Chastity: A Frame of Mind for Leaders

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Of the seven classical virtues, the one most at odds with the spirit of our age is chastity. Even among Christians today, there is rarely a true appreciation of chastity’s essential nature. To understand chastity and its role in leadership, we must first understand the meaning of the word as it occurs in the New Testament. Once we understand what it is that we seek, we need a reliable guide, someone who has already completed the journey and can lead us in this great undertaking. This paper commends as guide for the serious seeker, Saint John Climacus (c. 579-c. 649). Saint John’s book, The Ladder of Divine Ascent has for centuries been the most studied patristic text in the Orthodox Christian world. The reason for the influence of this work is John’s extraordinary insight into the human heart and his deep love and compassion for those brave souls attempting, with Christ’s help, to ascend the ladder of virtues, which leads to Love. In John’s view, the virtues are not merely edifying concepts to be studied, but treasures that must be fought for and possession of which brings us closer to being true imitators of Christ. The acquisition of chastity, like salvation itself, can only be won through the combined efforts of God and the individual struggler. Each Christian is enjoined to make “outright war” on the demons, but ultimately, success is only possible if we have the humility to confess before God our weakness and total reliance on Him.

“To be chaste is to put on the nature of an incorporeal being.”
—St. John Climacus

Of the seven classical virtues, the one most at odds with the spirit of our age is chastity. Indeed, chastity, except in the sense of marital fidelity and sexual abstinence outside of marriage, holds as little interest for most Christians today as it does for the world at large. Chastity today is generally understood as merely a moral obligation, a prohibition on fornication. Such a reductive view is far from the understanding of the Church fathers. Here for example is commentary by St. Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397) on the opening of the Song of Songs (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine”)¹: “Therefore, such a soul also desires many kisses of the Word, so that she may be enlightened with the light of the knowledge of God. For this is the kiss of the Word, I mean the light of holy knowledge” (Wright, 2005, p. 292).

¹ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New International Version.
Ambrose’s understanding of the erotic language in the Song of Songs as being an earthly representation of the Christian soul’s “erotic” longing for Christ is today regarded as nonsense by secular readers, but how many modern Christians are truly sympathetic to Ambrose’s interpretation?

**Definition**

If we posit the idea that chastity has relevance to the study of leadership and that leaders should acquire this virtue, then we ought to know of what we speak. What then is chastity and how is the word understood in the New Testament? The Greek word for chastity is *hagneia* (ἁγνεία), “purity, sinlessness of life” (Grimm, 1901, p. 7). It, along with its adjectival form, *hagnos* (ἁγνός) occur in 10 locations in the New Testament (see appendix).

From the Scripture passages quoted in the appendix, it is clear that the apostles considered chastity an important pastoral concern. But what, in the eyes of the apostles, does it mean to be chaste or pure? The answer lies in the etymology of the Greek word for chastity: *Hagneia* shares the same root as *hagios* (ἅγιος), “holy” and *hazomai* (ἅζομαι), “that which awakens religious awe” (Kittel, 1964, vol. 1, p. 122). To become chaste, then, means to become holy, a saint.

**A Guide to Holiness**

Even with God’s help, raising ourselves out of our fallen state to become holy is a most difficult journey. If we are to have any chance of success, we need a reliable guide, someone who has already successfully completed the journey. For the serious pilgrim, I would like to commend St. John Climacus (c. 579-c. 649). According to his biographer, at age sixteen John began his monastic life at Sinai, where, apart from visits to Egyptian monastic communities, he remained for his entire life. The externalities of John’s life fit a similar pattern of many monastic saints: after living nearly twenty years under obedience to his spiritual father, John moved to the desert to live as a hermit, first in complete solitude and later in a small, semi-eremitic community of monks. Because it is not God’s will that a light be hidden under a bowl (Matthew 5:15), word of John’s holiness spread, so that other monks and even lay people travelled to his remote location in the desert to receive his council and prayers (Chryssavgis, 2004). After forty years of life in the desert, John left the solitary life when entreated to become abbot of the Monastery at Sinai. It was during the last years of his life that John accepted the request of another abbot to put the spiritual wisdom he had acquired into a manual for monks. The work John wrote, a spiritual guide consisting of thirty steps, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, would confer on John the epithet *Climacus*, from the Greek word for ladder, *klimax*.

