

DESCENDING TO ASCEND: PRAYER AS INITIATION INTO DIVINE JUDGMENT IN THE *APOPTHHEGMATA PATRUM*

The Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee has ever been a cornerstone of Orthodox spirituality. But as the Desert Fathers remind us, it has eschatological significance as well.

by Father Joseph Lucas

In Late Antique Christian monasticism, there existed an interplay between scriptural exegesis and the mystagogy of prayer. Reading the Bible through the lens of asceticism, the monks looked for keys to understanding their spiritual practices. There are numerous biblical passages that deal directly with prayer, such as Jesus' directive to 'go into your closet to pray,' which is generally interpreted in ascetical literature as entering into the heart when praying. But other passages are more subtle, such as Luke 18: 'The Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee.' And yet this parable greatly influenced the way in which monks have understood prayer. This is evident from one of the earliest and most popular ascetical texts, the *Apophthegmata Patrum: Alphabetical Collection*. Although the Gospel of Luke is quoted or alluded to roughly half as much as the Gospel of Matthew in this work, the parable is exceptional in that it is directly referenced four times throughout the text.

The parable in its entirety reads:

And [Jesus] spoke this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous (*δίκαιοι*), and despised others: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unrighteous, adulterers, or even as this publican.

I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I possess.” And the publican, standing afar off, would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but struck his chest, saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” I tell you, this man went down to his house vindicated (δεδικαιωμένος) rather than the other, for every one that exalts himself shall be humbled (ταπεινωθήσεται); and he that humbles himself shall be exalted (ὑψωθήσεται).¹

As interpreted by the Desert Fathers, this pericope is not simply a warning to avoid judging others; rather, it establishes a dynamic of how God will judge and vindicate (δικαίω) his servants. For monks seeking God, the parable is transformed into a mystagogical equation which informs all aspects of their spiritual life: to exalt oneself through self-vindication leads to God’s condemnation, but to voluntarily descend through self-condemnation leads to God’s vindication. Through prayer and humility, the monk is initiated into divine judgment. As we examine the significance of Luke 18 in forming this monastic understanding of spirituality, we will simultaneously unpack a broader understanding of the matrix between prayer, humility and judgment.

The history of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is complicated and uncertain. The monks whose sayings are contained therein flourished in the fourth and fifth centuries. The largest number of sayings originates from the areas of Scetis and Nitria, located south of Alexandria in Egypt, with some sayings coming from regions farther down the Nile.² It was there in the inhospitable conditions of the desert where the monastics settled in caves or huts. Some chose to live the anchoritic life, like Anthony the Great; while others settled around a wise elder, working and praying together as a community (later known as a *coenobium*).³ With the devastation of Scetis in 407/8, the process of compiling the sayings of the fathers likely began.⁴ Derwas Chitty writes, ‘Physical insecurity and a sense of moral decay gave impetus to the work, with the fear lest the great Old Men and their times be forgotten.’⁵ Interestingly, sayings associated with Abba Poemen account for one-seventh of the *Alphabetical Collection*, suggesting that his disciples may have been responsible for initiating the process of collation.⁶ However, scholarly consensus points to Gaza as the location where the final text was edited, a process likely completed by the end of the fifth century.⁷ As the Egyptian desert became increasingly hostile, and the monastics became vulnerable to attacks from bandits and warring tribes, many fled to Palestine to resume their ascetic life in a more suitable environment. Fear of losing the oral and written traditions they

carried with them became the catalyst for compiling the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Though the sayings reflect a diverse group of personalities from many backgrounds, representing different theological approaches, the collection as a whole exhibits a remarkable homogeneity. If we presume that the final edition was compiled and redacted by a single group in Gaza, then it is likely the editors would have selected those sayings that reflected their theological tendencies, and altered or omitted any that did not. What was copied and passed down to later readers was received as one, integral text: the first monastic manual. It is within this manual that we discover the earliest mystagogy of prayer derived from the ‘Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee’—an idea that would influence subsequent ascetical literature.

We begin with an *apophthegma* of Abba Ammonas: ‘[K]eep the word of the publican always in your heart, and you shall be able to be saved (*δύνασαι σωθῆναι*).’⁸ Throughout the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the elders are approached with the request, ‘Give me a word that I may be saved.’ For every eager disciple who came to the desert, eternal salvation was the goal of their ascetic endeavor. They did not seek out sages to be amused by pithy witticisms; they were seeking a path to salvation. Like Jesus’ disciples in Mark 10:26, the monastics desired a personal answer to the query, ‘Who is able to be saved? (*τίς δύναται σωθῆναι*;)’⁹ According to Abba Ammonas, the monastic life modeled on that of the humble publican is the surest path to salvation. This ‘word of the publican’ is both a prayer (‘God be merciful to me a sinner’), and an action—a humbling of the soul before God. Amongst all the Christian virtues, humility is mentioned most frequently in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Humility is both the companion and goal of the spiritual life.

An exemplar of humility was Abba John, called ‘the Dwarf’ on account of his short stature. Once, he was asked by his fellow monks, ‘Who sold Joseph?’ With the *historia* of Genesis in mind, one of the monks replied, ‘It was his brethren.’ Abba John responds, ‘No, it was his humility (*ταπεινωσις*) which sold him, because he could have said, “I am their brother” and have objected; but, because he kept silence (*σιωπῶν*), he sold himself by his humility. It is also his humility which set him up as chief in Egypt.’¹⁰ Behind Abba John’s interpretation lays the ‘Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee’: ‘[E]very one that exalts himself shall be humbled (*ταπεινωθήσεται*); and he that humbles himself shall be exalted (*ύψωθήσεται*).’¹¹ In choosing the path of humility

(equated here with silence, another monastic virtue) the patriarch Joseph is exalted. But something more profound is implied in the saying. Abba John does not refer to specific moments in which Joseph humbled himself; rather, he speaks of Joseph's character in general. Joseph's way of life radiates the virtue of humility. As the narrative in Genesis outlines, Joseph continually cooperated with God's plan rather than opposed it. The resultant state of humility and meekness that led to his exaltation (as Pharaoh's governor) may be taken as a metaphor for God's exaltation and vindication, the same granted to the publican. Thus, the Desert Fathers envisaged humility as more than one virtue among many. As Abba Or states, 'The crown of the monk is humble-mindedness (*ταπεινοφροσύνη*).'¹² Humility is more than isolated acts; it becomes a state of being, reflected here by the coupling of 'humble' (*ταπεινός*) with 'mindset' (*φρόνησις*). Another definition of *ταπεινός* is 'lowly,' which characterizes a downward spiritual movement through repentance.¹³ Without entry into such a state, the efforts of the monk remain futile.

In order to acquire true humble-mindedness, the Desert Fathers maintained an acute awareness of God's impending judgment. Abba Anthony the Great tells his disciples, 'Remember what you have promised God, for it will be required of you on the Day of Judgment (*ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως*).'¹⁴ Abba Orsisius candidly cautions, 'With difficulty shall we be able to escape the judgment of God (*τὴν κρίσιν τοῦ Θεοῦ*).'¹⁵ Abba Agathon advises, 'At every hour, a man should be aware of the judgment of God (*τῷ κριτηρίῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ*).'¹⁶ Evagrius teaches, 'Always keep your death in mind and do not forget the eternal judgment, then there will be no fault in your soul.'¹⁷ And Abba Silvanus receives a sobering vision of the perpetual judgment that confirms the previous sayings. While sitting with some other monks, 'he came into ecstasy (*ἐγένετο ἐν ἐκστάσει*) and fell with his face to the ground.' When asked what he saw, he responds, 'I was taken up to see the judgment (*κρίσιν*) and I saw there many of our kind coming to punishment (*κόλασιν*) and many laypersons going into the kingdom.'¹⁸ It is clear that the monks were not merely concerned about God's judgment, but more specifically they feared the possibility of eternal condemnation (*καταδίκη / κατάκρισις*).

To preserve spiritual vigilance or watchfulness (*νήψις*) in prayer, the monastics were taught to continually meditate on death and the fearful judgment seat of Christ. The monks lived out daily the 'inaugurated eschatology'¹⁹ of the earliest

Christian communities, bringing the eternal judgment of Christ to the fore at every moment. Behind this eschatological vision is the biblical aphorism, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’²⁰ In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, remembrance of judgment is synonymous with the fear of God. Abba Cronius, when asked, ‘Through what work (πράγματος) does a monk come to the fear of God?’ replies, ‘According to me, he should withdraw himself from every work and give himself to afflicting his body; and with all his strength, he should remember the departure (ἐξόδου) from his body and the judgment of God (κρίσεως τοῦ Θεοῦ).’²¹ Similarly, Abba Anthony teaches, ‘Always have the fear of God before your eyes; remember he who gives death (θανατοῦντος) and life (ζωογονοῦντος).’²² In contemplating death and judgment, Abba Anthony draws the end into the present; and with mindfulness of God’s judgment comes awareness of God’s constant presence.

