

09. Obedience and Detachment



Before we examine Teresa's teach on contemplation, let us pause to reflect on two virtues that are essential if we are to grow into contemplative prayer

I. Obedience

Hebrew: עָנָה 'Listen' 'Heed' 'Obey'

Greek ἄκουειν = 'listen' ὑπακούειν = 'obey'
'under', from a position of submission.

Latin **ob**-audiens

'right up against'

To obey God is to be close to God and to be listening for the slightest expression of God's will with the desire and intention of doing what God inspires us to do with all our heart and with joy, knowing that God's will is the most beautiful and liberating thing we can do.

Communion in love between two people is possible only to the extent that they are able to listen to each other, and are committed to do so. We have already seen that it is the transcendent God who takes the initiative in communicating with us and that God does so through the Word and the Spirit. How can we respond if we are not listening for God's invitation to share God's life and to enjoy the intimacy of communion with God in prayer?

‘Want only what God wants’ (*Interior Castle* II,1,7).

‘The whole aim of any person who is beginning prayer – and do not forget this because it is very important – should be to prepare oneself with determination and every possible effort to bring one's will into conformity with God's will. The greatest perfection attainable along the spiritual path lies in this conformity. ... In perfect conformity to God's will lies all our good’ (*Interior Castle* II,1,8).

‘Obedience brings us the sooner to perfection and is the best means of attaining it’ (*Foundations* 5).

Teresa concludes the account of her inner life with the following prayer:

‘May it please the Lord, since He is powerful and can hear me if He wants, that I might succeed in doing God's will in everything.’

(*Life*)

‘My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete my mission’ (John 4:34).

‘I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of the One who sent me’ (John 5:30).

‘I do nothing on my own ... the one who sent me is with me. My Father has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases my Father’ (John 8:28-29).

‘Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done”’ (Matthew 26:39 and 42).

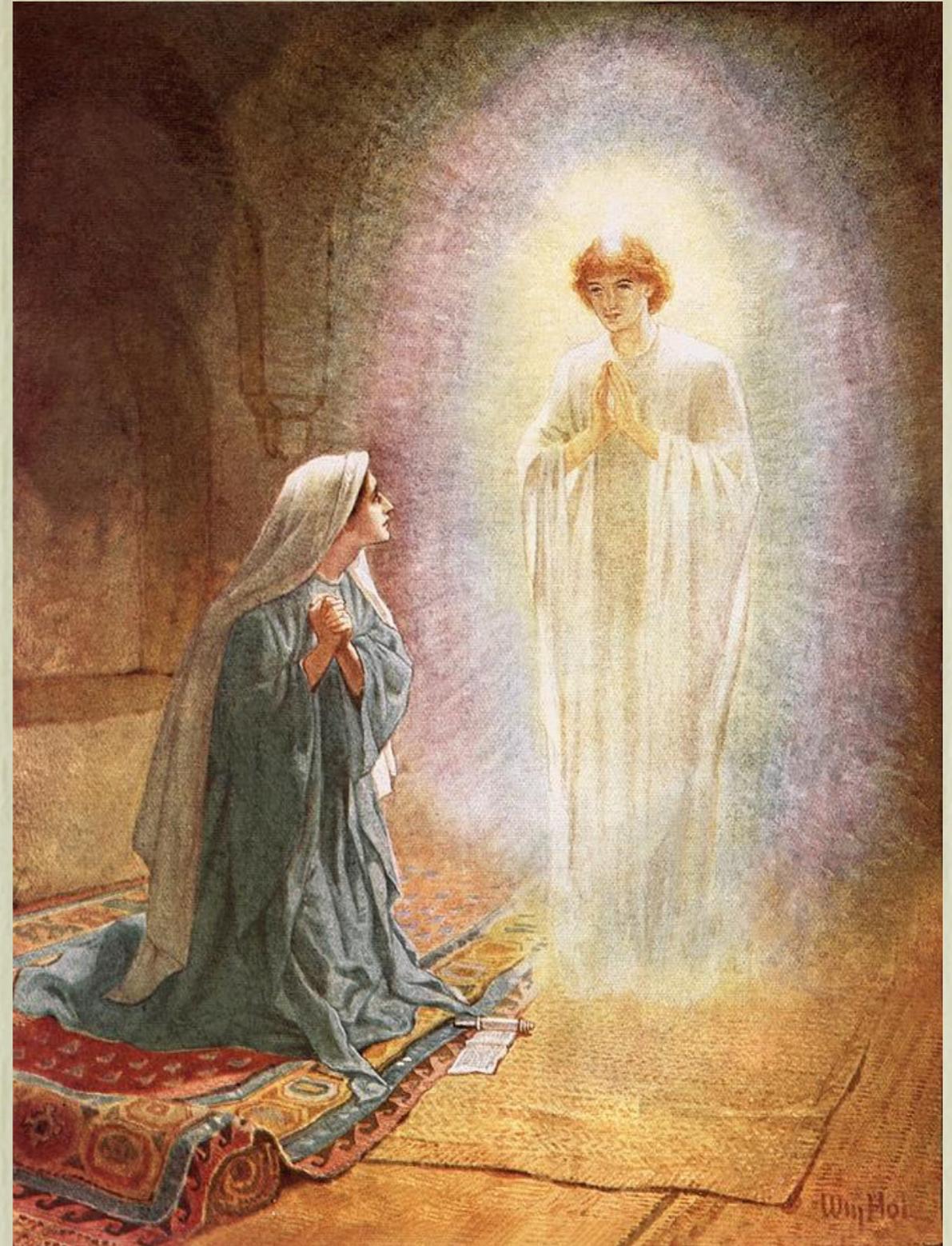
Jesus asks the same of his disciples: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven’ (Matthew 6:9-10).

‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father’ (Matthew 7:21).

‘Pointing to his disciples, Jesus said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”’ (Matthew 12:49-50).

‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:19-20).

Luke presents Mary as a model for our obedience: ‘Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”’ (Luke 1:38).



‘Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord’ (Luke 1:45).

God is speaking to our heart.

God is speaking also to others.

‘God is so content that the rule and direction of human beings be through other human beings, and that we be governed by human reason, that God definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence upon supernatural communications, nor be confirmed in their strength and security, until they pass through the human channel of the mouth of another human being. As often as God reveals something to a person, God confers upon that person a kind of inclination to manifest this to someone appropriate. Until this is done, we usually go without complete satisfaction, for it is not received from another person like ourselves’ (John of the Cross *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II.22.9).

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899) refers to the conversion of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus.

When Paul asked: ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ (Acts 22:10), Jesus told him to go into Damascus, and there a man called Ananias would tell him what to do.

So the more attentive we are to others and especially to the community of faith in which Christ has promised to be present, the more we will be able to listen to every word that comes to us from the mouth of God. For this to happen we must be in touch with our own heart and listen there for the echo inside us which says Yes to what we hear. The Spirit helps us to discern God’s word in the many words that continually impact upon us.

1. We tend to seek **joy** – that is to say, to seek always what gives us a sense of well-being. God is wiser than our natural desires, and sometimes it is clearly wiser to do something that goes against immediate gratification and is even quite painful. We don't find this easy.

2. We tend to want to look forward to good things in **hope**, and to act in a way that looks like working out for our benefit. Once again our judgment of this can be quite superficial and even misguided. To follow God's will can mean putting our own future happiness at risk. We don't find this easy.

3. **Fear** plays a big role in our lives. We instinctively avoid whatever threatens our sense of well-being. ‘We dread feeling unwell, unhappy, insecure, miserable, unattractive, downcast’ (Burrows, *Ascent to Love*, page 32).

If God wants to draw us beyond our small egoism and enlarge our heart with compassion and generosity, we might have to suffer some of these negative feelings. We don’t find this easy.

4. We tend to **grieve** whenever something associated with our sense of well-being is taken from us, so we are tempted to hold on tightly to whatever gives us a sense of security. If our hands are so tightly clenched, how can we be open to receive a grace that will enlarge our hearts

If, however, we are truly convinced of God's love and that God is revealing his will to us moment by moment, then we must decide that we want what God wants more than anything and we must get on with the job of making space for reflective prayer, doing our duty, and caring for others while accepting realistically our own limitations. We must be committed to acting in this way, whatever the feeling and whatever the cost. We don't find this easy.

