

# FROM STEP 15 OF THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT: CHASTITY

by St. John Climacus



TO BE CHASTE is to put on the nature of an incorporeal being. Chastity is a supernatural denial of what one is by nature, so that a mortal and corruptible body is competing in a truly marvelous way with incorporeal spirits. A chaste man is someone who has driven out bodily love by means of divine love, who has used heavenly fire to quench the fires of the flesh.

A chaste man is completely oblivious to the difference between bodies.

Anyone trained in chastity should give himself no credit for any achievements, for a man cannot conquer what he actually is. When nature is overcome, it should be admitted that this is due to Him Who is above nature, since it cannot be denied that the weaker always yields to the stronger.

The beginning of chastity is refusal to consent to evil thoughts and occasional dreams and emissions. The middle stage is to be free of dreams and emissions even when there are natural movements of the body brought on by eating too much. The completion of chastity comes when mortified thoughts are followed by a mortified body.

The chaste man is not someone with a body undefiled but rather a person whose members are in complete subjection to the soul, for a man is great who is free of passion even when touched, though greater still is the man unhurt by all he has looked on. Such a man has truly mastered the fires of earthly beauty by his attention concentrated on the beauties of heaven. In driving off this dog by means of prayer he is like someone who has been fighting a lion. He who subdues it by resistance to it is someone still chasing an enemy. But the man who has managed to reduce its hold completely, even when he himself is still in this life, is someone who has already risen from the dead.

The man who struggles against this enemy by sweat and bodily hardships is like someone who has tied his adversary with a reed. If he fights him with temperance, sleeplessness, and keeping watch, it is as if he had put fetters on him. If he fights with humility, calmness, and thirst, it is as though he had killed the enemy and buried him in sand, the sand being lowliness since it does nothing to feed the passions, and is only earth and ashes.

One man keeps this tormentor under control by struggling hard, another by being humble, another by divine revelation. The first is like the star of the morning, the second like the moon when it is full, the third like the blazing sun. And all three have their home in heaven. Light comes from the dawn and amid light the sun rises,

so let all that has been said be the light in which to meditate and learn.

So long as you live, never trust that clay of which you are made and never depend on it until the time you stand before Christ Himself.

Among beginners lapses usually occur because of high living, something that, together with arrogance, brings down also those who have made some progress. But among those nearing perfection, a lapse is solely due to the fact of passing judgment on one's neighbor.

Pity the man who falls, but pity twice over the man who causes another to lapse, for he carries the burden of both as well as the weight of the pleasure tasted by the other.

Do not imagine that you will overwhelm the demon of fornication by entering into an argument with him. Nature is on his side and he has the best of the argument. So the man who decides to struggle against the flesh and to overcome it by his own efforts is fighting

in vain. The truth is that unless the Lord overturns the house of the flesh and builds the house of the soul, the man wishing to overcome it has watched and fasted for nothing. Offer up to the Lord the weakness of your nature. Admit your incapacity and, without your knowing it, you will win for yourself the gift of chastity.

Everything created longs insatiably for its own kind, blood for blood, the worm for a worm, clay for clay. And what does flesh desire if not flesh?

So let us pray that we may always escape from such a trial because those who slide into the pit fall far below those others climbing up and down the ladder. And they have to sweat copiously and practice extreme abstinence if they are ever to get far enough out of that pit to be able to start the climb again.

The Lord, being incorruptible and incorporeal, rejoices in the purity and cleanliness of our bodies. As for the demons, nothing is said to please them more than the foul smell of fornication, and nothing delights them as much as the defilement of the body.

Chastity makes us as familiar with God and as like Him as any man may be.

The mother of chastity is stillness and obedience. Often the dispassion of body attained by stillness has been disturbed whenever the world impinged on it. But dispassion achieved through obedience is genuine and is everywhere unshakable.

I have seen humility emerge from pride, and I thought of the man who said: "Who has fathomed the mind of the Lord?" (Rom. 11:34). The pit and the fruit of arrogance is a fall; but a fall is often an occasion of humility for those willing to profit by it.



The man who observes himself succumbing to some passion should first of all fight against this, especially if it has made its abode with him, for until this particular vice is wiped out it will be useless for us to have mastered other passions. Kill this Egyptian and we will surely have sight of God in the bush of humility (cf. Exod. 2:12; 3:2).

