

A four-fold path to transformation

from the Prologue to the Rule of St. Benedict

(Excerpted from: David G. R. Keller. *Desert Banquet: A Year of Wisdom from the Desert Mothers and Fathers*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011. Used with permission of the author.)

A four-fold path to transformation

*Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master, and turn to them with the ear of your heart. Willingly accept the advice of a devoted father and put it into action. Thus you will return by the labor of obedience to the one from whom you drifted through the inertia of disobedience. Now then I address my words to you: whoever is willing to renounce self-will, and take up the powerful and shining weapons of obedience to fight for the Lord Christ, the true king.*¹

In the Prologue to his Rule for monks, Benedict of Nursia describes a four-fold path to holiness that mirrors the teachings of the desert mothers and fathers. Everything begins with *listening* and not simply to words, but with “*the ears of your heart.*” Then he advises *turning* toward the teachings of a master, a father or abba. The turning is a desire to reorient the focus of your life to a person whose life and wisdom authentically incarnate the presence of Christ. But turning is not enough. This is not an academic experience. Along with the turning comes a genuine desire to “*willingly accept*” a mentor’s advice and, finally, *put it into action.*” This is a whole-hearted decision.

It has become very popular these days to go on a retreat, take a course, or participate in a series of teachings like this series on the Rule of Benedict. Is listening and learning enough for you? If not, what is lacking? How will you respond?

The path begins with listening

*Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master, and turn to them with the ear of your heart...*²

The path to the gift of union with God begins with listening. The Rule of St. Benedict, influenced by the teaching of the desert elders, is filled with both references to and direct quotations from the Bible. In Deuteronomy 6:4 the Hebrew scriptures exhort: “Hear, O Israel...” and when God’s unique presence in Jesus is manifested to Peter, James, and John on the mountain of Transfiguration, a voice declares “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mark 9:7) Jesus’ ministry was filled with listening; “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” (Mark 1:35) Jesus, himself, declared, “...anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life...” (John 5:24) Like the desert elders, Benedict invites his monks to listen “*to the teachings of your master.*” The role of a master, abba, or amma is to transmit the experience and wisdom of God in their lives, not to call attention to themselves. But their role is crucial in a person’s vocation of listening. God speaks both in the silence of our hearts and in the life and teaching of our mentors.

¹ Terrence G. Kardong. *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996. Prologue, 1-3, page 3.

² Ibid. page 3.

It is clear that in Benedict's Rule and the life of a Benedictine community there is only one "master," and he is Christ Jesus. Yet, Benedict also knows that the Master speaks and acts through the lives of human mentors, especially the abbot of a monastic community. Their credibility and authority come from recognition of the presence of Christ in their lives. In the Rule there is a variety of ways to LISTEN: corporate worship (with spaces for silence and listening), recitation of and deep listening to the psalms (with pauses at the end of each verse for listening), personal silence and listening (with an emphasis on the Great Silence from the end of compline until Morning Prayer the next day), and the discipline of *lectio divina* (a personal discipline for listening to portions of the Bible).

Who are the persons who have mentored you in the past? What were they like? Who mentors you now? How have your mentors helped you listen "with the ear of your heart" as well as give you intellectual or abstract information? Do you have a listening community? In our fast-paced society with so many electronic devices available how do you care for the art of listening and conversation? What personal and corporate disciplines for listening are regular parts of your life?

The courage to change our lives

*"Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master, and turn to them with the ear of your heart..."*³

As we saw yesterday, turning "*to the teachings of your master*" carries a double meaning for Benedict and echoes words of Abba John Cassian.⁴ In the Prologue to his Rule, Benedict's monks are urged to renounce sins and self-will and return to the graced-filled life given at baptism. The "*teachings of your master*" may refer both to Jesus and to a monastic teacher or mentor. In the lives of the desert elders, the integrity of an abba's or amma's teaching is that it manifests the presence of Jesus. Ultimately we are called to listen to the teachings of Jesus. But there is more. We are to **turn to them** "*with the ear of your heart*". The teachings will reorient our lives only if we embrace them. A choice must be made. It seems possible that Benedict, like Cassian, has Psalm 45:10-11 in mind. The psalm describes a bride leaving her father's house to marry a king: "*Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty.*" Reorienting one's life is never easy.

When you think of your mentors, your study of the Bible, and your opportunities for spiritual renewal at retreats in what way have you been able to "turn to them"? What changes have they challenged you to make in your life? How have you been able to "live into" these changes? Where has support come from to guide and support you?

The grace of obedience

*"Willingly accept the advice of a devoted father and put it into action. Thus you will return by the labor of obedience to the one from whom you drifted through the inertia of disobedience."*⁵

³ Ibid. page 3.

