

92. Said

My dear Jacques, you are right in thinking that to become a man of prayer, one must discipline his instincts, put order in his priorities, and attain interior unity. Does this mean that before beginning the practice of mental prayer, one must have attained perfect self-mastery? I am less convinced of this than you. But before presenting my point of view, I'd like you to read the letter a friend sent me twenty years ago, and that I recently found. I am copying it down for you:

"Here I am again, after many long years of absence in this North African city I love so much. There is the joy of seeing relatives again, of renewing friendships, of encountering smiling faces. I wake up in the morning to see palm trees swaying in the wind, and ancient stones gilded by the sun. During the day I shake a thousand hands.

"In the confusion of my arrival, I had a surprise. Said, my old Said, came to welcome me with the classical wish: '*Ahlan oua sah'lan.*' It is not surprising that he has remained in our family's service for twenty-five years. It was something else that surprised me. I had known him to be quarrelsome, vindictive, brutal, a women-chaser, and an incorrigible drinker. Today he is gentle, patient, and humble. He does not raise his voice. His gestures are sober and deliberate. A certain indefinable and inexpressible serenity emanates from him.

"To clear up the mystery, I questioned Said a few days later, as our long friendship allowed. He answered, 'God willed it. God willed that.' That was all. He didn't explain. Said knows my religion and sincerely respects it, but he will not let me penetrate into his inner life.

"Not content with such an evasive explanation, I went to his home one morning. He lives in the heart of the Arab Quarter, in one of those houses with whitewashed walls. He lives with his wife Zohra and the abandoned child he adopted. It is a strange oasis of peace and order, contrasting with the hubbub of the neighborhood. It was eight o'clock. I went to Said's room but, contrary to the laws of Oriental hospitality, he made no effort to welcome me. He was at prayer. I later discovered that Said did not limit himself to the five daily ritual prayers, but spent considerable time in prayer or meditation besides. Was this his secret, the explanation of his transformation?

"While I waited for Said, I was told that he begins to pray everyday at dawn, and then goes out to work until mid-afternoon. Once back home, he resumes his prayer. During this time the whole household keeps silence. Only afterward does the coming and going of visitors begin. Said is known in his neighborhood, and his neighbors come to ask his advice. He settles the myriad daily quarrels that are submitted to his arbitration. He does not allow anyone to publicly give him the title of 'sheikh' to which he has a right. However, he is unanimously respected, and is surrounded with more attentions than a venerable marabout. He is always ready to chat, and his words are filled with a wisdom and gentleness that amaze anyone who knew the Said of earlier days. At night he prays again at length before going to sleep. He spends not less than five hours with his God during the course of a day.

“When Said had finished praying he came to me, invited me into a tiny drawing room, and offered me the traditional cup of coffee. In a word, he received me with all the refinements of exquisite Oriental hospitality.

“After leaving him, I returned homeward slowly. It was my turn to meditate....”

Do you understand why I wanted you to read this letter? It clearly shows that Said’s prayer life is the source of the transformation of his character and of his moral life, and not the reverse. My friend made no mistake about it. I grant you that self-mastery is necessary to anyone who wants to progress in mental prayer. But prayer is even more necessary in order to arrive at self-mastery. Indeed, I greatly fear that if you wait until you have acquired self-mastery before you devote yourself to mental prayer, you may never succeed in either.

Anyway, the expression “self-mastery,” that you use, seems open to debate. A Christian has better things to do than to aspire to self-mastery. He should rather be striving to let God have mastery over him. Consider Said. Do you think that if he had merely attained self-mastery, he would have had this magnetic influence on those around him? Through his transformed and pacified personality, the presence of Another within him shone forth and attracted.

Seek God, surrender your spirit to the growing dominion of his love, and you will soon discover that order and peace will take root within you. St. Augustine vigorously and clearly expresses this great law of the spiritual life:

It is fitting that the inferior be subject to the superior. He who wants to dominate what is inferior to himself, must submit to what is superior to himself. Your own submission is to God, and the flesh (and all its inclinations) must submit to you. What could be more just? What could be more beautiful? You are subject to what is greater than you. If you break the first law: “You owe submission to God,” then the second law will never be carried out: “The flesh owes submission to you.”

There is a privileged means for achieving the submission to God of our whole being. It is mental prayer. Said bears witness to it, as have countless Christians over the centuries.