

Danger - Caution in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Service in the Church is a holy work, and for that very reason it is attended by spiritual dangers that the servant must learn to recognize. The enemy does not waste his attention on those who are asleep; he attends most carefully to those who are awake and laboring for the Lord. The Fathers speak with a sober realism about the temptations that come to the servant precisely because he is serving — pride, spiritual fatigue, comparison, manipulation, the confusion of the Lord's work with our own, and the gradual dimming of the inner life beneath the outer labor. This lesson is not meant to frighten us out of the field. It is meant to send us into the field with our eyes open, so that the very work we have been given does not become the ground of our falling.

Why Servants Are Especially Tempted

There is a sober line in the Scriptures that every servant would do well to carry in memory:

“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” 1 Corinthians 10:12, NKJV

Paul writes this in the very midst of recounting Israel's failures in the wilderness. Those who had been fed with manna, who had drunk from the rock, who had seen the sea opened before them — those very ones fell. Spiritual privilege is not a shield against spiritual danger; it is sometimes an occasion for it. A servant who has stood for a long time at the altar, taught many classes, led many groups, may be precisely the one for whom the next step requires the greatest care.

St. Macarius the Great, who watched many monks for many years, observes this pattern with tenderness:

“The enemy does not trouble those who are not fighting; he troubles those who are fighting, and especially those who are on the point of advancing. Let the servant therefore not be surprised when the storm gathers most heavily over the very work the Lord has most blessed.” St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XXVI

Understanding this up front protects us from two equally unhelpful reactions — the surprise that keeps a servant from anticipating attack, and the discouragement that reads attack as evidence that we are off the road. The opposite is often true. The strongest winds usually blow on the trees that are bearing the most fruit.

Pride — The First and Most Subtle Danger

Of all the dangers the servant faces, pride is the first named by the Fathers and the most difficult to see in ourselves. Other sins announce themselves by the shame that follows them. Pride announces itself by a warmth of self-satisfaction that, at the time, feels like virtue.

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” James 4:6, NKJV

The servant who preaches well, teaches well, organizes well, is in daily danger of mistaking the Lord's gift for his own quality. The warning signs are small and familiar: the quiet satisfaction when our class is praised; the irritation when another servant is praised instead; the reluctance to receive correction from someone less experienced; the growing conviction that the ministry could not easily do without us.

John Climacus has a paragraph that should hang over every servant's door:

“Pride is the denial of God, an invention of the devil, the despising of men. It is the mother of condemnation, the offspring of praises, a sign of barrenness. It is a flight from the help of God, the harbinger of madness, the cause of falls. Where a fall hath overtaken a man, there pride had taken up its abode beforehand; for the falling is but its outward sign.” St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 23

The antidote is not self-loathing; it is the deliberate and repeated returning of credit to its true Owner. After every small victory in the work, a short sentence under the breath — 'Yours, Lord, not mine' — is one of the simplest disciplines a servant can keep.

Spiritual Fatigue

A less dramatic but nearly as dangerous peril is simple fatigue — the slow erosion of the inner life by the very activity of the outer life. The Greek Fathers have a word for this: akedia, sometimes translated 'spiritual sloth,' sometimes 'listlessness.' It is the servant's soul grown quietly flat. The prayers are still said, but they have gone thin. The liturgy is still attended, but the heart watches it from a distance. The gifts are still given, but something in the giver has gone dry.

Our Lord Himself attended to the fatigue of His disciples:

“And He said to them, 'Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.' For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.” Mark 6:31, NKJV

Rest, in His economy, is not lazy; it is pastoral. A servant who has not learned to step back regularly — for a walk, for a quiet hour with the Gospel, for a day of sabbath, for a weekend retreat once or twice a year — will eventually give his parish a tired, thin version of the grace that was meant to pass through him.

Isaac the Syrian writes with great gentleness on this:

“Do not despise thyself when thy soul hath grown weary. A tired soul is not yet a fallen soul; it is only a soul that hath forgotten for a moment the sweetness of her Lord. Withdraw a little, remember Him, and return. The field will be there, and the labor, and the grace to carry both.” St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies LXIV

Comparison and Competition

A danger that often surprises new servants is the quiet acidity of comparison. We begin serving alongside brothers and sisters we love. Over time, however, we begin to notice who is noticed more, who speaks better, whose class grows faster, whose gifts are praised in meetings. Comparison rarely announces itself; it shows up as a small reluctance to rejoice in another's success, or a small eagerness to point out another's mistake, or a private discouragement when we feel we are falling behind.

Our Lord, speaking to Peter about the other beloved disciple, says words that belong to every servant:

“Jesus said to him, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.'” John 21:22, NKJV

'You follow Me.' The servant who follows the Lord does not have the bandwidth to also measure himself against his peers. Each of us is called by name. The work the Lord is doing in another is not our business, except to thank Him for it. The work He is doing in us is different, particular, and enough.

