

St. Isaac the Syrian: Homily 2

St. Isaac The Syrian: Isaac-the-syrian-homily-51 Isaac-the-Syrian-Homily-51 St Isaac the Syrian, Homily 51. doc 14 12 18 11 49 54 Page 1 St Isaac the Syrian (ca. 650 AD) HOMILY FIFTY-ONE From The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian (Holy Transfiguration Monastery: Boston, 1984) pp 243-248 Page 243 On the Harm of Foolish Zeal That Has the Guise of Being Divine, and on the Help That Comes of Clemency and on Other Subjects A ZEALOUS MAN never achieves peace of mind. But he who is a stranger to peace is a stranger to joy. If, as it is said, peace of mind is perfect health, and zeal is opposed to peace, then the man who has a wrong¹ zeal is ill with a grievous disease. Though you presume, O man, to send forth your zeal against the infirmities of other men, you have expelled the health of your own soul; be assid- uous, rather, in labouring for your own soul's health. If you wish to heal the infirm, know that the sick are in greater need of loving care than of rebuke. Therefore, although you do not help others, you expend labour to bring grievous illness upon yourself. Zeal is not reckoned among men to be a form of wisdom, but as one of the illnesses of the soul, namely narrow-mindedness and deep ignorance. The beginning of divine wisdom is clemency and gentleness, which arise from greatness of soul and the bearing of the infirmities of men. For, he says, 'Let the strong bear the infirmities of the weak',² and 'Restore him that has fallen in the spirit of meek- ness.'³ The Apostle numbers peace and patience among the fruits of the Spirit.⁴ A heart full of sorrow on account of its feebleness and impotence regarding outward physical deeds takes the place of all physical works. Deeds of the body performed without sorrow of mind are like a body without a soul. The man who is sorely grieved in his heart but gives rein to his senses, is like a sick man who suffers physically but who opens his mouth to every kind of harmful food. The man who is sorely grieved in his heart but ¹ The Syriac omits this word. ² Cf. Rom. 15:1. ³ Cf. Gal. 6:1. ⁴ Vide Gal. 5:22. ²⁴⁴ gives rein to his senses is like a man with an only son, whom he slaughters with his own hands, little by little. Sorrow of mind is a precious gift before God, and the man who bears this gift as he ought is like a man who bears holiness in his members. A man who unleashes his tongue against other men for good or for evil is unwor- thy of this grace. Repentance joined with conversations is a shattered vessel. Liberality joined with blows is a knife fixed and concealed in honey. Chastity and conver- sation with a woman is like a lioness and a lamb in one dwelling. Good works and mercilessness are before God like a man slaughtering a son before his father. The man who corrects his companions while his soul is infirm is like a blind man who shows others the way. Mercy and justice⁵ in one soul is like a man who wor- ships God and the

