

PRINCIPLES OF HEALING FOR THE PASSION OF LUST

FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

(200 A.D. TO 850 A.D.)

St. John Climacus and description of lust

A victim of sensuality who had overcome his weakness told me once that within people of this kind there flourishes a yearning for bodies, a shameless, and terrible spirit that asserts itself at the very heart's core. Sheer physical pain burns so fiercely in the heart that it is like being scorched by an open fire. The sufferer finds that because of this he has no fear of God, he spurns the thought of punishment, turns away from prayer, and the sight of a corpse moves him no more than if it were a stone. He is like someone out of his mind, in a daze and he is perpetually drunk with desire for man or beast. And if a limit were not placed on the activities of this demon, no one would be saved, no one who is made of clay mingled with blood and foul moisture.[\[1\]](#)

An important point: People did recover! Many today act as if they have to struggle with lust until they die. While it may be appropriate to fight the passion of lust to the end from an attitude of humility, people throughout the centuries recovered from lust and lived a life of purity. It was expected that if you lived the life of a Christian, who put away lust from your life. The attitude that it is a life long battle and that "God is forgiving" often becomes a license to continue in this sin. But the Apostle Paul states:

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:9)

This verse is quoted extensively by the church fathers. Most references to lust include these words "will not inherit the kingdom of God" and "be not deceived."

Sexual sin is different from all others in that it is a sin against one's own body.

"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:15-20)

St. John Climacus writes that about how sexual sin is a special sin against the body:

Every other kind of sin is external to the body, but the sin of impurity is a sin against the body, since the very substance of the flesh is defiled by pollution in a way that cannot happen in the case of the other sins. And a good question to ask is this: "Why do we normally say regarding every other kind of sin that so-and-so has slipped, whereas we say sorrowfully that someone has fallen when we discover that he has committed fornication?"[\[2\]](#)

Here are just some of the people who struggled and recovered:

- St. Moses the Ethiopian
- St. Mary of Egypt

- St. Pelagia
- St. Anthony
- St. Augustine

St. John Climacus states:

“I have seen impure souls crazed for physical love; but when these same souls have made this grounds for repentance, as a result of their experience of sexual love they have transferred the same eros to the Lord, They have immediately gone beyond all fear and been spurred to insatiable love for God. This is why the Lord said to the chaste harlot not that she had feared, but that she had loved much, and was readily able to repel eros through eros”^[3]

“Let them take courage who are humbled by their passions. For even if they fall into every pit and are caught in every snare, when they attain health they will become healers, luminaries, beacons and guides to all, teaching about the forms of every sickness and through their own experience saving those who are about to fall.”^[4]

Key Principles of Healing

There are key principles to healing from sexual addiction and lust. Much of the ancient wisdom correlates with how we treat people today.

From the Desert Fathers

“At one time a brother came to the abbot Pastor, and said to him, “What am I to do, Father? For I am harried with lust. And I sought out the abbot Hybistion, and he said to me, ‘Thou oughtst not to allow it to tarry long in thee.’” And the abbot Pastor said to him, The deeds of the abbot Hybistion are about with the angels in heaven: but thou and I are in fleshly lust. But if a monk keep his belly and his tongue and stay in solitude, he may have confidence that he will not die.”^[5]

1. Fasting

“For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and the glory is their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” (Phil. 3:18-19 NIV)

The link between gluttony and lust

“A stuffed belly produces fornication, while a mortified stomach leads to purity.”^[6]

“And we should note that most food that inflates the stomach also encourages desire.”^[7]

“And the man who looks after his belly and at the same time hopes to control the spirit of fornication is like someone trying to put out a fire with oil.”^[8]

“And if the stomach triumphs over you, tame it with hard work, and if you are too weak for this, fight it by keeping vigil. If you find yourself getting sleepy, turn to manual work, but keep away from that if you happen not to be sleepy, for you cannot serve both God and Mammon.”^[9]

“You should remember that frequently a demon can take up residence in your belly and keep a man from being satisfied, even after having devoured the whole of Egypt and after having drunk all the Nile. After we have eaten, this demon goes off and sends the spirit of fornication against us, saying: “Get him now! Go after him. When his stomach is full, he will not put up much of a fight.” Laughing, the spirit of fornication, that ally of the stomach’s demon, comes, binds us hand and foot in sleep, does anything he wants with us, befouls body and soul with his dirty dreams and emission.”^[10]