Turning to the Scriptures, the Desert Fathers looked for ways to avoid condemnation at the final judgment. The ‘Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee’ again provided the key. In a saying attributed to Epiphanius, we read: ‘The Canaanite woman cries out (βοᾷ) and is heard; and the woman with the issue of blood is silent and blessed; but the Pharisee cries out (κράζει) and he is condemned (κατακρίνεται); the publican does not open his mouth and is heard.’²³ In the first example, the Canaanite woman and the hemorrhaging woman are compared. One cried out from the depths of her soul, while the other preserved humble silence. Both acted in faith and humility and were in turn answered by Christ. In the second example, the arrogant and self-righteous Pharisee ‘cries out,’ but in pretense. He has vindicated himself before God, usurping his master’s prerogative of judgment; but the humble self-condemnation of the publican invites God’s favor. In comparing these four characters, Epiphanius is not criticizing loquacity, nor commending silence as an end in itself (since both silence and speaking are presented in a positive light in the first example). It is the content of one’s words, thoughts and deeds that determines the judgment of God. The publican, who chooses to condemn himself to God rather than judge others, is hence vindicated. In contrast, self-vindication is depicted as an impediment to salvation. The same idea is indicated by a saying of Abba Poemen. We are told, ‘Abba Poemen said this about the slaves of Shimei (3 Kgs. 2:39), “His mistake was to vindicate himself; whoever does that destroys himself.”’²⁴ Like the Pharisee, Shimei does not admit his sin (in this case, his disobedience to Solomon, who had

commanded he never leave Jerusalem). Instead, he directs blame back to Solomon. Poemen implies that Solomon would have spared Shimei had he accepted blame rather than defend himself.

The Desert Fathers take this approach even further, rejecting not only vindication of one's sins, but even the desire to rectify injustices against oneself:

A brother who was wronged (*ἀδικηθείς*) by another brother came to Abba Sisoës, and he says to him, 'My brother has wronged me for something and I want to avenge (*ἐκδικῆσαι*) myself.' But the old man pleaded with him saying, 'No, my child, leave vengeance to God.' He said to him, 'I shall not rest until I have avenged myself.' The old man said, 'Brother, let us pray.' Then the old man arose and said, 'God, we no longer need you to care for us, since we vindicate ourselves (*ἐκδίκησιν ἑαυτῶν ποιοῦμεν*).' Hearing these words, the brother fell at the old man's feet, saying, 'I will not again vindicate myself (*δικάζομαι*) against my brother; forgive me, abba.'²⁵

This *apophthegma* ties together divine judgment with theodicy. The presence of injustice and evil in the world has prompted Christians in every age to question the righteousness and sovereignty ascribed to God. Abba Sisoës reminds the monk that ultimate justice depends on God, and the outcome shall be according to his will. Rather than seeking to vindicate himself against his brother, he must leave judgment to God. In another saying, Abba Agathon commends something similar. During a reading from Genesis, he overhears a fellow monk condemn the patriarch Jacob for his cunningness. Agathon replies, 'Let be, old man. If God vindicates, who condemns? (*Εἰ ὁ Θεὸς ὁ δικαίων, τίς ὁ κατακρίνων;*).'²⁶ This is nearly identical to Paul's words in Romans 8: 'God vindicates, who shall condemn? (*Θεὸς ὁ δικαίων, τίς ὁ κατακρινῶν;*)'²⁷ It is God who chose Jacob and appointed him an heir to the covenant promises; and it is God who will vindicate Jacob at the last judgment. Abba Agathon interprets Romans in terms of God's sovereign prerogative to judge his creatures, which precludes the monk's right to condemn other persons.

If it is right for a person to refrain from defending his actions, it is an even greater feat to condemn oneself. Whereas the former response is passive, self-condemnation is an active appropriation of repentance. Throughout the

Apophthegmata Patrum, the prayer of the publican becomes a descent from self-vindication into the depths of prayerful repentance. It is simultaneously a movement away from judging others, and towards self-condemnation. Abba Poemen ‘said, groaning, “All the virtues come to this house (οἶκον) except one, and without that virtue it is hard for a man to stand.” Then they asked him, “What is it?” and he said, “For a man to blame himself (μέμψηται ἑαυτόν).”²⁸ His understanding of repentance is contained in the verb μέμφομαι, which literally means ‘to complain against.’²⁹ The entrance to humility through self-condemnation is through the act of finding fault in oneself rather than others. The house that Poemen refers to is his own person; so it is himself whom he blames for not having acquired this virtue. Like a house built on an unstable foundation, a monk who does not complain against himself is unable to stand—a fall is inevitable. Abba John tells us something similar, stating, ‘We have put the light burden on one side, that is to say, blaming ourselves (ἐαυτοὺς μέμφασθαι), and we have loaded ourselves with a heavy one, that is to say, vindicating ourselves (δικαιοῦν ἑαυτούς).’³⁰ We may rightly ask, how is self-condemnation the lighter burden, when it would seem easier to justify one’s own actions? To vindicate oneself places one in opposition to God, and in the end results in condemnation at the last judgment, therefore making it the heavier burden. Thus, according to Abba John, we confuse the matter, not perceiving that blaming oneself is (in the outcome) the easier weight to bear.