John of the Cross

‘What does it profit you to give God one thing if God asks of you another? Consider what it is God wants, and then do it. You will as a result satisfy your heart better than with something toward which you yourself are inclined’ (*Sayings of light and love*, n. 73).

God is love. To disobey God is to sin. Sin closes us off from God's love and reaps its own harvest. God is no lover of distraction and waste and mediocrity. God loves us and wants us to live to the full (John 10:10).

May we learn, like Jesus, to want God's will with all our minds and hearts and soul and strength. That is the path to maturity and to peace. It is the way of holiness.

Wanting what God wants is the essential attitude required of us if we are to enter into prayer and grow in holiness.

Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face

‘Perfection consists in doing God’s will, in being what God wills us to be’ (Ms A, 1895, 14).

‘My God ‘I choose all!’ I don’t want to be a saint by halves. I am not afraid to suffer for you. I fear only one thing: to keep my own will. So, take it, for ‘I choose all’ that You will!’ (Ms A, 1895, page 27).

‘Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervour, except the accomplishment of God’s will, without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way’ (Ms A, 1895, page 178).

‘My joy is the holy will of Jesus my one and only love. And so I live without fear. I love the night as much as I love the day’ (words spoken from her sickbed 21.1.1897).

‘It is the thought alone of accomplishing the Lord’s will that makes up all my joy’ (Letter to l'Abbé Bellière, July 18, 1897).

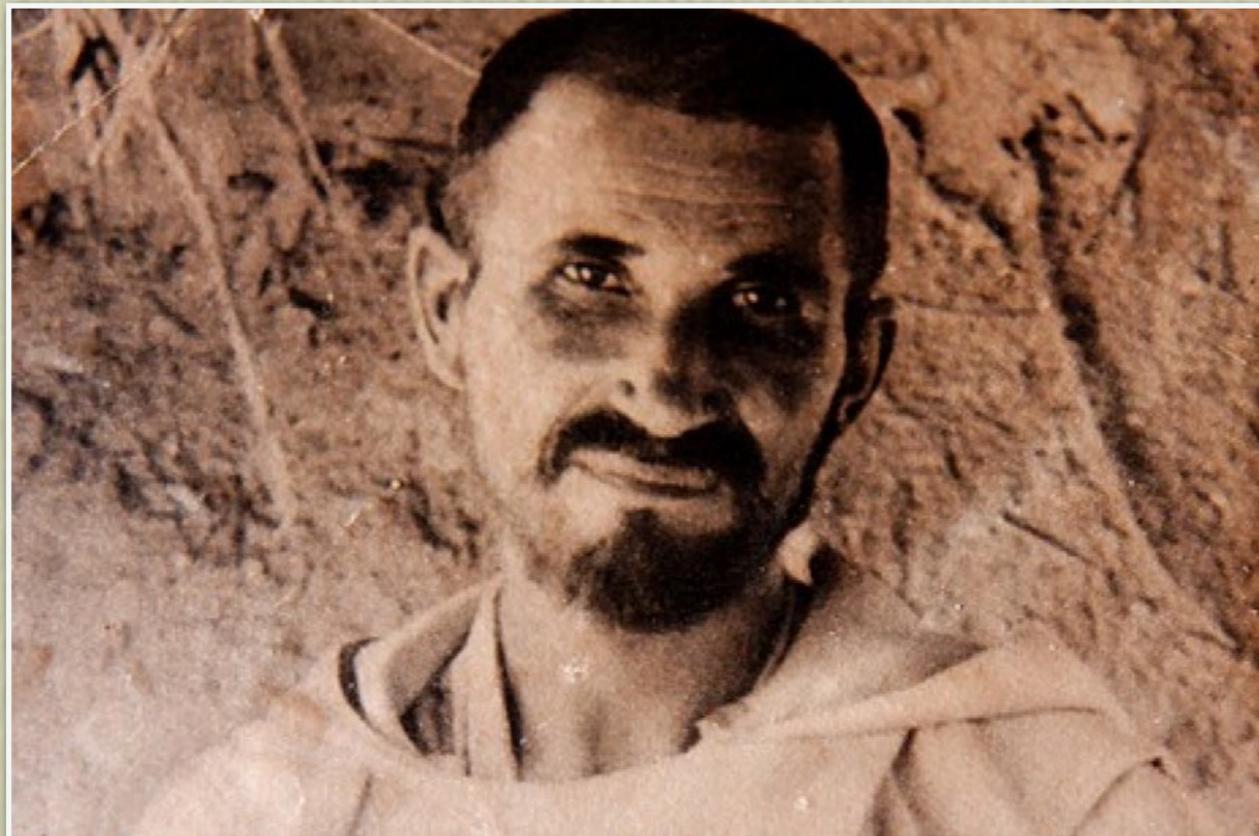
Elizabeth of the Trinity (d.1906)