When the devil decides to forge some disgraceful bond between two people, he goes to work on the inclinations of each of them--and then lights the fire of passion.

The body can be defiled by the merest touch, for of all the senses this is the most dangerous. So think of the man who wrapped his hand in an ecclesiastical garment when he was about to carry his sick mother. Let your hand be dead to everything natural otherwise, to your own body or to that of another.

We have to be especially sober and watchful when we are lying in bed, for that is the time when our mind has to contend with demons outside our bodies. And if our body is inclined to be sensual it will easily betray us. So let the remembrance of death and the concise Jesus Prayer go to sleep with you and get up with you, for nothing helps you as these do when you are asleep.

Never brood by day over the fantasies that have occurred to you during sleep, for the aim of the demons is to defile us while we are still awake by causing us to harp on our dreams.

The place of temptation is the place where we find ourselves having to put up a bitter fight against the enemy, and wherever we are not involved in a struggle is surely the place where the enemy is posing as a friend.

We should strive in all possible ways neither to see nor to hear of that fruit we have vowed never to taste. It amazes me to think we could imagine ourselves to be stronger than the prophet David, something quite impossible indeed (cf. 2 Kings [2 Sam.] 11:2-4).

After we have fought long and hard against this demon, this ally of the flesh, after we have driven it out of our heart, torturing it with the stone of fasting and the sword of humility, this scourge goes into hiding in our bodies, like some kind of worm, and it tries to pollute us, stimulating us to irrational and untimely movements. This particularly happens to those who have fallen to the demon of vainglory, for since dirty thoughts no longer preoccupy their hearts they fall victim to pride.

This demon is especially on the lookout for our weak moments and will viciously assail us when we are physically unable to pray against it.

Who has won the battle over the body? The man who is contrite of heart. And who is contrite of heart? The man who has denied himself, for how can he fail to be contrite of heart if he has died to his own will?

Dirty and shameful thoughts in the heart are usually caused by the deceiver of the heart, the demon of

fornication, and only restraint and indeed a disregard for them will prove an antidote.

By what rule or manner can I bind this body of mine? By what precedent can I judge him? Before I can bind him he is let loose, before I can condemn him I am reconciled to him, before I can punish him I bow down to him and feel sorry for him. How can I hate him when my nature disposes me to love him? How can I break away from him when I am bound to him forever? How can I escape from him when he is going to rise with me? How can I make him incorrupt when he has received a corruptible nature? How can I argue with him when all the arguments of nature are on his side?

If I try to bind him through fasting, then I am passing judgment on my neighbor who does not fast--with the result that I am handed over to him again. If I defeat him by not passing judgment I turn proud--and I am in thrall to him once more. He is my helper and my enemy, my assistant and my opponent, a protector and a traitor. I am kind to him and he assaults me. If I wear him out he gets weak. If he has a rest he becomes unruly. If I upset him he cannot stand it. If I mortify him I endanger myself. If I strike him down I have nothing left by which to acquire virtue. I embrace him. And I turn away from him.

What is this mystery in me? What is the principle of this mixture of body and soul? How can I be my own friend and my own enemy? Speak to me! Speak to me, my yoke-fellow, my nature! I cannot ask anyone else about you. How can I remain uninjured by you? How can I escape the danger of my own nature? I have made a promise to Christ that I will fight you, yet how can I defeat your tyranny? But this I have resolved, namely, that I am going to master you.

And this is what the flesh might say in reply: "I will never tell you what you do not already know. I will speak the knowledge we both have. Within me is my begetter, the love of self. The fire within me is past ease and things long done. I conceived and give birth to sins, and they when born beget death by despair in their turn. And yet if you have learned the sure and rooted weakness within both you and me, you have manacled my hands. If you starve your longings, you have bound my feet, and they can travel no further. If you have taken up the yoke of obedience, you have cast my yoke aside. If you have taken possession of humility, you have cut off my head.

This is the fifteenth reward of victory. He who has earned it while still alive has died and been resurrected. From now on he has a taste of the immortality to come.

**O Mary, Conceived without original sin, make my body pure and my soul holy. Hail Mary...**  
(3 times morning & night)