Listen and hear the word of warning: “Wide and spacious is the road of gluttony. It leads to the catastrophe of fornication, and there are many who travel that way. The gate is narrow and the

way of fasting is hard, that way leading to the life of purity, and there are few to make the journey.” [\[11\]](#)

To fast is to do violence to nature. It is to do away what whatever pleases the palate. Fasting ends lust, roots out bad thoughts, frees one from evil dreams. [\[12\]](#)

St. John Climacus writes about gluttony, “My firstborn son is the servant of fornication, the second is hardness of heart, and the third is sleepiness. From me flow a sea of dirty thoughts, waves of filth, floods of unknown and unspeakable impurities.” [\[13\]](#)

2. Humility

St. John Climacus writes:

“Do not imagine that you will overwhelm the demon of fornication by entering into an argument with him. Nature is on his side and he has the best of the argument. So the man who decides to struggle against his flesh and to overcome it by his own efforts is fight in vain. The truth is that unless the Lord overturns the house of the flesh and builds the house of the soul, the man wishing to overcome it has watched and fasted for nothing. 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.” [\[14\]](#)

St. John Climacus on humility with temperance

The man who imagines he can conquer the demon of fornication by gluttony and by stuffing himself is quite like someone who quenches fire with oil. And the man who tries to put an end to this struggle by means of temperance only is like someone trying to escape the sea by swimming with just one hand. However, join humility with temperance, for the one is useless without the other. [\[15\]](#)

A certain brother questioned an old man about imaginings of this kind. And the old man said to him, “I myself have never been goaded by this thing.” And the brother was scandalized at him and went off to another old man saying, “Behold this was what the old man said to me, and I was scandalized at him, for what he says is beyond nature.” And the old man said, “Not in foolishness was this said to thee by the man of God: arise and go, and do penance before him, that he may open to thee the wisdom in his words.” So the brother rose up and came to the old man, and did penance in his sight. And he said, “Forgive me, Father, in that I behaved like a fool, and left thee without bidding thee farewell: but I entreat thee to explain to me how thou has never been harried by lust.” The old man said to him, “Since the time that I became a monk I have never given myself my fill of bread, nor of water, nor of sleep, and tormenting myself with appetite for these things whereby we are fed, I was not suffered to feel the stings of lust.” And the brother went away, profiting by the old man’s tale. [\[16\]](#)

3. Using the sign of the cross

St. Athanasius tells of how St. Anthony fought temptation with the sign of the cross.

“Sign yourselves therefore with the cross, and depart boldly, and let these make sport for themselves.’ So they departed fortified with the sign of the Cross. But he remained in no wise harmed by the evil spirits, nor was he wearied with the contest, for there came to his aid visions from above, and the weakness of the foe relieved him of much trouble and armed him with greater zeal. For his acquaintances used often to come expecting to find him dead, and would hear him singing, ‘Let God arise and let His enemies be scattered, let them also that hate Him flee before His face. As smoke vanisheth, let them vanish; as wax melteth before the face of fire, so let the sinners perish from the face of God;’ and again, ‘All nations compassed me about, and in the name of the Lord I requited them

For when they cannot deceive the heart openly with foul pleasures they approach in different guise, and thenceforth shaping displays they attempt to strike fear, changing their shapes, taking the forms of women, wild beasts, creeping things, gigantic bodies, and troops of soldiers. But not even then need ye fear their deceitful displays. For they are nothing and quickly disappear, especially if a man

fortify himself beforehand with faith and the sign of the cross.[\[17\]](#)

Note: To make the sign of the cross, one puts together the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand together and pulls the remaining two fingers down to the palm. Then one touches their forehead, their abdomen, their right shoulder and finally their left shoulder. This is not to be confused with how Roman Catholics make their sign of the cross which is open handed and backwards.

4. Repetitious, Meaningful Prayer

St. John Climacus writes:

“When you pray do not try to express yourself with fancy words, for often it is the simple repetitious phrases of a little child that our Father in heaven finds most irresistible. . . . One phrase on the lips of the tax collector was enough to win God's mercy; one humble request made with faith was enough to save the good thief.”

5. The Refusal to Despair

“Repentance is the daughter of hope and the refusal to despair.” (The penitent stands guilty-but undisgraced.) [\[18\]](#)

6. The assistance of our Guardian Angel

“Are the guardian angels standing by us, or are they still at a great distance? For until they come close to us, our efforts are vain and futile. Our prayer has neither the power of access nor the wings of purity to reach the Lord, unless our angels draw near to us and take it and bring it to the Lord.” [\[19\]](#)

St. Macarios and the angel

St. Macarios of the desert in walking one day, he sees someone and perceives that he is seeing an angel and as he draws near the angel says to him that he is not a man, but an angel. He says that in fact he is this man's guardian angel and points to a house. This angel had been weeping because this man was inside this house committing adultery and that he could not go into the house to protect the man because the stench is too strong.