The Desert Fathers maintained an acute awareness of their unworthiness in the presence of God. Abba Matoes explains that, ‘The nearer a man draws to God, the more he sees himself a sinner. For when Isaiah the prophet saw God, he accused himself and called himself unclean (τάλαν καὶ ἀκάθαρτον ἔλεγεν ἑαυτόν).’³¹ The allusion is to the theophany in Isaiah 6, when the prophet ‘saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.’ Isaiah found himself standing in the presence of the living God, yet he could only think of his unworthiness: ‘Woe is me, I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips!’³² The prophet’s experience is confirmed by Abba Matoes. As the monk ascends to God in the spiritual life, he comes into contact with the holiness and purity of divinity. But this forces a comparison between himself and the other—between divinity and the fallen human condition—revealing how far the monk is from God. The closer the proximity to God, the more obvious sin becomes in contrast.

In another saying Poemen says, 'If a man blames himself, he is protected on all sides.'³³ Self-condemnation also sets up a hedge of protection around the monk, almost like an amulet able to ward off temptation. We find the same theme in yet another of his sayings: 'A brother said to Abba Poemen, "If I fall into a shameful transgression, my thought (λογισμός) devours and accuses me (κατηγορεῖ) saying: 'Why have you fallen?'" The old man said to him, "At the moment when a man goes astray, if he says 'I have sinned,' immediately it will have ceased."³⁴ Self-condemnation is repentance and the constant awareness of sin. The act of naming and confessing the sin has the power both to expunge it and to strengthen the monk so that he is less likely to fall prey to it again. The temptation immediately abates, and he is able to focus his attention once again on God. A saying of Amma Syncletica (one of the few Desert Mothers in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*) connects the action of self-condemnation with the goal of humble-mindedness, interpreted once again through Luke 18: 'Imitate the publican so that you will not be co-condemned (συγκατακριθῆς) with the Pharisee. Choose the meekness (πραῶν) of Moses and you will find your heart which is stone changed into a fountain of water.'³⁵ The second line explains the first; it is the meekness of the publican that saves him.³⁶ According to Syncletica, the action of humbling oneself leads to a general state of humility, of which meekness and compassion (the conversion of the stony heart) are attributes.

Like his fellow monks, Abba Xanthias believed that a prayer of self-condemnation leads to salvation. He contrasts the positive words of the Good Thief with the negative deeds of Judas Iscariot. He tells his disciples, 'The thief was on the cross and he was vindicated (ἐδικαιώθη) by a single word; and Judas, who was counted in the number of the apostles, lost all his labor in one single night and descended from Heaven to Hades. Therefore, let no one boast of his good works, for all those who trust in themselves fall.'³⁷ Here the Good Thief secured his eternal vindication by the spoken word. But internal self-condemnation can also lead the monastic to *hesychia*, inner silence and stillness. Quoting Matthew 12:3, Abba Poemen states, 'If man remembered that it is written: "By your words you will be vindicated (δικαιωθήση) and by your words you will be condemned (καταδικασθήση)," he would choose to remain silent (σιωπᾶν).'³⁸ Abba Agathon concurs: 'Whenever his thoughts urged him to judge something that he saw, he would say to himself, "Agathon, it is not your business to do that." And thus his thought was silenced (ὁ λογισμὸς αὐτοῦ

ἡσύχαζεν).³⁹ Judging himself, Agathon is able to resist the urge to judge others. But delving more deeply into this saying, we find that self-condemnation is also an entrance into the divine silence where the monk encounters God.

A saying of Abba Moses offers further insight into the nature of voluntary self-condemnation. An inquirer asked the elder, ‘What of the fasts and vigils which a man does, what do they accomplish?’ He replied, ‘They enable the soul to be humbled (ταπεινωθῆναι). For it is written, “See my humiliation (ταπείνωσιν) and my travail (κόπον), and forgive all my sins” (Ps. 24:18). If the soul produces these fruits, through them God may have compassion on the soul.’⁴⁰ Here the objective of asceticism is to acquire humility—it is not undertaken for its own sake. And he reveals something else by quoting the psalm: humiliation is coupled with travail. It is through these ‘fruits’ (in the plural) that God has compassion on the soul, hence forgiving all of a person’s sins. There is a sense here that humility is acquired through an active engagement with strife and an acceptance of shame. Self-condemnation is both an internal process of descent, and an external embrace of hardships facing the monk. The lives of the Desert Fathers provide a testimony to their voluntary sacrifice of comfort and their acceptance of hardship and shame in order to find God.

