



WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP

On the Love of Solitude and Silence: Thomas a Kempis

Choose a suitable time for recollection and frequently consider the loving-kindness of God. Do not read to satisfy curiosity or to pass the time, but study such things as move your heart to devotion. If you avoid unnecessary talk and aimless visits, listening to news and gossip, you will find plenty of suitable time to spend in meditation on holy things.

The greatest Saints used to avoid the company of men (Heb. 11:38) whenever they were able, and chose rather to serve God in solitude. A wise man once said `As often as I have been among men, I have returned home a lesser man. (Seneca, Epist. VII)

We often share this experience, when we spend much time in conversation. It is easier to keep silence altogether than not to talk more than we should. It is easier to remain quietly at home than to keep due watch over ourselves in public.

Therefore, whoever is resolved to live an inward and spiritual life must, with Jesus, withdraw from the crowds (Mark 6:31). No man can live in the public eye without risk to his soul, unless he who would prefer to remain obscure. No man can safely speak unless he would gladly remain silent. No man can safely command, unless he has learned to obey well. No man can safely rejoice, unless he possesses the testimony of a good conscience.

The security of the Saints was grounded in the fear of God, nor were they less careful and humble because they were resplendent in great virtues and graces. But the security of the wicked springs from pride and presumption, and ends in self-deception. Never promise yourself security in this life, even though you seem to be a good monk or a devout hermit.

Those who stand highest in the esteem of men are most exposed to grievous peril, since they often have too great a confidence in themselves. It is therefore, more profitable to many that they should not altogether escape temptations, but be often assailed lest they become too secure and exalted in their pride, or turn too readily to worldly consolations. How good a conscience would he keep if a man never sought after passing pleasures nor became preoccupied with worldly affairs! If only a man could cast aside all useless anxiety and think only on divine and salutary things, how great would be his peace and tranquillity!

No one is worthy of heavenly comfort, unless they have diligently exercised themselves in holy contrition. If you desire heartfelt contrition, enter into your room, and shut out the clamour of the world, as it is written, `Commune with your own heart, and in your chamber, and be still (Ps. 4:4; Isa. 26:20). Within your cell you will discover what you will only too often lose abroad. The cell that is dwelt in continually becomes a delight, but ill kept it breeds weariness of spirit. If in the beginning of your religious life you have dwelt in it and kept it well, it will later become a dear friend and a welcome comfort.

In silence and quietness the devout soul makes progress and learns the hidden mysteries of the Scriptures (Ecclus. 39:1-3). There she finds floods of tears in which she may nightly wash and be cleansed (Ps. 6:6). For the further she withdraws from all the tumult of the world, the nearer she draws to her Maker. For God with His holy angels will draw near to him who withdraws himself from his friends and acquaintances. It is better to live in obscurity and to seek the salvation of his soul, than to neglect this even to work miracles. It is commendable in a Religious, therefore, to go abroad but seldom, to avoid being seen, and to have no desire to see men.

Why do you long to see that which is not lawful for you to possess? The world itself passes away, and all the desires of it (John 2:17). The desires of the senses call you to roam abroad, but when their hour is spent, what do you bring back but a burdened conscience and a distracted heart? A cheerful going out often brings a sad home-coming, and a merry evening brings a sorry morning. For every bodily pleasure brings joy at first, but at length it bites and destroys. (Prov. 23:31,32)

What can you see elsewhere that you cannot see here (Ecclus. 1:10)? Look at the sky, the earth, and all the elements, for of these all things are made. What can you see anywhere under the sun that can endure for long? You hope, perhaps to find complete satisfaction; but this you will never do. Were you to see all things at present in existence spread out before your eyes, what would it be but an unprofitable vision (Ecclus. 2:11)? Lift up your eyes to God on high, (Ps. 121:1; Isa. 40:26) and beg forgiveness for your sin and neglectfulness. Leave empty matters to the empty-headed, and give your attention to those things that God commands you. Shut your door upon you, (Matt. 6:6; Isa. 26:20) and call upon Jesus the Beloved. Remain with Him in your cell, for you will not find so great a peace anywhere else. Had you never gone out and listened to idle talk, you would the better have remained perfectly at peace. But if it pleases you to hear the news of the world, you must always suffer disquiet of heart as a result.