Although in the Christian West, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* has been studied mostly by scholars and monks, in the Orthodox East, its impact and influence through the centuries can hardly be overstated. According to Ware (1982), in addition to monasteries (where the book is appointed to be read aloud every Lent), the *Ladder* has been “the favorite reading of countless lay people…throughout the Orthodox world” (p. 1).

What accounts for the popularity among pious lay people through the centuries of a seventh century ascetic guide written for monks? First of all, John’s writing is extraordinarily descriptive, with earthy examples and metaphors that remain in the memory long after the book has been put down. Here, for example, is John’s explanation of the consequence of not confessing impure...
thoughts: “Eggs warmed in dung hatch out. Unconfessed evil thoughts hatch evil actions” (Ladder, p. 156). The clarity and vividness of John’s language is like a bolt of lightning to both the humblest and most learned readers alike.

The second reason for The Ladder’s enduring popularity is that its subject is the unseen battle that every Christian must fight with the aid of angels against demons. In the first chapter, John defines a Christian as “an imitator of Christ in thought, word, and deed, as far as this is humanly possible, and he believes rightly and blamelessly in the Holy Trinity” (p. 74). For John, any Christian life worthy of the name involves daily spiritual warfare by those trying to imitate Christ “in though, word, and deed.”

The final reason for the special place The Ladder holds in the monastic literature is the deep holiness of the author. As one re-reads and studies The Ladder, it becomes clear that John’s severity is never joyless, but filled with hope and the joyful conviction that, if only we face the struggle with courage and faith, we can, with Christ’s help, overcome our enemies and ascend the ladder of virtues to become true imitators of the Lord. The final step of The Ladder is Love, and it is John’s love for all struggling Christians that informs every page of his book. Acknowledging the hardships and setbacks that accompany the beginning of one’s conversion and spiritual life, John writes, “Yet full of passions and weakness as we are, let us take heart and let us in total confidence carry to Christ in our right hand and confess to him our helplessness and our fragility. We will carry away more help than we deserve, if only we constantly push ourselves down into the depths of humility” (p. 76).

Saint John on the Acquisition of Chastity

John’s approach to defeating the vices and putting on the virtues is epitomized by a remark in chapter 26 (On Discernment): “We should not spar with demons. We should make outright war on them” (p. 248). As John constantly reminds us, our enemy is very formidable and attacks from multiple fronts. We have no choice but to struggle against all the vices and work as best we can on acquiring all the virtues at once. Moreover, as Ware (1982) writes, “the different steps [of the Ladder] are not to be regarded as strictly consecutive stages, the one terminating before the next commences. For even though by God’s grace we gradually progress to the higher steps…there are some things that in this present life we never outgrow; they continue unceasing up to the gates of death” (p. 16).

Before turning directly to John’s teaching on chastity, mention should be made of the vice that for John is closely related to lust and makes the acquisition of chastity impossible until it has been brought under control: gluttony. In the chapter on gluttony (Step 14) that immediately precedes the chapter on chastity, the demon of gluttony addresses the reader directly: “My firstborn son is the servant of Fornication…from me flow a sea of Dirty Thoughts…” Small wonder that John concludes at the end of the chapter that “Victory over [gluttony] is a brave one. He who is able to achieve it should hasten towards dispassion and total chastity” (p. 170).

As with salvation itself, chastity can only be won by a combined effort of God and the individual struggler. According to John, “The beginning of chastity is refusal to consent to evil thoughts,” (p. 172). In another passage, John writes, “my praise goes out each day to those who take the knife, so to speak, to their own evil thoughts” (p. 173). As John explains, “It amazes me to think we could imagine ourselves to be stronger than the prophet David, something quite impossible indeed” (p. 180).
Since “chastity is a name common to all virtues” (p. 172), it follows that becoming chaste involves practicing all the other virtues as well. Chief among these is humility, because it is only through humility that we can admit before God that, despite our best efforts, the enemy is too strong for us: “Offer up to the Lord the weakness of your nature. Admit your incapacity and, without your knowing it, you will win for yourself the gift of chastity” (p. 173). According to John, the failure to practice humility is a snare especially for those more advanced in the spiritual life: “But among those nearing perfection, a lapse is solely due to the fact of passing judgment on one’s neighbor” (p. 173).

The demons wage war on us as a coordinated army, tempting us with new vices as we make some progress on others. In the same way, “making outright war” on our enemies means bringing all the virtues to bear against each one of the vices. Along with humility, the virtue that has a special role to play in the acquisition of chastity is love. Although the Greek word eros (ἔρως) and its cognates are used nowhere in the New Testament (Warfield, 1918), John makes frequent use of eros in The Ladder, while denoting agape (ἀγάπη) as the monk’s ultimate goal in Step 30. For John, eros is not merely physical love and attraction, but “an energy, a way, a prototype” (Chryssavgis, 1985, p. 192). Physical eros, while fallen along with the rest of man’s nature, is still a reflection of its primordial, pre-fallen condition. In the fight for chastity, therefore, part of the internal struggle involves redirecting eros away from earthly desires towards heavenly ones: “A chaste man is someone who has driven out bodily love (eros) by means of divine love (eros)” (Ware, p. 31). For John, the long, slow redirection of human desire toward Heaven is the kind deep repentance that defines Christian life. Repentance in Greek is metanoia (μετάνοια), a changing of one’s mind. For John, the prototype of the repentance of the erotic impulse is the sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50, who is forgiven much because she loves much.

Concluding Thoughts

At this point, the reader may be convinced that chastity is an essential component of the spiritual life, but not perhaps of leadership. Although clearly a worthy goal in itself, why is it important for leaders to acquire this virtue? The answer lies in John’s understanding of the relationship of the vices with other vices, and the virtues with other virtues: “The holy virtues are like the ladder of Jacob and the unholy vices are like the chains that fell off the chief apostle Peter. The virtues lead from one to another and carry heavenward the man who chooses them. Vices, on the other hand beget and stifle one another” (p. 152). In other words, the virtues lead to other virtues, and the vices lead to other vices. In order to win any of the virtues, we must do our best to practice all of them and to make “outright war” on all the vices.

It may also be objected that The Ladder of Divine Ascent was written for monks and its prescriptions for purity are irrelevant for people living in the world. There are two answers to this objection. The first is that John explicitly rejects the view that purity is a virtue only for monks or people who have never known sin, “for you can easily graft a good olive onto a wild olive if you so wish” (p. 181). Moreover, John upholds the apostle Peter as a model of how married people may also become chaste, for “the man who had a mother-in-law…nevertheless received the keys of the kingdom after he had become pure” (p. 181). The second response to the claim that The Ladder is exclusively a guide for monks is that John is not really interested in the outer form of monasticism, but with its “vital content” (Luibheid, 1982. p. xvii). The vital content of monasticism is repentance (metanoia) and sanctification (hagiasmos) of the human
person, and this is a way of life from which no Christian is exempt, as Paul makes clear: “To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints” (Romans 1:7, NKJV).

In conclusion, as an incentive for leaders to begin the long and hard struggle to become chaste in thought, word, and deed, let us give the final word to John, writing at the end of Step 15: “This [chastity] is the fifteenth reward of victory. He who has earned it while still alive has died and been resurrected. From now on he has a taste of the immortality to come” (p. 186).

About the Author

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References


Appendix

Occurrences of chastity/purity in the New Testament

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Passage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Corinthians 7:11</td>
<td>See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what</td>
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<td>eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing,</td>
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<td>what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have</td>
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<td>proved yourselves to be innocent (ἁγνὸς) in this matter.</td>
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<td>2 Corinthians 11:2</td>
<td>I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband,</td>
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<td>to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure (ἁγνή) virgin to him.</td>
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<td>Philippians 4:8</td>
<td>Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure (ἁγνὰ), whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.</td>
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<td>1 Timothy 4:12</td>
<td>Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity (ἁγνείᾳ).</td>
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<td>1 Timothy 5:1-2</td>
<td>Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity (ἁγνείᾳ).</td>
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<td>1 Timothy 5:22</td>
<td>Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure (ἁγνὸν).</td>
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<td>Titus 2:4-5</td>
<td>Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure (ἁγνάς), to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.</td>
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<td>James 3:17</td>
<td>But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure (ἁγνῆ); then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.</td>
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<td>1 Peter 3:1-2</td>
<td>Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity (ἁγνή) and reverence of your lives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 John 3:3</td>
<td>All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (ἁγνός).</td>
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