‘The soul must surrender itself to the Divine will completely, passionately, so as to will nothing else but what God wills’ (*Heaven in Faith*, page 112).

In the final retreat before her death, she uses the image of a stringed instrument that is tuned so that it can sound the note intended by Christ when he chooses to play upon it, and she adds: ‘The soul remains under his touch like a lyre, and all His gifts to it are like so many strings which vibrate to sing, day and night, the praise of His glory.’

Charles de Foucauld

‘Father, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all. I accept all. Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my spirit. I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you Lord, and so need to give myself into your hands, without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.’



2. Detachment

God made us in God's 'image and likeness' (Genesis 1:26). God is Communion in Love and God's will is that we share in this communion, the communion enjoyed by Jesus who invites us: 'Come to me' (Matthew 11:28), and who prays: 'May they be one in us, Father, as you are in me and I am in you' (John 17:21).

God gives us many things, but we must not confuse the gift with the Giver and we should not become so attached to God's gifts that we continue to hold them tightly when God is asking us to let them go in order to draw closer. How can we embrace God with open arms while refusing to loosen our hold on what is less than God?



‘Let what you have said be done to me’ (Luke 1:38).

To be so open to allow God to achieve God’s loving purpose in us, we need to hold everything that is not God so reverently that we are willing to let it go the moment God calls us to do so. This is the meaning of detachment.

Carthusian author

‘There is no peace without detachment. There is no detachment without effective renunciation. There it is, the hard saying! Our passions carry us towards what is pleasing and delightful, towards what we love. Thus they cause us to avoid what is unpleasant and hurtful, the things we fear or hate. The way of resurrection is the way of death, a curtailment of life, a mortification of the senses. Today, as always, we don't want it. But listen to Christ: “If you would follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).’ (The Way of Silent Love, page 84).

The purpose of detachment is that we might be free to make a whole-hearted gift of ourselves to God. The discipline required to maintain this freedom is called asceticism.

Teresa

‘It is essential that you begin well by making an earnest and most determined resolve not to halt until you reach your goal. You must do this, whatever might come, whatever might happen to you, however hard you may have to labour, whoever may complain about you, whether you reach your goal or die on the road or have no heart to confront the trials you meet’ (Way of Perfection, chapter 21).

Teresa

‘The aim of all my advice to you in this book is that we should surrender ourselves wholly to the Creator, place our will in God’s hands and detach ourselves from creatures ... We are preparing ourselves for the time, which will come very soon, when we will find ourselves at the end of our journey and will be drinking of living water from the fountain I have described. Unless we make a total surrender of our will to the Lord, and put ourselves in God’s hands so that God may do in all things what is best for us in accordance with God’s will, God will never allow us to drink from it’ (Way of Perfection, chapter 32).

Authors speak of ‘**abandonment**’ when the gift of self is such that there is no holding back, when we entrust ourselves without reserve (with abandon) to God.

Teresa

‘The mistake we make is to not leave ourselves entirely in the Lord’s hands; yet God knows best what is good for us ... God cares for us better than we can care for ourselves and He knows of what each of us is capable. What is the use of governing oneself if one has surrendered one’s whole will to God?’ (*Life*).

Detachment is ‘not paying attention to what doesn’t bring us closer to God’ (*Life* 40.3).

The goal of detachment is to find delight in everything. For this to happen we must see everything as God sees. Since only the pure in heart can see God (Matthew 5:8) we must strive to 'be as pure as Christ' (1 John 3:3).

