

Following Christ without anxiety or hesitation.

Applying spiritual solutions to all problems

Concerning monastic books, and strong language.

Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 02.01, On Detachment

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/ladder-02-01_2018+detachment-and-freedom-from-anxiety-or-hesitation+strong-words-in-prayer.doc

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The “Ladder of Divine Ascent” is my favorite book. I read every Great Lent, and new things come out of my reading every year. Much of this book is specifically written to monks, and some of it is off-putting to those that don’t understand the monastic life and do not understand how those who are not monks should be influenced by monks, even though they do not live as monks. We have a problem in our church in our modern age, our age which has attachments to a legion of things that are not salvific. There is this idea that monks do one thing and laypeople do another. There is even another idea that monks are extreme and not to be trusted because they are so extreme. The reason for these ideas is because we are such a secular society.

Those who have the right temperament should read the “Ladder of Divine Ascent”. If a person does not want to struggle with themselves, they should not read this book. If a person is easily upset and gets despondent because of their failures, they should not read this book. If a person thinks that the monastic life is something wholly separate from the life that they live in their parish, they should not read this book. However, if a person wants to read things that resonate in their heart, and challenge them, and that remind them of how far they have to go, then this is a fantastic book to read.

The second step in St. John’s ladder is concerning **Detachment**, and it is arguably the most monastic of all of the chapters. Even in this somewhat technical chapter, a person can glean many things that are salvific for their soul.

We don’t have to understand everything in this book to get great benefit from it. We should glean the things that are good for our soul and not be upset about the things that we do not understand. This is how we should read Scripture also.

Here is an example of gleaning something that is useful to our soul. The very first paragraph of the second step has this amazing statement:” **he will follow Christ without anxiety or hesitation**”.

It is at the end of some words that people might not be accustomed to reading or feeling. Most of us live life as if in a dream, barely paying attention to spiritual things. St. John is not like that at all. Listen to his words, and see whether or not they apply to you. I must say with shame that I cannot say that I live completely according to any of the dictates that he describes:

“The man who really loves the Lord, who has made a real effort to find the coming Kingdom, who has really begun to be troubled by his sins, who is really mindful of eternal torment and judgment, who really lives in fear of his own departure, will not love, care or worry about money, or possessions, or parents, or worldly glory, or friends, or brothers, or anything at all on earth.” (Step 02.01, partial)

These things are hard for us worldly ones to accomplish, but the return on our effort is staggering:

“But having shaken off all ties with earthly things and having stripped himself of all his cares ... **he will follow Christ without anxiety or hesitation.**”

I have a little confession to make. I left something out of the quote above, because many people would be highly offended by John's strong language. This is why so many monastic writings are not suitable for people in the world, because they get offended by strong language and don't understand it. Of course, our Lord used strong language. He said things such as: if you do not hate your parents you cannot follow Him. He said: if you do not forgive you will not be forgiven. There are many more examples. We need to read more strong language. When we pray in our closet, we must use strong language. The services in great Lent use strong language. It is a shame that so many do not hear them, or they only hear a very few things on Sunday morning. The really strong language is not on Sunday morning; it is in the weekday services.

Our society is in the midst of an epidemic of anxiety and hesitation. Most people consider their anxiety to be something biological, or perhaps environmental. People run to medical therapy and psychological counseling, and tobacco, and marijuana, and alcohol, and video games, and whatever else helps them to have some relief from their anxiety. Certainly, anxiety, depression, and other mental conditions can have biological causes, but no matter what the cause, part, or all of the solution must be spiritual.

Perhaps someone who is reading these words is angry because they suffer from some mental state and feel that they are being insulted. That grieves me, because no insult is intended. As a pastor, a confessor, and a sinner, my experience has shown me that our attachment to worldly things, and our indulgence in sin always leads to some level of anxiety.

The Lord promises us that we will be completely free of anxiety. Which one of us is? Why are we not free of anxiety? Is this only because of an imbalance of neurotransmitters, or our environment or upbringing?

Should we not consider spiritual solutions for everything that plagues us? The Scripture makes it very clear that indeed we should.

I am captivated by the idea of following Christ and therefore having no anxiety or hesitation. That does not mean that the one who follows Christ completely does not suffer from human emotions, and difficulties, and pain. We are going to have all that stuff because we live in the human condition. The freedom from anxiety that St. John is promising -- he is promising on good authority because he understands the Scripture and the way of life that leads to freedom from anxiety -- is having God abiding within our hearts, so that we know Him.

The Lord will not abide wherever attachments to the world are. Fortunately for us, this is not an either/or situation. That is, we are not required to be completely committed to Christ before He reveals Himself to us in some way. As our hearts make room, He abides in us more.

The Christian life is an experiential life. The reason why so many people are anxious is because they don't experience Christ, they only know something about Him or have some image of Him. We are not saved by images of Christ; we are saved by Christ.

The reason why it is such a good idea to read this book during Great Lent is because Great Lent challenges us -- that is, if we go through it with effort. St. John's words are very challenging. If we are fasting, increasing our prayer, increasing our church attendance, and attempting to in some way have our soul learn something more of God and apply what we learn to loving our neighbor, we will naturally be decreasing our attachments to the world and increasing our attachments to Christ.