7. The Support of a Brother

“And he told them a story: how there were two brethren in the Thebaid, and one of them would have run into fornication, and said to his fellow, ‘I am going back to the world.’ But the other wept and said, ‘I will not let thee go, brother and lose thy labour and thy virginity.’ But he would not agree, and said, ‘I will not sit here: I am going. Either come with me and I shall come back with thee again, or else let me go, and I shall stay in the world.’ So the brother went and told a certain old man. And the old man said, ‘Go with him, and God for thy travail will not let him go to ruin.’ So he rose up and went away with his brother to the world. And when he had reached a certain town, God seeing his travail, how from love and necessity he was following his brother, removed desire from his brother's heart. And he said, ‘Brother, let us go back to the desert. Behold, I think to myself, ‘Now I have sinned with a woman!’ what better am I of that?’ And turning about, they came back unharmed to their cell.” [\[20\]](#)

There is another incredible story from the Desert Fathers that teaches us what it means to bear one another's burden and thus fulfill the law of Christ:

“Two brethren made their way to the city to sell their handiwork: and when in the city they went different ways, divided one from the other, one of them fell into fornication. After a while came his brother, saying, ‘Brother, let us go back to our cell.’ But he made answer, ‘I am not coming.’ And the other questioned him, saying, ‘Wherefore, brother?’ And he answered, ‘Because when thou didst go from me, I ran into temptation, and I sinned in the flesh.’ But the other, anxious to help him, began to tell him, saying, ‘But so it happened with me: when I was separated from thee. I too ran into

fornication. But let us go, and do penance together with all our might: and God will forgive us that are sinful men.' And they came back to the monastery and told the old men what had befallen them, and they enjoined on them the penance they must do. But one began his penance, not for himself but for his brother, as if he himself had sinned. And God, seeing his love and his labour, after a few days revealed to one of the old men that for the great love of this brother who had not sinned, He had forgiven the brother who had. And verily this is to lay down one's soul for one's brother." [21]

8. Do not Remember Fantasies

"Never brood by day over the fantasies that have occurred to you during sleep, for the aim of the demons is to defile us while we are still awake by causing us to harp on our dreams." [22]

9. Various Weapons against lust

"When temptation comes, our best weapons are sackcloth and ashes, all-night vigils standing up, hunger, the nearest touch of water when we are thirsty, time passed among the burial places of the dead, and the most important of all, humility of the heart; and if possible a spiritual director or helpful brother, old in wisdom rather than years, should also support us. Indeed it would come as a great surprise if anyone could, by his efforts alone, save his ship from the sea." [23]

Watch Eating, Tongue and Solitude

"At one time a brother came to the abbot, and said to him, 'What am I to do, Father? For I am harried with lust. And I sought out the abbot Hybistion, and he said to me, 'Thou oughtst not to allow it to tarry long in thee.'" And the abbot said to him, 'The deeds of the abbot Hybistion are about with the angels in heaven: but thou and I are in fleshly lust. But if a monk keep his belly and his tongue and stay in solitude, he may have confidence that he will not die.'" [24]

Spend more time in prayer

"An old man questioned a brother, saying, "Is it not thy wont to have speech with women?" And the brother said, "Nay. But my imagination and certain memories I have are painted old and new, disquieting me with images of women." And the old man said to him, "Fear not the dead, but flee the living: that is to say, the consenting to, and the act of, sin: and give thyself longer to prayer." [25]

10. A humble and teachable heart

In Alcoholics Anonymous, it states that many of us held on to our own ideas and the result was nil until we let go of them. It is not helpful to recover from lust to already know how to fight it. This is an example of pride to which God is opposed. (Proverbs 3:34 and James 4:6)

