

Exodus 90 and Virtue

There are many men and women everywhere doing a program called: Exodus 90. Exodus 90 is a 90 day program which focuses on prayer, asceticism and fraternity. Participants are invited to do a variety of different spiritual practices: a minimum of 20 minutes to one hour of prayer each day, refraining from any unnecessary internet use (Netflix, youtube, facebook, instagram), and fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays as some examples. the main reason why it is 90 days is because that is how long it takes for our brain to reset, to overcome some sort of addiction, to change a deeply embedded set of habits. In other words, by engaging in this 90 day exodus from slavery to freedom these men and women are engaging in the school of Wisdom as laid out today by the Book of Sirach.

When we enrol ourselves in the school of Wisdom, we allow ourselves to be taught by her. And bit by bit we begin to love her and when we love her we love life because she leads us to the path of life. Sirach says that all wisdom comes from God and the purpose of the wisdom of God is to lead us to life through virtue. The fruit of Wisdom is virtue.

How is virtue the fruit of Wisdom? Listen to what we hear in the first reading: *she will walk with them on torturous paths and she will bring fear and dread upon them.* Many of us are thinking that if the school of wisdom is operating like that then I don't want to go! But if we understand this passage in light of vice and virtue it makes complete sense.

A virtue is a good habit while a vice is a bad habit, and habits are built up through repeated action. Rarely do people become addicted to cigarettes or alcohol overnight but rather through repeated, and repeated action. Think of the person who had the bad habit or the vice of smoking 3 packs a day or drinking a case of beer every night, but imagine now that they want to enrol in the school of wisdom, they want to be set free from their vices to develop other virtues, what will happen when they stop their vices? It will feel like they are on torturous paths, they will feel fear and dread. It is like going through a withdrawal and so there is an experience of pining, and longing and pain!

It is also the same with sin. When we move from the vice or bad habit of gluttony to the virtue or good habit of temperance, there is a temporary period where our old habits are dying and it feels like we are dying with them.

Yet the time will come when our practice of virtue becomes transformative, when our good habits become internalized. Notice what the scripture says next: *she will torment them by her discipline until they remain faithful in their heart*. This is a key passage. By disciplining ourselves, by not giving into our feelings to do this or that particular action which leads to this or that sin or bad habit, we begin to be faithful in the heart. Our external actions begin to transform our internal reality and what happens is that we begin to reject sin and choose goodness, choose virtue, choose life.

What can begin to happen is we begin to experience freedom. Take the vice of lust for example. There may be a point in our life where we might find it impossible to not lust after a person in our thoughts or actions. Yet over time with the practice of virtue and the grace of God, the virtue of chastity can be achieved to the point where not only do we no longer choose to lust after another person, we are disgusted that we would want to objectify any person in that way. That is the power of virtue, that is the freedom of virtue. This is what the school of wisdom offers through grace!

Then she will come straight back to them again and gladden them

As Lent approaches one week from now, let us reflect on the particular bad habits or vices that we have built up, vices which have crippled or enslaved us. Let us be guided by wisdom who at first seems to lead us along torturous paths but eventually will lead us to life through virtue, since *those who love her love life*.