

THE BARRIER OF JUDGMENT

In our ignorance, we continuously pass judgment, seeing some things as good and some as bad. Instead of innocently perceiving God's presence in all things and his wisdom ordering all things for the good of all, we judge some things as suited to our designs and some opposed. Instead of listening with faith, innocence, and humility to the Voice of God, who is speaking to us even through those things that we believe to be contrary to the will of God, we cast our own fears and judgments upon the world and hear their frightful echoes. Things we judge opposed to our notions of goodness we experience as void of love and hence opposed to God; we thus perpetuate our belief in our lonely exile from God's love and justify our conviction that our fearful self-defense is essential. Essential it is only to pride, a service only to the self-centered ego. The ego can wrap itself in the garb of righteousness and stand secure behind a wall of judgments; it can accumulate power, prestige, and wealth to isolate itself from all it deems unfit to serve its ends; it can tranquilize itself with comforts and pleasures and thereby avoid confronting its own painful isolation; but innocent love trusts in God and sees his providence everywhere. St. Paul writes: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:35, 37-39). Chardin comments on this scripture:

Because you ascended into heaven after having descended into hell, you have so filled the universe in every direction, Jesus, that henceforth it is blessedly impossible for us to escape you. . . . Now I know that for certain. Neither life, whose advance increases your hold upon me; nor death, which throws me into your hands; nor the good or evil spiritual powers which are your living instruments; nor the energies of matter into which you have plunged; nor the irreversible stream of duration whose rhythm and flow you control without appeal; nor the unfathomable abysses of space which are the measure of your greatness. . . ; none of these things will be able to separate me from your substantial love, because they are only the veil, the 'species' under which you take hold of me in order that I may take hold of you.¹

Conscious awareness of the presence of God in every created thing is the fruit of an abundant spiritual life. This "all inclusive One," in Chardin's words, "is so perfect that as it receives me and I lose myself in it I can find in it the ultimate perfection of my own individuality."²

However, the alienated self believes its existence lies in separateness: it clings to the notion that safety lies in defining and defending itself as something unique apart from and in opposition to the "other." This distinction between self and other is, from the point of view of the alienated self, the single greatest benefit of exercising judgment. Judgment "proves" that God is not present in certain people, situations, or even parts of ourselves. It splits the unified wholeness of God's all-pervading presence into opposing camps of good and bad, right and wrong, strong and weak, mine and yours, self and other. The alienated self identifies with a finite collection of ideas, feelings, and experiences, defining itself by what it is *not* as much as by what it *is*.

This limited experience of self is a profound distortion of reality: we are created in the image of God, who is one, whole, and infinite. The tension between the limited nature of our alienated self and the unlimited nature of our true self—our real, God-created Self—generates a primordial urge towards resolution, towards freedom, towards God. The alienated self, invested in its narrow boundaries, perceives this natural movement towards wholeness as a threat to its existence. Having cut the wholeness of awareness into pieces, it maintains its existence by continuing to judge and to defend its judgments with all the logic and emotion that it can muster. Its ceaseless stream of judgmental perceptions maintains the boundaries between self, God, and neighbor that make the alienated self seem real.

FORGIVENESS AND THE RETURN TO WHOLENESS

When we pass judgment on ourselves or others, we split our consciousness in two: judgment divides our awareness into the judge and the judged. When we genuinely cease from judgment, God's healing love blesses the condemned and alienated parts of ourselves and the world. Our fear, guilt, and anger dissolve. Experiencing God's strength, mercy, and goodness, we find that we want what he wants for us and for others. Our will conforms to his and all is forgiven. God's love thus integrates our being and makes us whole.

The separated ego, however, lives in fear of God's dominion. It rebels against his wisdom, justifies itself with false notions of its own significance, and in so doing creates the dynamics of its own destruction. Our status as beloved children of God can never be destroyed; but destruction shall surely someday come to our separateness, our ignorance of who we really are, and our denial of who really holds the reins of power. In the Book of Daniel, the story is told of Nebuchadnezzar, a powerful king who had conquered and oppressed many people. Nebuchadnezzar attributed his wealth and success to his own power and gloried in his own majesty. To teach him that "the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (Dan 4:25), God drove him mad and banished him from his people to live like an animal among the beasts of the field. Finally, after much suffering, Nebuchadnezzar's reason was restored to him, at which point he lifted his eyes to heaven and blessed and praised God in recognition of God's everlasting dominion. His kingdom was then restored to him and he was made greater than ever before. Reflecting upon his spiritual odyssey, he said, "I . . . praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase." (Dan 4:37)

The teaching of this story is that acceptance of the omnipresent and eternal sovereignty of God frees us from the need to build and defend our own little kingdom: we cannot bless what we rule with pride, whereas all that we allow God to rule with love is blessed abundantly. Surrendering to the all-providential presence of God allows God to fulfill our needs, brings us into harmony with his will, and give us splendor as his servant:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;
 they neither toil nor spin;
 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory
 was not arrayed like one of these.
 But if God so clothes the grass of the field,
 which today is alive and tomorrow
 is thrown in the oven,

will he not much more clothe you,
 O men of little faith?
 Therefore do not be anxious, saying,
 'What shall we eat?'
 or 'What shall we drink?'
 or 'What shall we wear?'
 For the Gentiles seek all these things
 and your heavenly Father knows
 that you need them all.
 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
 and all these things shall be yours as well.
 (Mt 6:28-33).

PARTICIPATION IN THE LIFE OF GOD

The perfection to which God calls us is more than just constant commitment to faith or virtue; indeed, such a commitment can always be appropriated by pride. We are called to a constant participation in the life of God, the abundant source of all goodness. Holiness means wholeness of life, the integration of our individual lives with the universal life of God. Merton writes: "Christian holiness is not a mere matter of ethical perfection. It includes every virtue, but is evidently more than all virtues together. Sanctity is not constituted only by good works or even moral heroism, but first of all by ontological union with God in Christ."³

We are created to be fully human, which is to be fully open to God and neighbor, to love without restriction, to live by giving. As long as we are locked within the narrow boundaries of our own limited self we are living an unnatural life. Merton points out:

It is more natural for us to be 'out of ourselves' and carried freely and entirely towards the 'Other' – towards God in Himself or in other men – than it is for us to be centered and enclosed within ourselves. We find ourselves to be most truly human when we are raised to the level of the divine. We transcend ourselves, we see ourselves in a new light, by losing sight of ourselves and no longer seeing ourselves but God. Thus in a single act (union with God in Christ through prayer) we accomplish the double movement of entering into ourselves and going out of ourselves which brings us back to the paradisiacal state for which we were originally created.⁴

The essence of the spiritual journey is "putting off the old nature" – transcending our limited sense of self – and "putting on the new nature" – finding our true, unbounded Self in Christ (Col 3:9-11). Christ tells us, "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn 15:5); and he commands us to share our love with others as he has shared his with us: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). His love is unlimited, and union with God in Christ therefore leads to liberation from egoism and infinite freedom to love.

UNION AND REDEMPTION

God's plan is to "unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). As we come to recognize our essential identity as expressions of God's infinite love, it naturally becomes clear to us how we can best serve his will on earth and bring about the uniting of all things in God.