With his attention focused on his own sins, the monastic avoids seeing the sins of others. Caveats against condemning others are ubiquitous in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. In a letter from Abba Moses to Abba Poemen we read, ‘The monk must die to his neighbor and never judge him at all, in any way whatever.’⁴¹ Abba Paphnutius asks his spiritual father Macarius the Great for a word, and is told, ‘Do no evil to anyone, and do not condemn (κατακρίνῃς) anyone. Observe this and you will be saved.’⁴² Likewise, Abba Isaac the Theban discovered the danger of judging others:

One day Abba Isaac went to a monastery. He saw a brother falling (σφαλέντα) and he condemned (κατέκρινεν) him. When he returned to the desert, an angel of the Lord came and stood in front of the door of his cell, and said, ‘I will not let you enter.’ But he persisted, saying, ‘What is the matter?’ and the angel replied, ‘God has sent me to ask you where you want to cast the fallen brother whom you have condemned (ἐκρίνας)?’ Immediately he repented and said, ‘I have sinned, forgive

me.’ Then the angel said, ‘Get up, God has forgiven you. But from now on, be careful not to judge someone before God has judged him.’⁴³

By placing himself in God’s position as judge, Abba Isaac has instead brought judgment upon himself. The action of God, mediated through an angel, is meant to bring the elder to repentance, not simply to make light of his sin. In effect, Abba Isaac is preemptively judged. But when he chooses the way of the publican rather than that of the Pharisee, he is spontaneously forgiven by God.⁴⁴

A monk who prayerfully and diligently condemns himself and acquires true humility is also on the path to righteousness. (We must here remember that the verb ‘to vindicate’ and the noun ‘righteousness’ are cognates of the same Greek word: *δίκαιος*.) Abba Poeman states, ‘The will of man (*τὸ θέλημα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου*) is a brass wall between him and God, and a stone of stumbling. When a man renounces it, he also says to himself, “In my God, I pass over the wall” (Ps. 18:29). Therefore, if righteousness (*τὸ δικαίωμα*) is united with the will, a man can labor successfully.’⁴⁵ Presenting us with yet another antinomy, Poemen teaches that the desire to pursue righteousness is within the grasp of a person only when he renounces his own desires. Man must redefine his will, submitting it to the righteous will of God. Righteousness (*δικαιοσύνη*) is depicted as a certain way of being and acting, but it is clear here that the righteousness of God precedes human righteousness, and persons must be ‘in’ (*ἐν*) God in order to ‘pass over the wall.’

Frequently in the sayings of the Desert Fathers, the spiritual life is presented in terms of the acquisition of *δικαιοσύνη*. But the Desert Fathers also understand humility to be an important corrective to, and safeguard against, false righteousness. In an inspired parable that Abba Daniel receives from Abba Arsenius, we become spectators of a vision granted to the latter:

[Arsenius] saw a temple and two men on horseback, opposite one another, carrying a piece of wood crosswise. They wanted to go in through the door, but could not because they held their piece of wood crosswise. Neither of them would draw back before the other, so as to carry the wood straight; so they remained outside the door. A voice said to the old man, ‘These men carry the yoke of righteousness with arrogance (*ὑπερηφάνιας*), and do not humble themselves so as to correct

themselves and walk in the humble way of Christ. So they remain outside the kingdom of God.’⁴⁶

In relating this story to Abba Daniel, Arsenius is passing on the valuable lesson that righteousness and pride are antithetical. Arsenius contrasts external righteousness—the failing attributed to the Pharisees—with a true righteousness that is necessarily united to humility.

This brings us to another saying of Epiphanius, which references Luke 18: ‘God remits the debts of sinners who are penitent, for example, the sinful woman and the publican, but of the righteous man he even asks interest. This is what he says to the apostles, “Except your righteousness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20).’⁴⁷ Here the publican’s self-condemnation is synonymous with repentance. The action of the publican is set in opposition to the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The saying is paradoxical: one’s righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven; and yet it is the penitent sinner who is pardoned of transgressions and granted salvation. Epiphanius does not resolve this tension, but leaves it to the ascetic, those who have ‘ears to hear,’ to determine the meaning. Another saying that elaborates on vindication and righteousness belongs to Abba Anoub, but is contained within the sayings of Poemen.⁴⁸ Anoub offers an explication of the verse, ‘All things are pure to the pure’ (Titus 1:15). He explains, ‘If a man really affirms this saying, and he sees the shortcomings of his brother, he makes his righteousness to swallow up the shortcomings (*Ποιεί τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ καταπιεῖν αὐτά*). The brother says to him, “Of what kind is his righteousness?” The old man answered, “That he constantly blames himself (*Ἴνα πάντοτε καταμέμφηται ἑαυτόν*).”’⁴⁹ There are two complimentary components to this saying. First, there is Abba Anoub’s advice to the brother: purity is to see only the righteousness in others. In effect, humbling oneself is an active motion of placing oneself below others. Second, there is the praiseworthy trait of the other monk: his righteousness radiates from his self-condemnatory prayer. Like the publican, the monk is vindicated—deemed to be righteous—precisely because he does not consider himself so.