idols in one house. Mercy is opposed to justice. Justice is the equality of the even scale, for it gives to each as he deserves; and when it makes recompense, it does not incline to one side or show respect of persons. Mercy, on the other hand, is a sorrow and pity stirred up by goodness, and it compassionately inclines a man in the direction of all; it does not requite a man who is deserving of evil, and to him who is deserving of good it gives a double portion. If, therefore, it is evident that mercy belongs to the portion of righteousness, then justice belongs to the portion of wickedness. As grass and fire cannot coexist in one place, so justice and mercy cannot abide in one soul. As a grain of sand cannot counterbalance a great quantity of gold, so in comparison God's use of justice cannot counterbalance His mercy. As a handful of sand thrown into the great sea, so are the sins of all flesh in comparison with the mind of God.⁶ And just as a strongly flowing spring is not obstructed by a handful of dust, so the mercy of the Creator is not stemmed by the vices of His creatures. As a man who sows in the sea and expects to reap a harvest, so is he who remembers wrongs⁷ and prays. As the flame of fire cannot be checked from rising upward, so the prayers of St Isaac the Syrian, Homily 51. doc 14 12 18 11 49 54 Page 2 the merciful are not hindered from ascending to Heaven. The current of a stream runs swiftly in a narrow place, and likewise the force of anger whenever it finds a place in our mind. The man who has acquired humility in his heart is dead to this world. He who is dead to the world has died to the passions. For to the man who has died in his heart to his kinsmen, the devil is dead. He who has found malice, with it has found him who originally found it.⁸ There is a humility that comes from the fear of God, and there is a humility that comes from the fervent love of God. One man is humbled because of his fear of God; 5 Gk. dikaiokrisia. This can also be translated just judgement. 6 This is the Syriac reading. The word mind has the sense of way of thinking. The Greek reads here the providence and mercy of God.⁷ Or bears a grudge. 8 I. e. the devil. 245 another is humbled because of his joy. The man humbled from fear of God is possessed of modesty in his members, a right ordering of his senses, and a heart contrite at all times. But the man humbled because of joy is possessed of great exuberance and an open and in-suppressible heart. Love does not know shame, and for this reason she does not know to give a form of propriety to her members. Love is naturally unabashed and oblivious to her measure. Blessed is the man who has found thee, the heaven of all joy! The assembly of the humble is beloved of God like the assembly of the Seraphim. A chaste body is more precious before God than a pure offering. These two, humility and chastity, prepare in the soul a tabernacle⁹ for the Holy Trinity. Walk with your friends circumspectly. When you do this you will profit both yourself and them, for often the soul casts off the bridle of watchfulness under the pretext of love. Keep yourself from conversations, for they are not always profitable. Honour silence in assemblies, for this will keep you from much harm. Watch over your belly, but still more over your sight. Unquestionably, conflict

at home is easier than conflict abroad. Do not believe, brother, that
 inner thoughts can be checked unless the body is brought into a good and
 orderly state. Fear has more than enemies. He who nourishes a habit within
 himself is like a man who feeds a fire, for the degree of the strength of each is
 determined by the fuel with which it is supplied. Once a habit demands something
 and its request is not fulfilled, the next time you will find it weaker. But if you fulfill its
 desire just once, the next time you will find its assault against you to be much
 stronger. May the memory of this remain with you with respect to all things, for the
 help received from watchfulness is better than the help received from works. He
 who is fond of laughter and of making a show before men should be no friend of
 yours, for he will lead you into loose habits. Do not allow your countenance to be
 glad with joy in the company of a man who has relaxed his discipline; but keep
 yourself from despising him. If he desires to stand up, give him your hand, and till
 death take concern for him. But if you are still infirm, shun the work of healing.
 'Give him', he says, 'the end of your staff', and so on.¹⁰ Speak
 circumspectly before the conceited and envious man. For while you are speaking
 he is interpreting your words as he pleases, and gathers fuel from what is good in
 you to make others stumble. And in his mind he changes your words to suit the
 substance of his illness. As soon as he begins to speak evil of his brother in your
 presence, show a gloomy countenance. When you do this, you will be found
 prudent before God and before him. ⁹ There are two words in Syriac with identical
 spelling, one meaning a pledge, the other a tent, a tabernacle. The Greek
 translators chose a pledge, but the meaning here points to a tabernacle. ¹⁰ See
 Budge, *The Sayings of the Holy Fathers*, 1:331. 'If thou seest a man who hath
 fallen into the water, and thou canst help him, stretch out thy staff to him and draw
 him out, lest, if thou stretchest out thy hand to him, and thou art not able to bring
 him up, he drag thee down and both of you perish.' ²⁴⁶ If you give something to
 one in need, let the cheerfulness of your face precede your gift, and comfort his
 sorrow with kind words. When you do this, by your gift the gladness of his mind
 surpasses even the needs of his body. ¹¹ On the day when you open your mouth
 and speak ill of someone, even though your thought urged you to say something
 that seemed correct and for edification, reckon yourself as dead to God and void
 of all your works. For what need has a man to demolish his own house and set
 aright that of his companion? On the day when you are pained in some way, either
 physically or mentally, for the sake of any man, be he good or evil, reckon yourself
 as a martyr on that day, and as one who suffers for Christ's sake and is
 deemed worthy of confession. For remember that Christ died for sinners, not for
 the just. See how great a thing it is to grieve for wicked men and to benefit sinners
 even more than the righteous! The Apostle brings this to mind, as some-
 thing worthy of wonder. ¹² If you are able to acquire within yourself righteousness of
 soul, do not take pains to pursue other righteousness. Let all your works be pre-
 ceded by bodily chastity and purity of conscience, for without them every act is

