



## On the Denial of Self and the Cleansing of the Heart

*St. Ephraim the Syrian*

"Deny yourself," Jesus commanded us. This is incredibly difficult for 99% of us. But doing so is essential if we are to be saved. As Colliander writes, *"If you cannot get rid of your own greatness, neither can you lay yourself open for real greatness. If you cling to your own freedom, you cannot share in true freedom, where only one will reign. The saints' deep secret is this: do not seek freedom, and freedom will be given you"* (12).

When Jesus and the authors of the New Testament speak of freedom or of being free, they are not speaking of the type of freedom that Americans and residents of other democracies enjoy. By freedom, the Scriptures do not mean political freedom, and they certainly do not mean the freedom to do whatever we want, whenever we want to. Rather, by "freedom," they mean freedom from sin, freedom to live the kind of life that God has called us to. Of course, the main thing that prevents us from enjoying that freedom is our own sinfulness. Our sinful thoughts and actions prevent us from being all that we can be in Christ (not in the Army!).

But how are we to do this? How are we to master the passions that constantly lead us into sin? Colliander offers this advice: *"If you wish to set yourself free from a great suffering, crush the small*

*desires, say the Holy Fathers" (13).*

He continues this thought: *"...it does not pay to come to grips with the hard-to-master great vices and bad habits you have acquired without at the same time overcoming your small "innocent" weaknesses: your taste for sweets, your urge to talk, your curiosity, your meddling. For finally, all our desires, great and small, are built on the same foundation, our unchecked habit of satisfying only our own will" (13).*

Now, after reading this quote, you might be thinking, "Gee, is he saying that it is a sin to like sweets (I hope not, or I'm done for!), to talk, to be curious?" and so on. No, he is not saying that. What he IS saying is that it is sinful to always give in to these things. It is sinful to never say no to ourselves. What's more, always indulging ourselves in small things teaches us the lesson that it is okay to always indulge ourselves in other things, things that more readily lead to sin.

This is a large reason why Orthodox Christians fast so strictly during Lent (and only slightly less strictly at many other times throughout the year). We deny ourselves certain types of food (the ones that most of us love the best) and drink so that we can tell our body that we are in charge of it, not the other way around. We attempt to gain control of our passions, rather than letting them control us. We say no to our desire to eat and drink so that we can better say no to our desire to sin. For, as Colliander states, *"Since the Fall, the will has been running errands exclusively for its own ego" (13).*

He goes on to give us some examples of how we can deny ourselves: *"If you have the urge to ask something, don't ask! If you have the urge to drink two cups of coffee, drink only one! (Fr. James' note: Ouch! NOW he's hitting close to home!) If you have the urge to look at the clock, don't look! If you wish to smoke a cigarette, refrain! If you want to go visiting, stay at home! This is self-persecution; in this way does one silence, with God's help, one's loud-voiced will" (13-14).*