Reception in Later Ascetic Literature

Now we will briefly examine how this spiritual approach influenced later ascetical literature in the Greek-speaking Christian east. For later generations, the *Alphabetical Collection* became a favorite reading for ascetics throughout the Christian world, serving as a blueprint for both eremitic and coenobitic monasticism. As the compilation and redaction of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is generally ascribed to fifth century Gaza, a product of the burgeoning monastic movement there, we can see their influence most acutely on three collections of writings, all attributed to the sixth and seventh century Levant: *The Letters of Barsanuphius and John*; *Discourses and Sayings* by Dorotheos of Gaza; and John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. These will provide a starting point for examining the influence of the Desert Fathers on later readers.

Barsanuphius was a monk from Egypt who later came to settle in the Thavatha region of Palestine.⁵⁰ A monastic community sprung up around him, and he was later joined by Abba John. The two elders lived as anchorites in adjacent huts, both providing spiritual counsel to the monastic community that looked to them for guidance. Their advice was strongly influenced by the Desert Fathers, perhaps owing to Barsanuphius' origins in Egypt. John Chryssavgis finds at least eighty direct references from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* in their *Letters*, and fifty instances in which the Desert Fathers themselves or their writings are referred to as an important foundation for the monastic life.⁵¹

Many of the same themes found in the *Sayings*—judgment (especially self-condemnation), humility, and the acquisition of righteousness—appear in the responses of Barsanuphius and John to various queries from monks, clergy and laypersons. To illustrate the similarity to the Desert Father's views on prayer, humility and vindication, we shall cite two examples. The first is an answer to a question posed by the deacon in their monastic community. Barsanuphius explains that,

in continually condemning yourself, your heart feels compunction in order to receive repentance. For, he who by the prophet said: 'Be first to confess your sins, so that you may be vindicated' (Isa. 43:26), this same one vindicates you and renders you innocent of every condemnation. Indeed, it says, 'It is God who vindicates; who is it then that will condemn you?' (Rom. 8:33) So, as I have on other occasions stated to you, acquire humility, obedience, and submission, and you shall be saved.⁵²

This remarkable passage brings together all three themes examined in our study. In our second example, we see the ‘Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee’ employed to demonstrate the spiritual principle of vindication by self-condemnation. Abba John responds to a brother who asks whether he should condemn another monk for sinning. He replies, ‘[W]e do not know whether through his repentance, the sinful brother will be more pleasing to God, like the publican who in an instant was saved through humility and confession. For it was the Pharisee who left condemned by his own arrogance.’⁵³ John concludes, ‘[L]et us imitate the humility of the publican and condemn ourselves in order to be vindicated; and let us avoid the arrogance of the Pharisee in order not to be condemned.’ The parallels with the sayings of the Desert Fathers are remarkable.

Abba Dorotheos was a disciple of Barsanuphius and John. In his *Discourses and Sayings*, he also frequently quotes from the *Alphabetical Collection*, and arranges his chapters according to themes emphasized by the Desert Fathers. In the chapter ‘On Fear of God,’ Dorotheos advises, ‘One forms a desire of God through fear of condemnation; this is . . . the starting point.’⁵⁴ In the discourse ‘On Humility,’ Dorotheos again elaborates on the necessity of this virtue, and the means to acquiring it. At one point he states, ‘If a painful experience comes to a humble man, straightway he goes against himself, straightway he accuses himself as the one worthy of punishment, and he does not set about accusing anyone or putting the blame on anyone else.’⁵⁵ Here Dorotheos ties humility with self-condemnation and refraining from judging others.

In the discourse ‘On Refusal to Judge our Neighbor,’ Dorotheos brings in Luke 18 as evidence that judging others leads to condemnation. After citing the parable, he concludes, ‘It was then that he made a judgment. He condemned a person and the dispositions of his soul—to put it shortly, his whole life. Therefore, the tax-collector rather than the Pharisee went away vindicated.’⁵⁶ He goes on to lament, ‘Why do we not rather judge ourselves and our own wickedness which we know so accurately and about which we have to render an account to God? Why do we usurp God’s right to judge?’⁵⁷ Elsewhere, Dorotheos includes an entire discourse titled ‘On Self-Accusation,’ in which he quotes from the *Alphabetical Collection* nine times.⁵⁸ And finally, in the discourse ‘On the Need for Consultation,’ he warns of the danger of

self-righteousness, quoting the saying of Abba Poemen, examined above ('The will of man is a brass wall standing between him and God'). Therein he equates the path to righteousness with relinquishing self-will and depending instead on the will of God.⁵⁹

