,” because it sounded the easiest (and no one seems to be offering “1 Step to Holiness”). However, I found out that behind the façade of simplicity in the “Two Steps to Holiness” was a lack of spiritual substance. This left me with the question—how many steps are there to holiness?

I have good news and bad news. The bad news is—I have no idea how many steps there truly are to holiness. The good news is—I know that one of those steps involves gentleness! Last week, we looked at the importance of gentleness in our life. This week, I invite us to look at the importance of our being *gentle with ourselves*, especially regarding our sinfulness. Many spiritual writers suggest that such gentleness is an essential step toward holiness.

Father Jacques Philippe, in his book, Searching for and Maintaining Peace, writes, “True repentance and a true desire to correct our faults... [are] always gentle, peaceful, and trustful.”¹ Most Christians, however, do not approach repentance and holiness with gentleness and peace. Instead, we approach them with self-reliance, aggression, and anger. Relying upon our own determination, we aggressively try to rid ourselves of sin and we get angry at ourselves for falling into the same sins over and over. If this pattern continues in our lives, then we usually find ourselves frustrated, sad, and, eventually, hopeless.

This pattern reveals that we mistakenly understand holiness to mean “perfection,” which has to do with *actions*, when in reality holiness is about *relationship*—primarily our relationship with God, but also with ourselves and other people. When we understand holiness in this way, then the proper response to our sinfulness is not anger or aggression, but rather, a peaceful, gentle, swift turning back to God. In the words of Father Philippe—

It is not so much a question of making superhuman efforts to completely eliminate our imperfections and our sins... as it is a question of knowing how, as quickly as possible, to recapture our peace when we have fallen into sin or have been troubled by the experience of our imperfections...²

In order for us to be gentle with ourselves in the midst of our sinfulness, we must grow in our awareness of being “loved sinners.” This was an extremely important concept in the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The first week of his Spiritual Exercises is directed toward helping retreatants experience the freedom and hope of being loved sinners. The only way this can happen is by separating holiness and love from the hope of perfection. Thankfully, Scripture explains this separation. In Paul’s letter to the Romans we read, “God proves his love for us in that *while we were still sinners* Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, *emphasis mine*). God’s greatest act of love for us—His death on a cross—was the product, not of our perfection, but of

¹ Jacques Philippe. Searching for and Maintaining Peace, Society of St. Paul, 2002, pg. 64).

² Ibid. pg. 57

His perfect love. As long as we mistakenly believe that we are only loved and holy when we eliminate sin, then we will always be slaves to our failed attempts at perfection. However, once we know ourselves to be loved sinners, then we experience a new freedom and hope to let God's grace lead us in holiness.

Loved sinners are people who are gentle with themselves. Rather than beating themselves up for sinning, they humbly and swiftly return to God. In the words of Father Philippe, "The sign of spiritual progress is not so much never falling [into sin] as it is being able to lift oneself up quickly after one falls."³ Gently and swiftly turning back to God after sin is far more pleasing to Him than inwardly or outwardly becoming violent towards ourselves, which is actually a subtle form of pride.

Understanding ourselves to be loved sinners also deepens the gift of gratitude in us. We become more and more grateful at how God uses everything—EVERYTHING—as a tool for our salvation, including our sinfulness. Saint Augustine, when he quoted St. Paul's statement, "We know that all things work for good for those who love God," added the words, "even sins" (Romans 8:28a).

By our own efforts, we cannot overcome sin. It is purely God's grace. This does not, however, invite us into moral laxity or spiritual resignation, but rather, it is an invitation for us to cooperate with what God is doing and it is a profound invitation into an inner gentleness with ourselves in the midst of our sinful struggles.⁴

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read Luke 15:1-32, the parable of the Prodigal Son. How gentle were the two sons toward the sinfulness that is described in the parable? Now, pay close attention to the *gentleness* of the father as he welcomes home his son, the "loved sinner."
- ✚ Read Romans 5:3-8. Notice how it reminds us that God uses EVERYTHING to draw us closer to Himself. Also, take some time in prayer to recall the worst sin you ever committed. Let yourself feel the shame and guilt of that moment. Then, pay attention to what happens in your heart when you realize that it was at the moment of your greatest sinfulness that Christ chose to lovingly die on the cross for you. Share with God what happens in your heart.

³ Ibid. pg. 64

⁴ Adrian Van Kaam, in his book, *Spirituality and the Gentle Life*, wrote, "The true spiritual person expects spiritual growth from God alone. The pseudo-spiritual person sees holiness not primarily as one's gratuitous transformation by the Divine but as a feat of self-mastery" (1994, pg. 117).