
CONFESSION: THE SACRAMENT OF FREEDOM

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WEEK 5 ~ Watchfulness: The Real Journey

I. Introduction

- How do you live a life grounded in the sacrament of Confession?
- “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” ~ *I Peter 5:8*
- Exploring Watchfulness (*Nepsis*), the key to spiritual life

II. The Nous: The Inner Person

- The inner self
 - “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day” (II Corinthians 4:16)
 - The Fathers call this the Nous – the deep center of who you are
 - The inner bride chamber, the place where you and God meet in intimacy
 - The lens through which we may see God
- The problem
 - The lens gets clouded up (“The pure in heart shall see God” ~ Mat. 5:8).
 - Our heart gets darkened and needs purification
 - Forgetfulness – The greatest sin
- The solution
 - Watchfulness (*Nepsis*)
 - “There is in the mind a deep center where the whole person converges...to be present to God in our prayer life means to be watchful of what is taking place in our being” (film).

III. Nepsis: Awareness of One’s Thoughts and Heart

- What is it?
 - “The word “*nepsis*” comes from “*nepho*,” which means to be sleepless, to guard, to inspect, examine, watch over, keep under surveillance. All these things the fathers sum up in one continuous attention to the nous.” ~ *Fr. Coniaris*

- “The guarding of the nous is a ‘watchtower commanding a view over our whole spiritual life.’” ~ Hierotheos Vlachos
- Thoughts bring us down or up
 - “a thought...may...attack us, may pollute us, may pleasure us, and is able to render us worthy of hell. A heavenly thought, a thought of self-denial, a brave thought a thought of prayer and the vision of God, makes us worthy to draw near the Divine throne and to taste of heavenly things. By the thoughts either we will become unclean or we will become better. The beginning of sins starts with the thoughts.” ~ *Elder Ephraim of Philotheou*
- Watchfulness allows prayers to go up
 - “And when the man is rendered pure through watchfulness and spiritual works, his prayers have boldness before God, they cross the sky, they go beyond the stars, they pass through the heavens and draw near to the Divine Throne of Grace, where the blessings of God are granted. And this being the case, the man at prayer is enriched by the grace of God.” ~ *Elder Ephraim of Philotheou*

IV. The Story of Abba Paphnoutios

- “Abba Paphnoutios, a great desert father, was going along one day on his way and there he saw two men committing some sin. The thought of his passion said: “Look what great evil they are doing!” The eye saw them and immediately the thought flared up, trying thereby to attack the purity of the Saint’s soul by judging the brother or also by his being tempted. Having watchfulness, however, he was being vigilant, immediately his mind was enlightened and he said to his thought, “They are sinning today, I will sin tomorrow. They will repent, but I know myself to be a hard man, unrepentant, egotistical, and thus, I won’t repent. I will be punished since I am worse than these two. And what do I have to do about these careless sinners, since I am a much greater sinner and more passionate?” And speaking in this manner and putting a lock on the provocation of sin, he was saved and didn’t judge the brothers who were sinning... But his thought said that they were in fact sinning, he saw them. In spite of these things, however, even though the thought was spoken to him, the correct thought triumphed and thereby he escaped the shipwreck of his soul.”

V. Attuned to Our Hearts Like a Mother to Her Baby

- To be present – to be Aware
 - “Nepsis means to be completely present to where we are, just as the mother has an attentive ear to the least sound of the baby in the crib even as she talks on the phone or vacuums the rug.” ~ *Anthony Coniaris*
- Nepsis is the act of being attentive to the heart.
 - Watching and observing the thoughts in your head
- Guard your heart
 - At every hour and moment let us guard the heart with all diligence from thoughts that obscure the soul’s mirror. For in that mirror Jesus Christ, the wisdom and power of God the Father is illuminously reflected.” ~ *St. Philotheos*

VI. Keep Your Finger on the Trigger

- “We should take care to become better, that is, we should be vigilant to always have our hand on the trigger. With the first appearance of the enemy, we should shoot. As soon as an evil thought comes to us, immediately knock it down. A dirty image comes, immediately spoil it. We shouldn’t allow it to become more vivid in colors and in appearance, because thereby we will come to immediate difficulty. When the evil is struck at the root, it is impossible to sprout and to increase. When this struggle comes about with diligence, we will cleanse our soul and thereby we will be found clean and with boldness before God.” ~ *Elder Ephraim*

VII. Killing the Baobabs

- The Axe
 - “Watchfulness is described as the axe which shatters the large trees, hitting their roots.”
- *The Little Prince*
 - **Life on the asteroid** > The Prince is a young boy who lives up on an asteroid, so far away that no one has yet discovered it. The asteroid is his entire world, though so small that you can walk all the way across it in only a few steps. But unlike just any asteroid, this one’s unique, because it has a rose on it. One single rose grows there, which is the sole love and affection of the Little Prince
 - **The baobabs** > But it’s not an easy life, because on that asteroid there’s the constant threat of a weed called baobabs. The baobabs start out as tiny sprouts that seem innocent enough, but the minute you stop paying attention, they take root and before long, they become giant trees that drain the asteroid of all its nutrients. If the Prince were to slack from his gardening for only a day or two, he could be sure that those baobabs would cover the whole planet and destroy his precious rose.
 - *Now isn’t this a bit like our souls?*
- **Temptations come in tiny thoughts**
 - A person says one word that really annoys you.
 - At first it’s nothing, but you allow an angry thought to take root in your mind – maybe you play around with it – maybe tease it a little and nurse it.
 - In no time at all, you’ve come to hate that person.
 - You come to church and try to pray, but as mass goes on all you can hear are the conversations in your head, imagining this or that which he said, or might have said, or could possibly say in the future – and all of a sudden, you can’t take it any more, the exit doors are too inviting.
- **Demons**
 - The loser demons linger about, waiting for any chance to catch us off guard, and then they fire their arrows, those small, subtle thoughts that enter our heads and tempt us. *Nip the baobabs in the bud.*

- **The airplanes**
 - Thoughts are like airplanes – let them fly over, don't flag them down!
 - “If we don't allow a logismos to land inside the depths of our hearts and minds, then even if we see it and hear it, even if it bothers us for awhile by its presence, we should never be afraid of it. We must not wail and beat our chests because an airplane passed over the roof of our house. Only when that airplane crashes on our house should we worry” ~ *Fr. Maximos*

VIII. Never Try This on Your Own

- We need one another
- We need a spiritual father
 - “Tell everything to your spiritual father, and the Lord will have mercy on you and you will escape delusion. But if you think that you know more about the spiritual life than your spiritual father, and you stop telling him everything about yourself in confession, then you will immediately be allowed to fall into some sort of delusion, in order that you may be corrected.” ~ *St. Silouan the Athonite*
- This is the foundation of life in all Orthodox cultures

IX. Watchfulness Brings us to Confession

- “When our soul lives carelessly without watching over its thoughts, it will consequently fill up with dirty and sly thoughts. As a result, people start developing psychological problems which gradually pile up.... Some people, while they are found in this situation and come face to face with the problem itself, they do not realize it, and thus are unable to humbly confess to their spiritual father their fall. Instead, they look for a “secular” solution and consult a psychiatrist... The only solution is to become aware of the problem and confess it to a spiritual father and then humbly follow his advice.” ~ *Elder Paisius*
- “This spiritual attention becomes light and as light, illumines the path. And an illumined path of watchfulness is also a path to sacred confession. The attention illumines it, which urges the man to settle his account with God. And he is guided by the light of watchfulness to this great mystery [the sacrament of confession] and there he deposits the entire debt, all the uncleanness of sins. He enters into this bath and he comes out entirely clean. And I say that we must have much joy in our souls when we are accounted worthy to come into this bath. We must celebrate and thank the Lord who allowed this bath on earth, who allowed this authority of “binding and loosing.” Whatever things your spiritual father looses, God also looses. Whatever the representative of God forgives, the Lord also forgives.” ~ *Elder Ephraim*

X. How Can We Live This Out in the Modern World?

- Something to think about...