John Climacus was a near contemporary of Barsanuphius, John and Dorotheos. He worked out his salvation in the renowned monastery located on Mount Sinai. His 'surname' is derived from the title of his manual on the Christian spiritual life, *The Ladder* (*κλίμαξ*) *of Divine Ascent*, a text that likewise cites the Desert Fathers on numerous occasions. Correspondences with the latter are ubiquitous. Regarding judgment, John Climacus writes, 'During prayer and supplication, stand with trembling like a convict standing before a judge, so that . . . you may extinguish the wrath of the just Judge.'⁶⁰ He frequently advises self-condemnation as the means to acquiring 'holy humility';⁶¹ and he warns, 'Do not be self-confident until you hear the final judgment passed upon yourself.'⁶² Regarding the 'Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee,' John Climacus cites it twice. In the first instance, the Pharisee typifies the passion of pride and denial of God.⁶³ And in the second instance, the Publican exemplifies humility: 'He who asks God for less than his dessert will certainly receive more than he deserves. This is demonstrated by the publican who asked for forgiveness, but received vindication.'⁶⁴ The emphasis is once again on the divine vindication of one who humbles himself in prayer.

From the eighth century onwards, the corpus of Christian ascetical writings continued to multiply. The *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the writings of Barsanuphius and John, Dorotheos and John Climacus—along with classic works such as the *Life of Anthony* and John Cassian's *Institutes*—were foundational for later ascetical literature. Although the traditions and teachings of the Desert Fathers became part of the common parlance of monasticism throughout Christendom, the principle of vindication by self-condemnation eventually disappeared in most places. Yet in the Eastern Orthodox Church, so much indebted to early monastic literature, a remnant of this early mystagogy has survived, being incorporated into Byzantine hymnography⁶⁵ and revived by later ascetics such as the contemporary elders Sophrony Sakharov of Essex⁶⁶ and Paisios of Mount Athos.⁶⁷ And so the reception history of Luke 18, and its elaboration as an initiation into God's vindication and righteousness, continues into post-modernity.

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Notes

1. Luke 18:9-14.
2. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Saint Joseph: Liturgical Press, 1984), xviii.
3. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 3.
4. Derwas Chitty, *The Desert a City* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1966), 67.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 69.
7. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, 6-8; Lucien Regnault, *Les Pères du désert à travers leurs Apophtegmes* (Solesmes: Abbaye saint-pierre de solesmes, 1987), 73-83; Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 1-25; Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 86-7.
8. PG 65.120; Ward, 26. Throughout this paper, citations from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are loosely based on the translation of Benedicta Ward (cited above), but greatly revised or translated anew based on the text given in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca Cursus Completus*. For the reader's convenience, I will cite both sources throughout. On occasion, Ward draws additional sayings from the following work: Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la Tradition Grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1962).
9. Notice the similarity in grammatical construction between Mk 10:26 and Abba Ammonas' statement.
10. PG 65.212; Ward, 90.
11. Luke 14:11.
12. PG 65.440; Ward, 247.
13. Consider the similar connection between the Latin 'humus' (ground) and the word 'humility,' indicating this downward motion.
14. PG 65.85; Ward, 8.
15. PG 65.316; Ward, 161.
16. PG 65.116; Ward, 24.
17. PG 65.173; Ward, 64.
18. PG 65.408; Ward, 222.
19. The term 'inaugurated eschatology' was first introduced by Georges Florovsky in 'Revelation and Interpretation,' in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 1 (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1987), 36. Florovsky preferred this term over that coined by C. H. Dodd: 'realized eschatology.'
20. Ps. 110:10; Prov. 9:10.