empty before God. Know that every work you do without reflection and examination is St Isaac the Syrian, Homily 51. doc 14 12 181149 54 Page 3 empty even if it be comely, for God reckons righteousness in proportion to discernment and not in proportion to discerning effort. An unwise righteous man is a lamp in the sun. The prayer of one who remembers wrongs is a seed upon a stone. An unmerciful ascetic is a barren tree. A rebuke springing from envy is a poisoned arrow. The praise of a crafty man is a hidden snare. A foolish counsellor is a blind watchman. Sitting with senseless men is the shattering of the heart. Conversation with wise men is a sweet fountain. A wise counsellor is a wall of hope. A foolish and imprudent friend is a treasury of ruin. It is better to see a house full of mourners than a wise man who clings to a fool. It is better to dwell with beasts than with the envious. It is better to inhabit a tomb than to dwell with depraved men. Sit with vultures rather than with the covetous and insatiate. Be friends with a murderer rather than with a contentious man. Converse with a swine rather than with a glutton, for the swine's trough is better than the mouth of a gourmet and glutton. Sit amid lions rather than amid the proud. Be persecuted, but persecute not; be crucified, but crucify not; be wronged, but wrong not; be slandered, but slander not. Have clemency, not zeal, with respect to evil. [Lay hold of goodness, not justice.] Justice¹⁴ does not belong to the Christian way of life and there is no mention of it in 11 This is the Syriac reading. The Greek has the gladness of his mind surpasses your gift, even more than the needs of his body. 12 Vide Rom. 5:7, 8. 13 Gk. lepers, i.e. $\lambda\omega\beta\iota\nu$ for $\lambda\epsilon\iota\nu\tau\omega\nu$. β often had a form similar to ν . 14 Orrectitude. 247 Christ's teaching. Rejoice with the joyous and weep with those who weep; for this is the sign of limpid purity. Suffer with those who are ill and mourn with sinners; with those who repent, rejoice. Be every man's friend, but in your mind remain alone. Be a partaker in the sufferings of all men, but keep your body distant from all. Rebuke no one, revile no one, not even men who live very wickedly. Spread your cloak over the man who is falling and cover him. And if you cannot take upon yourself his sins and receive his chastisement in his stead, then at least patiently suffer his shame and do not disgrace him. [Do not strive with men for the sake of the belly. And do not hate for the sake of honour. And do not find pleasure in judging.] Know, brother, that the reason why we must remain within the door of our cell is to be ignorant of the wicked deeds of men, and thus, seeing all asholy and good, we shall attain to purity of mind. But if we become castigators, chastisers, judges, investigators, vindicators, and faultfinders, in what respect does our life differ from the life in the towns? And if we do not give up these things, what could be more miserable than such a life in the desert, falsely quiet? If you cannot be still within your heart, then at least make still your tongue. If you cannot give right ordering to your thoughts, at least give right ordering to your senses. If you cannot be solitary in your mind, at least be solitary in body. If you cannot labour with your body, at least be afflicted in mind. If you cannot keep your vigil standing, keep vigil sitting on your pallet, or lying down. If