Paul puts the same thought more bluntly to the Corinthians:

“For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.” 2 Corinthians 10:12, NKJV

Confusing Our Work with His Work

A subtler danger arises when a servant has labored in a ministry for many years. The ministry begins to feel, without our quite noticing, like ours. Our opinions about it sharpen. Our sense of ownership deepens. We find it difficult to watch someone else do it differently, or to let go of it when the Lord is moving us elsewhere. The ministry is no longer an offering placed in His hand; it has become a small kingdom that bears our name.

The Baptist, who had more reason than most to feel ownership of his own ministry, gives us the sentence we must keep saying:

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” John 3:30, NKJV

Every servant eventually reaches a moment in which the Lord asks for a step back — a change of role, a handoff to a younger servant, a simple retirement from a visible position. How we handle that moment reveals whether we had been serving the Lord or building a small empire in His name. A servant who can put down a work with open hands has not failed; he has completed the secret purpose of every servant's life, which is that the Lord should grow and we should grow smaller.

The Danger of Hollow Words

Because so much of our service involves speaking — teaching, counseling, praying aloud — the servant faces a specific danger that does not touch most other vocations: the danger of saying true things we have stopped meaning. Over time, a servant can acquire a vocabulary of piety that runs on its own, a pulpit ease that outpaces his own inner life. The words continue to bless others — the Lord is merciful — but they no longer nourish the speaker, and eventually that lack begins to be felt.

“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.” Matthew 15:8, NKJV

The remedy is not to stop speaking; it is to keep our speech rooted. A short sentence said slowly and meant fully does more, for both the hearer and the speaker, than a paragraph of fluent piety. Every servant ought, once in a while, to write out a phrase he has said a thousand times — 'Lord, have mercy,' or 'into Your hands I commend my spirit' — and sit quietly with it until it begins to be true in him again.

Chrysostom, who knew the danger of the preacher's fluency better than most, writes:

“Let not thy tongue outrun thy heart. For the tongue, being a light member, can speak what the heart hath not yet received; and when it doth so often enough, the heart groweth deaf to its own words. Let us therefore pause, even in preaching, and ask whether what we are saying is still breathed in us, and not only spoken.” St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood V.8 (paraphrased)

The Safeguards the Lord Has Given

The Church does not leave us to face these dangers alone. She has placed around every servant a set of safeguards as old as the apostles.

The first is a father of confession. A servant without a regular father of confession is exposed in a way that no amount of reading can protect. The eye of another, honest and loving, catches what we cannot catch in ourselves. A short monthly confession is one of the quiet pillars of a long service.

The second is a rule of prayer. The daily rhythm of prayer — morning, noon, evening, and the hour before sleep — is not a decoration; it is a railing that keeps us from slipping when the ground is wet.

The third is the sacramental life. Regular communion, when the conscience is clear, is the renewing of our union with the incarnate Lord. A servant who communes often is a servant who is being daily re-rooted in the ground of his own ministry.

The fourth is a small circle of brothers or sisters who know us. Not a committee; just two or three honest friends who will ask the direct question when they sense drift. Almost every serious falling of a servant has happened in the absence of such friends.

The fifth is sabbath. A day a week when the ministry pauses, the phone rests, the family is attended to, the body is fed, and the soul is not working. The Lord who made the week is wiser than our

enthusiasm. Sabbath is one of the great preventives of pride, fatigue, comparison, and hollow speech all at once.

May the Lord who has called us into the dangers of His service keep us also in its mercies. May He guard our hearts from the pride that whispers the gift is ours, the fatigue that lets the inner life grow thin, the comparison that poisons our joy in our brothers, the confusion that makes His work begin to feel like ours, and the hollow speech that lets our mouths outrun our hearts. May He give us the safeguards the Church has prepared — a father of confession, a rule of prayer, the Holy Mysteries, faithful friends, and the weekly gift of rest. And may every servant among us finish the race not only having labored but having been kept.

Review Questions

1. Paul warns that 'he who thinks he stands' is most in danger of falling. Where in our current service might the very length of our faithfulness have made us less vigilant than we ought to be?
2. Pride announces itself as the warmth of self-satisfaction rather than as shame. What recent 'warm' moment might, in honesty, have been the beginning of pride asking to be fed?
3. Akeidia is the soul grown quietly flat beneath the continuing labor. Are we showing any signs of this, and what small rest has the Lord been asking us to take that we have been postponing?
4. Comparison is a slow acid on the joy of service. Which servant's visibility, gift, or fruitfulness have we been measuring ourselves against, and what would it mean this week to lay that measurement down?
5. The Baptist said, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' Where in our own ministry is the Lord beginning, perhaps, to ask for a handoff, a step back, or a change of role?
6. The danger of hollow words: where in our speech have we been repeating a piety that has gone a little cold? What one phrase could we sit with this week until it becomes true in us again?
7. Of the five safeguards named (father of confession, rule of prayer, the Holy Mysteries, honest friends, sabbath), which one is most solid in our life, and which one most needs restoring?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, especially Steps 22–23 (Vainglory and Pride). Translated by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore.

- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, especially Homily XXVI. Translated by A. J. Mason.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 9.
- Evagrius Ponticus, Praktikos (on akedia and the eight thoughts).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes