

The limited self

by Father Matta El Maskeen (Matthew the Poor)

1. Never rely on your own wisdom or might or on human strength in any of your works. Otherwise, your mind will become dim and your insight blurred, thus blocking the way for grace to enter you and show you the way of God. You will thus be led astray from truth and fall into the enemy's trap. At the end, you will be enslaved to your own limited self and to the desires of other people, "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!" (Is.5.21).

2. Beware of thinking highly of yourself. Never feel that without you the world would stop. For your self would seem great and grand in your own eyes. Know instead that God can use another to do the work better than you. He can make the weak mighty and the mighty weak, the wise foolish and the foolish wise. Everything good and useful in you is from God and not from you. If you do not hand it over to God and with conviction attribute it to him, he will tear it away from you. If you boast of your intelligence or virtue, God will leave them to you as merely human gifts. They will then turn into corruption, loss, and damage.

3. Your limited self might hate submitting to God. It might escape surrendering to him. In the meantime, you would be making much of your own power – attributing your intelligence, virtue, and success to yourself. In this case, God will deliver you to continual discipline; discipline after discipline, tribulation after tribulation, until you succumb and surrender in brokenness. But if you reject discipline and cannot stand tribulation, God will forsake you forever.

4. Take heed then and open your ears: Either count yourself as nothing in word and deed and make up your mind to surrender yourself to God with all your might – and you will then gladly be released from your limited self by the grace of God; or, you will be delivered to discipline until you are set free from your limited self in spite of yourself. So if you wish to opt for the easier way, take that of voluntary submission. Count yourself from now on as nothing, and follow the path of grace wherever the Spirit may wish to lead you.

5. Know for certain that submission to God and total surrender to his will and divine plan are a free gift of grace. It thus demands, besides prayer and supplication, a trusting faith to receive this gift. This should be coupled with a longing springing from one's heart that God may not deliver us to discipline for our folly, nor abandon us to our own wisdom. For this reason, we should have

an extremely resolute will to renounce our own self at all times and in all works. This should not be done ostentatiously before people but within our conscience. Blessed is the man who can discover his own weakness and ignorance and confess them before God to the last day of his life.

6. If you fall under discipline, know for sure that this is a great profit, for God chastises the soul that has forgotten its weakness and has been puffed up by its talents and success. This is carried on until it realizes its weakness, especially when God does not provide in tribulation a way to escape. He besieges the soul from all sides and embitters it with inward and outward humiliation, whether by sin or by scandal, until it abhors itself, curses its own intelligence, and disowns its counsel. Finally, it surrenders itself to God, feeling crushed and lowly. At such a time, it becomes easy for man to hate himself. He even wishes to be hated by everybody. This is the way of true humility. It leads to total surrender to divine plan. It ends up with freeing one's soul from the tyranny of the limited self, with its deception, its stubbornness, and its vanity.

7. If you wish to free your soul by the shortest and simplest way, sit down every day under the discipline of grace. Examine your thoughts, movements, intentions, purposes, words, and deeds in the light of God's word. It is then that you shall discover the corruption of the limited self, its imposture, slyness, deception, vanity, and lack of chastity. If you persist in doing this regularly in contrition, you will manage to sever yourself from your false and devilish limited self. You will then be able to overpower it bit by bit until you can deny it altogether, hate it, and break jail from its tyranny. You will at last discover the catastrophe into which your limited self has led you for obeying it, finding peace in its shelter, boasting of it, and seeking its respect. The moment you realize at the bottom of your heart that you are nothing and that God is everything, then the truth shall have set you free.