In his Letter to Titus Paul spells out what this means: 'What we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God' (Titus 2:12).

The essence of abandonment is expressed in the following statement from a General of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupé:

‘More than ever,
I now find myself in the hands of God.
This is what I have wanted all my life,
from my youth.
And this is still what I want.

But now there is a difference:
the initiative is entirely with God.
It is indeed a profound spiritual experience
to know and feel myself so totally in God’s hands,
in the hands of this God who has taken hold of me.’

Ignatius of Loyola

‘Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, all I have and possess. You have given all these to me; to you, O Lord, I give them back: all are yours, dispose of them according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is enough for me.’ (Contemplation for Obtaining Love found in his Spiritual Exercises)

Christian asceticism is reaching out in love to Jesus, knowing that we cannot fully savour this love in this life, but refusing, in faith, to seek those assurances of feeling for which our nature craves.

Ruth Burrows *To Believe in Jesus*.

‘For the Christian to maintain a hunger for God, a God who does not satisfy our senses, we must take care not to so encompass ourselves with the good things of this world that our need for God is not experienced. If our desire for God is genuine, and we must not confuse real desire for a feeling or emotion, then we will want to express it in concrete forms. Outward expressions strengthen the inner disposition. Hunger for God has to be worked for. It is a sustained act of choosing under the influence of grace ... We cannot seek God always and serve our neighbour with a disinterested love until we have looked at ourselves, and then positively denied this self-seeking and worked against it’ (page 71).

Ruth Burrows

‘Prayer is self-surrender to God at every moment; the reality of our prayer will be the reality of our self-surrender, not how we feel, what we experience, the lights we get and so forth. Prayer is necessarily hard because self-surrender is hard.’

(To Believe in Jesus, page 85).

Ruth has this warning for anyone committed to a life of prayer:

‘Are our reactions prompted by the desire to please God or to have a spiritual life, to become a spiritual person? In other words, is our tenacious egotism operating in what is the most supremely satisfying sphere of all?’ *(The Ascent of Love, page 56).*

Asceticism is not the same for everyone. God knows what each person needs to let go of in order to draw close to Jesus and so enjoy divine communion.

For the rich young man it was material possessions.

For the scribes it was pride in their learning.

For others it was their negative sense of themselves,

and for others their inflated ego.

Essential to asceticism is that we are not the ones to decide. We must wait on the inspiration of grace. The goal is to do God's will. When Peter saw Jesus walking on the water, he did not dare to leave the boat of his own decision. He wanted to go to Jesus and so he prayed: 'If it is you, tell me to come to you across the water'. It was only when Jesus called him that he knew he could leave the boat and, keeping his eyes on Jesus, walk towards him (Matthew 14:28-31).

The science of detachment is a science of love. Only God has the wisdom to know what it is that we need to let go, and when we are ready to do so.

Carthusian Monk: 'The Way of Silent Love.'

'In speaking of detachment I am afraid of giving too much importance to what is of little consequence. Certainly detachment from things is an essential element of the spiritual life. This does not mean that we are obligated to make a continual effort of the will to be detached. A continual preoccupation such as this is unhealthy and sometimes results in a negative attitude and bitterness that has little to do with Christian simplicity and joy. And in the end it puts too much emphasis on secondary matters. To be continually preoccupied with denying ourselves something is to feed the desire to possess and give it importance ...

Carthusian Monk (continued)

‘The true contemplative doesn’t need to make a constant effort to mortify the senses. Only love is necessary, the heart turned to God and the things of God. The true contemplative realises that things are leaving him and detaching themselves from him.’

‘He quickly forgets them, so fascinated is he with the discovery of the wondrous Mystery. Let us not be like the fearful people who, on the mountain did not take their eyes from their feet for fear of stumbling and were thus unable to revel in the broad horizon and vast expanses. Let us be bold enough to be joyful. Christ and the love of God are worth it’ (The Way of Silent Love, pages 85-86).

Teresa (*Poesias* 30):

‘Let nothing disturb you;
let nothing dismay you:
all things pass;
God never changes.
Patience attains all.
The one who has God
lacks nothing:
God alone suffices.’