you cannot fast for two days at a time, at least fast till evening. And if you cannot fast until evening, then at least keep yourself from satiety. If you are not holy in your heart, at least be holy in body. If you do not mourn in your heart, at least cover your face with mourning. If you cannot be merciful, at least speak as though you are a sinner. If you are not a peacemaker, at least do not be a troublemaker. If you cannot be assiduous, at least in your thought be like a sluggard.¹⁵ If you are not victorious, do not exalt yourself over the vanquished.¹⁶ If you cannot close the mouth of a man who disparages his companion, at least refrain from joining him in this. Know that if fire goes forth from you and consumes other men, God will demand from your hands the souls which your fire has burned. And if you yourself do not put forth the fire, but are in agreement with him who does, and are pleased by it, in the judgement you will be reckoned as his accomplice. If you love gentleness, be peaceful. If you are deemed worthy of peace, you will rejoice at all times. Seek understanding, not gold. Clothe yourself with humility, not finelineen. Gain peace, not a kingdom. No man has understanding if he is not humble, and he who lacks humility is devoid of understanding. No man is humble if he is not peaceful, and he who is not peaceful is not humble. And no man is peaceful without rejoicing. In all the paths upon which men¹⁵ i. e. consider yourself lazy. ¹⁶ Gk. the guilty. In Syriac the same word means both vanquished and guilty.²⁴⁸ journey in this world they will find no peace, until they draw nigh to hope in God. The heart finds no peace from toil and from stumbling-blocks, until hope enters it, makes it peaceful, and pours joy into it. That worshipful and all-holy mouth spoke of this when it said, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'¹⁷ Draw nigh, He says, and hope in Me, and find rest from labour and fear. Divine hope uplifts the heart, but fear of Gehenna crushes it. The light of the mind gives birth to faith; faith gives St Isaac the Syrian, Homily 51. doc 14 12 181149 54 Page 4 birth to the consolation of hope; hope fortifies the heart. Faith is the unveiling of the understanding.¹⁸ When the mind is darkened, faith is hidden, fear holds sway over us, and our hope is cut off. It is not the faith which comes from instruction which frees a man from pride and doubt, but the faith which is beheld and dawns in the understanding; this is called knowledge and the revelation of truth. As long as the intellect perceives God as God, by His being revealed to the understanding, fear will not approach the heart. When we are permitted to be in darkness and we lose this perception, then fear will assail us until we are humbled and we draw nigh to humility and repentance. The Son of God endured the Cross, therefore let us sinners boldly rely on repentance. If the form of repentance averted God's wrath from Ahab, surely our sincere repentance will not now be unprofitable to us. If a form of humility turned aside Divine wrath from him who was insincere, how much more will it from us who sincerely grieve over our falls? Sorrow of mind suffices to take the place of all bodily labour. Saint Gregory says, 'He is a temple of grace who is united with God, and is constant in his concern over His judgement.'¹⁹ What is concern over

God's judgement? It is: a continual quest after His rest; 19a mourning at all times and a contrite meditation on account of those things which always remain imperfect because of the wretchedness of our nature; constant sadness on their account which the mind retains through powerful thoughts and which in prayer it offers up before God as an offering with humble compunction; and, inasmuch as is possible and is within a man's power, to hold solicitude for the body in disdain.²⁰ Such is the man who carries in his soul the continuous memory of God. As Saint Basil says, 'Undistracted prayer is that which produces in the soul a distinct reflection on God. And God's indwelling is this: to have God established in us by [unceasing] memory [of Him].'²¹ In this manner we become temples of God. This is concern with a contrite heart in preparation for the Lord's rest.¹⁷ Matt. 11:28. 18 Or insight. The Syriac printed text reads a plural, which gives of the intuitions. 19 The Syriac printed text has over that which pertains to Him (or him), The change in a single letter (nuntolamadh) gives this reading. 19a Or constant reflection upon that which pleases Him.²⁰ This sentence is considerably abbreviated in the Greek.²¹ Letter 2. To Gregory.