A certain brother questioned an old man about imaginings of this kind. And the old man said to him, "I myself have never been goaded by this thing." And the brother was scandalized at him and went off to another old man saying, "Behold this was what the old man said to me, and I was scandalized at him, for what he says is beyond nature." And the old man said, "Not in foolishness was this said to thee by the man of God: arise and go, and do penance before him, that he may open to thee the wisdom in his words." So the brother rose up and came to the old man, and did penance in his sight. And he said, "Forgive me, Father, in that I behaved like a fool, and left thee without bidding thee farewell: but I entreat thee to explain to me how thou has never been harried by lust." The old man said to him, "Since the time that I became a monk I have never given myself my fill of bread, nor of water, nor of sleep, and tormenting myself with appetite for these things whereby we are fed, I was not suffered to feel the stings of lust." And the brother went away, profiting by the old man's tale. [26]

11. Do not Judge

"A brother tempted by a demon set out to a certain old man and said to him, 'These two brother are together, and they are of evil life.' But the old man perceived that he was beguiled of the devil, and he sent and called them to him. And when evening was come, he laid down a mat for the two

brethren. And happed them in one bed, saying, the sons of God are great and holy.' But he said to his disciple, 'Shut that brother into a cell by himself: for the passion which he would fasten on them he hath in himself.'"[\[27\]](#)

12. Do not Entertain Thoughts

"A certain brother, bound by the spirit of lust, made his way to a certain great old man and asked him, saying, 'Show me kindness and pray for me, for I am harried by lust.' So the old man entreated the Lord for him. And again coming to the old man, he told the same tale. And again the old man did not neglect to beseech the Lord for him, saying, 'Lord, reveal to me whence cometh this devil's work in my brother. For I have prayed Thee for him, and he hath not yet found any peace.' And the Lord revealed to him what was happening round about that brother. The old man saw him sitting and the spirit of lust beside him as it were sporting with him, and an Angel sent to his help was standing by, and indignant against that brother because he did not prostrate himself before God, but was as one delighting in his imaginations and his whole mind inclining to them. And the old man perceived that the fault was with the brother, and told him so, saying, 'Thou dost consent to thine imagination.' And he taught him how one must withstand such thoughts. And the brother, taking breath again by the old man's wisdom and prayer, found peace from his temptation." [\[28\]](#)

13. Take Drastic Measures against Lust

You have heard it said by Jesus Christ that if your eye or hand causes us to sin we must cut it off.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:27-30)

The point is to take drastic measures to avoid sin. This following story has application for us who struggle with lust. While it may be foolhardy for us to do exactly what this monk did, because God might not grant us chastity by doing so, we can learn by his example and practice the many ways to buffet the body to avoid sin.

Here is a story told by the Desert Fathers:

There was a certain solitary living in Lower Egypt, and his fame was know to all, because alone in the church he dwelt in a desert place. And behold, by the operation of Satan a certain woman of ill fame heard of him and said to the young men, "What will ye give me if I bring down this solitary of yours?" And they agreed with her what they would surely give her. She went out at evening, and came as one that had lost her way, to his cell and when she knocked at his door, he came out. And seeing her he was troubled, saying, "How hast thou come here?" And she answered him as if weeping and said, "I lost my way and so came here." And he was shaken with pity for her, and brought her into the courtyard about his cell and himself went into his cell and shut the door. And the unhappy creature cried out, saying, "Father, the wild beasts are devouring me." Again he was troubled, fearing the judgments of God, and said, "Whence cometh this wrath upon me?" And opening the door he brought her within.

Then began the devil to pierce his heart as with arrows to desire her. And when he felt that these desires were from the devil, he said within himself, "The ways of the enemy are darkness: but the Son of God is light."

Rising, he lit the lamp. And when he burnt with desire, he said, "They that do these things go into torment. Prove thyself now, from this, if thou canst bear the everlasting fire." And he put his finger into the flame, and when it burnt and scorched he felt it not, for the flame of, lust that was in him. And so when daylight broke, all his fingers were burned. But when the unhappy woman saw what

he was doing, she became like a stone for dread.

In the morning, the young men came to the monk, and asked him, "Did a woman come here last evening?" He said, "Yea, see there she sleeps." And coming in they found her dead. And they said, "Father, she is dead."