⁴ John Cassian. *The Conferences*. Translated by Boniface Ramsey, OP. New York: Paulist Press, 1997. Third Conference: On Renunciation, VI. 1, 2, &3.

⁵ Kardong, *Benedict's Rule*, page 3.

The desert elders and Benedict place great stock in “obedience” because it enables us to listen and follow someone besides ourselves. Fullness of life is not possible if we are the center of our lives. But Benedict emphasizes that obedience is “*willingly*” accepted. Both he and the desert elders value obedience because it was the hallmark of Jesus’ life who, in St. Paul’s words, “...*humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death...*” (Phil. 2:8) Amma Syncletica said, “*It is dangerous for someone not ‘formed’ by experience of the ascetic life to try to teach...*” and Abba Dorotheos said, “*We need assistance, we need guidance in addition to God’s grace.*” The value of “*the labor of obedience*” is that it directs us away from “*the inertia of disobedience*” of self-will. Later in the Prologue Benedict’s says, “*And so, brothers, we have queried the Lord about what is required of a dweller in his tent, and we have received the teaching about dwelling there... Therefore we must prepare our hearts and bodies to wage the battle of holy obedience to his precepts.*” Contrary to conventional wisdom, obedience is freedom.

“Obedience means openness and receptivity to the other, rather than self-sufficient reliance on one’s own vision, plans, and insights.”⁶

“The hard work of obedience happens in relationships. Obedience consists of a word spoken and heard: the Latin word behind ‘obedience’ means ‘listening.’ Obedience is thus essentially a conversation, an intimate exchange based upon trust that the relationship is life-giving.”⁷

In what relationships and forms of community life do you find this kind of obedience? Are you willing to participate in the “hard work” of obedience in these contexts? How would this change your relationships in these venues?

Whom do you mentor, and how is obedience made possible in that relationship or relationships?

Words without action are useless

St. Benedict writes, “*Willingly accept the advice of a devoted father and put it into action.*”⁸

Amma Syncletica said, “*Because humility is good and salutary, the Lord clothed himself in it... For he says, ‘Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart’ (Matt 11:9). Notice who it is who is speaking; learn his lesson perfectly. Let humility become for you the beginning and end of virtues. He means a humble heart; he refers not to appearance alone, but to the inner person, for the outer person will also follow after the inner.*”⁹

Jesus’ life was his message. He exhorted those around him to listen to his words, but he made it clear that the vocation of a disciple is to *follow him*. He invited those who wanted to follow him to *share his life, including his actions*, regardless of the outcomes. An emphasis on personal example, embodied in humble charity, is the greatest legacy of the desert elders and appears as the core of the Rule of Benedict. “*An old man said, ‘Every evening and every morning a monk ought to render an account of himself and say to himself, ‘What have we done of what God does not want, and what have we done of that which God wills.’”*”

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 29.

⁷ Columba Stewart, OSB. *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition*. New York: Orbis Books, 1998, page 54.

⁸ *Ibid.* page 3.

⁹ Pseudo-Athanasius. *The Life of Blessed Syncletica*. Translated by Elizabeth Bryson. Toronto: Peregrina, 1999. Pp. 39-40

How does your life make Christ's life tangible? Who are the persons whose lives express "humbleness of heart?" How does personal example speak louder than words? What is the role of personal example in obedience?

St. Benedict recommends listening with the ear of your heart. So did Jesus...

Day 78

Discernment is an internal way of seeing life

Jesus spoke about seeing with the heart, but seeing with the heart is not possible if we do not take time to be present to what takes place in the heart. The heart is the place where the spirit of God and each person's spirit can live together. This mutual presence enlightens a heart with the desires and vision of God. Inability to see into the heart (or be present to the heart's vision) creates barriers between us and God and prevents us from experiencing fullness of life.

After Jesus has told the parable of the Sower the disciples ask, "*Why do you speak to them in parables?*" He answered, "*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." With them is indeed fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, "You will listen, indeed, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them." But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*" (Matthew 13:10-17)

Prayer is spending time with God in the inner chamber of the heart so that we will see and hear God's presence and activity in the rest of life. It is possible for a person to live every detail of the Torah and listen for God's voice and be blind and deaf if he or she has a heart that has "grown dull." Discernment in prayer is releasing control of our heart so that it can be filled with the brightness of God's presence. That will enable us to "turn" toward the light and embrace healing of the inability to see, hear, and understand. Prayer is a path toward enlightenment. The "secrets of the kingdom" are not kept for a select few, but without a desire to let go of control of what we want to see or hear, we will miss the "secrets" that are right before our eyes and being spoken within our hearing.

Saint Benedict taught that our hearts will "expand with delight" if we spend time in God's presence regularly. What did he mean?

How will listening with the ear of your heart influence your reading, studying, writing, and your quest for what is most fundamental in your life?

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