21. PG 65.248; Ward, 115.
22. PG 65.85; Ward, 8.
23. PG 65.165.197; Ward, 57-8.
24. Guy, 31; Ward, 195. The Greek text of the saying reads 'sons/servants of Shimei' (τοὺς παῖδας τοῦ Σεμει), which may be a corruption or divergent reading of the biblical text. Poemen is apparently citing 3 Kings 2:39, which reads "δύο δούλοι τοῦ Σεμει" (both in Rahlfs and Brenton LXX). Thus, in context, the saying refers initially to the two unnamed slaves of Shimei who went to Anchus (son of King Maacha), and then switches focus to their master Shimei. The slaves disobeyed, and in turn caused Shimei to disobey by leaving in order to bring them back home. In shifting attention from the slaves to their master, Poemen directs all blame to the latter. My gratitude to Prof. Hans van Loon for pointing out this textual divergence.
25. PG 65.392; Ward, 212.
26. PG 65.116; Ward, 23.
27. Rom. 8:33-4.
28. PG 65.356; Ward, 186.
29. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, edited by G.W.H. Lampe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969), 842.
30. PG 65.211; Ward, 90.
31. PG 65.289; Ward, 143.
32. Isa. 6:5.
33. PG 65.345; Ward, 180.
34. PG 65.345; Ward, 181.
35. PG 65.425; Ward, 233.
36. Although meekness is not exactly synonymous with humility, they are oftentimes used interchangeably in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.
37. PG 65.313; Ward, 159. The verb ἐδικαιώθη is aorist-passive, indicating an action that has occurred and been completed in the past, enacted by an external agent. In both the Septuagint and the New Testament, passive voice is often used to signify that God is the agent, and that the human party is the recipient of the action.
38. PG 65.332; Ward, 173.
39. PG 65.113; Ward, 23.
40. PG 65.288; Ward, 142.
41. PG 65.288; Ward, 141.
42. PG 65.273; Ward, 133.
43. PG 65.240; Ward, 109-10.
44. Cf. Isa. 64:6.
45. PG 65.333-6; Ward, 174. See Lampe, 770 for other instances of κάμνω as meaning 'to win by toil or labor,' which best fits the context of this *apophthegma*. Cf. Epiphanius of Salamis, *Against Heresies*, 80.4 (PG 489.10), where κάμνω is spoken of as 'unto righteousness' (εἰς δικαιοσύνην).
46. PG 65.100-1; Ward, 15-16. It is interesting that ὑπερηφάνια is ascribed to Satan and is listed as one of the sins he uses to destroy souls in *Epistle of Barnabas* 20.1. This document is generally dated to 2nd c. Egypt, and perhaps was known by some of the Desert Fathers. *Barnabas* 20.2 goes on to describe sinners as 'not knowing the reward of righteousness...nor judging righteously (κρίσει δικαίᾳ).'
47. PG 65.165-8; Ward, 58-9.

48. In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the saying immediately before the present one is Poemen's explanation of Titus 1:15. Abba Anoub's interpretation, cited here, is in response to the same interlocutor who previously inquired of Poemen.
49. PG 65.345; Ward, 181.
50. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, 36-9.
51. *Letters from the Desert*, trans. and intro. John Chryssavgis (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2003), 50.
52. Chryssavgis, 109; *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza: Correspondance*. Vol. II.I. ed. P. De Angelis-Noah, F. Neyt, and L. Regnault (Paris: Institut des Sources chrétiennes, 2000), 190-3 [SC 450].
53. Chryssavgis, 138; *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza: Correspondance*. Vol. II.II. ed. P. De Angelis-Noah, F. Neyt, and L. Regnault (Paris: Institut des Sources chrétiennes, 2001), 558-61 [SC 451].
54. Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*. trans. and intro. Eric Wheeler (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1977), 109; *Dorothee de Gaza: Oeuvres Spirituelles*. ed. L. Regnault and J. de Préville (Paris : Institut des Sources chrétiennes, 1963), 220 [SC 92].
55. Wheeler, 96; SC 92, 192-3.
56. Wheeler, 132; SC 92, 270-3.
57. Wheeler, 132-3; SC 92, 272-3.
58. Wheeler, 140-8; SC 92, 288-305.
59. Wheeler, 123-4; SC 92, 252-5.
60. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 71; PG 88.803.
61. *The Ladder*, 142; PG 88.971-2.
62. *The Ladder*, 140; PG 88.967.
63. *The Ladder*, 138; PG 88.966.
64. *The Ladder*, 159; PG 88.999.
65. For example, on the Sundays leading up to the Great Lent, Byzantine churches dedicate one Sunday to the 'Publican and the Pharisee.' Some of the hymns in the Matins service preserve the tradition of vindication by self-condemnation. One such hymn is the Doxastikon of the Canon: 'O Lord, you condemned the Pharisee who vindicated himself by boasting about his works; but you vindicated the publican who was humble, and who with sighs prayed for expiation.'
66. For example, he interprets Luke 18 and concludes with, '[T]he more a man abases himself in self-condemnation, the higher God will exalt him.' *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Platina: St Herman Press, 2006), 78. See also my own work, *Prayer of the Publican* (Rollinsford: Orthodox Research Institute, 2011), 83-8.
67. For example, he writes, 'Those...who struggled spiritually...judging their own selves, are released from the trial of the righteous Judge on the Day of Judgment... When we seek to be justified in this life and avoid being rebuked, we reveal that the worldly way of thinking is still robust within us.' *Epistles of Elder Paisios* (Thessaloniki: Holy Monastery of the Evangelist John the Theologian, 2002), 142.