Then, turning back the cloak that he wore, he showed them his hands, saying "See what you daughter of the devil hath done to me, she hast cost me every finger that I have." And telling them what had come to pass, he said, "It is written, 'Render not evil for evil.'" And he prayed, and raised her up. And she turned from her sins and lived in chastity for the rest of her days.[\[29\]](#)

There are many ways we can take drastic measures to avoid sin:

- Cold showers
- Prostrations
- Physical Exercise (although one needs to avoid the gym which is counter productive)
- Never going down certain streets
- Never going back to old slippery places
- Surrendering the computer or Internet
- Cutting off certain relationships
- Surrendering the television
- Surrendering movies, or certain ratings (i.e. never seeing rated "R" or any movie with any sexual theme, or element.)
- Praying longer than your normal rule of prayer

14. Acquiring Chastity

St. John Climacus on chastity:

"A sign of real chastity is to be unaffected by the dreams that come with sleep. Equally, a sign of complete sensuality is to be liable to emissions from bad thought when one is awake." [\[30\]](#)

"I have seen men who lapsed against their will and I have seen men who would willingly lapse and are unable to do so. These I pity far more than the daily sinner, for though impotent they long for corruption. [\[31\]](#)

"Pity the man who falls, but pity twice over the man who causes another to lapse, for he carries the burden of both as well as the weight of pleasure tasted by the other."[\[32\]](#)

15. St. John Climacus on sobriety at night

"We have to be especially sober and watchful when we are lying in bed, for that is the time when our mind has to contend with demons outside the body. And if our body is inclined to be sensual then it will easily betray us. So let the remembrance of death and the concise Jesus Prayer go to sleep with you and get up with you, for nothing helps you as these do when you are asleep."

"Some think that struggles with passion and ejaculations during sleep are caused solely by what we have eaten. Yet I have noticed that very sick people or strict practitioners of fasting can also fall prey to these defilements. I once asked a very experienced and celebrated monk about this, and the holy man clearly explained the matter to me. 'Emissions during sleep are the result of eating too much and living too well,' this famous man declared. 'They come too when we get complacent or when we preen ourselves because a long time may have elapsed since we experienced such

emissions. They come also if we start passing judgment on our neighbor. The last two problems can occur even among the sick, and perhaps all three.’ If someone discovers that he is untroubled by these, he is surely lucky to be free of such passions.[33]

16. Confession of one’s thoughts

“Another brother was goaded by lust, and rising at night he made his way to an old man, and told him his thoughts, and the old man comforted him. And revived by that comforting he returned to his cell. And again the spirit of lust tempted him, and again he went to the old man. And this happened many times. But the old man did not discountenance him, but spoke to his profit, saying, ‘Yield not to the devil, nor relax thy mind: but rather as often as the devil troubles thee, come to me, and he shall go buffeted away. For nothing so dispirits the demon of lust as when his assaults are revealed. And nothing so heartens him as when his imaginations are kept secret.’ So the brother came to him eleven times, confessing his imaginings. And thereafter he said to the old man, ‘Show love to me, my father, and give me some word.’ The old man said, ‘Believe me, my son, if God permitted the thoughts with which my own mind is stung to be transferred to thee, thou wouldst not endure them, but wouldst dash thyself headlong.’ And by the old man saying this, his great humbleness did quiet the goading of lust in the brother.”[34]

This is just a beginning of some of the wisdom of the early church that will help one to overcome lust. Lord have mercy on us.

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See [Healing from Lust Part 2](#)

[1] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, pp. 174.

[2] St John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 176.

[3] St. John Climacus, (580-650 A.D.), a quote from *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*., taken from the book, *Sacred Symbols that Speak Vol. 1* by Anthony M. Coniaris, pp. 74-75.)

[4] St. John Climacus, (580-650 A.D.), a quote from *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, as cited in *Sacred Symbols that Speak Vol. 1* by Anthony M. Coniaris, p. 74.)

[5] *Desert Fathers*, pg. 82.

[6] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 165.

[7] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 167.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

[11] *Ibid.*, pg. 169. Cf. Matthew 7:13-14.

- [12] Ibid., pg. 169.
- [13] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, pg. 170.
- [14] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, pg. 121.
- [15] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 176.
- [16] Desert Fathers, pg. 85-86
- [17] Letter of Athanasius on St. Antony, V. 23.
- [18] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 121.
- [19] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 124-125.
- [20] Desert Fathers, pg. 85.
- [21] Desert Fathers, pg.83-84.
- [22] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 179.
- [23] John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 179.
- [24]Desert Fathers, pg. 82.
- [25] Desert Fathers, pg. 82
- [26] Desert Fathers, pg. 85-86.
- [27] Desert Fathers, pg. 85.
- [28] Desert Fathers, pg. 83.
- [29] Desert Fathers, pg. 86-87.
- [30] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, pg. 172.
- [31] St. John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Mahwah: Paulist Press. pg. 173.
- [32] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, pg. 173.
- [33] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 178.
- [34] Desert Fathers, pg. 83.