

1 "Apostolic Abstinence a Pattern for Christians"
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3 St. John Henry Newman
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5 "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake, and thine often
6 infirmities." 1 Tim. v. 23.

7 THIS is a remarkable verse, because it accidentally tells us so much. It is addressed to
8 Timothy, St. Paul's companion, the first Bishop of Ephesus. Of Timothy we know very
9 little, except that he did minister to St. Paul, and hence we might have *inferred* that he
10 was a man of very saintly character; but we know little or nothing of him, except that he
11 had been from a child a careful reader of Scripture. This indeed, by itself, in that
12 Apostolic age, would have led us to infer, that he had risen to some great height in
13 spiritual excellence; though it must be confessed that instances are frequent at this day,
14 of persons knowing the Bible well, and yet being little stricter than others in their lives,
15 for all their knowledge. Timothy, however, had so read the Old Testament, and had so
16 heard from St. Paul the New, that he was a true follower of the Apostle, as the Apostle
17 was of Christ: St. Paul accordingly calls him "my own son," or "my true son in the faith."
18 And elsewhere he says to the Philippians, that he has "no man like-minded to Timothy,
19 who would naturally" or truly "care for their state." [Phil. ii. 20.] But still, after all, this is
20 but a general account of him, and we seem to desire something more definite in the way
21 of description, beyond merely knowing that he was a great saint, which conveys no
22 clear impression to the mind. Now, in the text we have accidentally a glimpse given us
23 of his mode of life. St. Paul does not expressly tell us that he was a man of mortified
24 habits; but he reveals the fact indirectly by cautioning him against an excess of
25 mortification. "Drink no longer water," he says, "but use a little wine." It should be
26 observed, that wine, in the southern countries, is the same ordinary beverage that beer
27 is here; it is nothing strong or costly. Yet even from such as this, Timothy was in the
28 habit of abstaining, and restricting himself to water; and, as the Apostle thought,
29 imprudently, to the increase of his "often infirmities."

30 There is something very striking in this accidental mention of the private ways of this
31 Apostolical Bishop. We know indeed from history the doctrine and the life of the great
32 saints, who lived some time after the Apostles' age; but we are naturally anxious to
33 know something more of the Apostles themselves, and their associates. We say, "Oh
34 that we could speak to St. Paul,—that we could see him in his daily walk, and hear his
35 oral and familiar teaching!—that we could ask him what he meant by this expression in
36 his Epistles, or what he thought of this or the other doctrine." This is not given to us.
37 God might give us greater light than He does; but it is His gracious will to give us the
38 less. Yet perhaps much more is given us in Scripture, as it has come to us, than we
39 think, if our eyes were enlightened to discern it there. Such, for instance, is the text; it is
40 a sudden revelation, a glimpse of the personal character of Apostolic Christians; it is a
41 hint which we may follow out. For no one will deny that a very great deal of doctrine,
42 and a very great deal of precept, goes with such a fact as this; viz. that this holy man,

43 without impiously disparaging God's creation, and thanklessly rejecting God's gifts, yet,
44 on the whole, lived a life of abstinence.

45 I cannot at all understand why such a life is not excellent in a Christian now, if it was the
46 characteristic of Apostles, and friends of Apostles, then. I really do not see why the trials
47 and persecutions, which environed them from Jews and Gentiles, their forlorn despised
48 state, and their necessary discomforts, should not even have exempted them from
49 voluntary sufferings in addition, unless such self-imposed hardships were pleasing to
50 Christ. Yet we find that St. Paul, like Timothy, who (as the Apostle says) had known "his
51 doctrine and manner of life," [2 Tim. iii. 10.] I say, St. Paul also, in addition to his
52 "weariness and painfulness," "hunger and thirst," "cold and nakedness," was "in
53 watchings often," "in fastings often." Such were holy men of old time. How far are we
54 below them! Alas for our easy sensual life, our cowardice, our sloth! is this the way by
55 which the kingdom of heaven is won? is this the way that St. Paul fought a good fight,
56 and finished his course? or was it by putting behind his back all things on earth, and
57 looking stedfastly towards Him who is invisible?

58 Now at first sight it may not be clear why this moderation, and at least occasional
59 abstinence, in the use of God's gifts, should be so great a duty, as our Lord, for
60 instance, seems to imply, when He places fasting in so prominent a place in the Sermon
61 on the Mount, with almsgiving and prayer. But thus much we are able to see, that the
62 great duty of the Gospel is love to God and man; and that this love is quenched and
63 extinguished by self-indulgence, and cherished by self-denial. They who enjoy this life
64 freely, make it or self their idol; they are gross-hearted, and have no eyes to see God
65 withal. Hence it is said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." [Matt. v.
66 8.] And again, it was the rich man who fared sumptuously every day, who neglected
67 Lazarus; for sensual living hardens the heart, while abstinence softens and refines it.
68 Now, observe, I do not mean that abstinence produces this effect as a matter of course
69 in any given person,—else all the poor ought to be patterns of Christian love,—but that
70 where men are religiously-minded, there those out of the number will make greater
71 attainments in love and devotional feeling, who do exercise themselves in self-denial of
72 the body. I should really be disposed to say,—You must make your choice, you must in
73 some way or another deny the flesh, or you cannot possess Christian love. Love is no
74 common grace in its higher degrees. It is true, indeed, that, as being the necessary
75 token of every true Christian, it must be possessed in some degree even by the
76 weakest and humblest of Christ's servants—but in any of its higher and maturer stages,
77 it is rare and difficult. It is easy to be amiable or upright; it is easy to live in regular
78 habits;—it is easy to live conscientiously, in the common sense of the word. I say, all
79 this is comparatively easy; but one thing is needful, and one thing is often lacking,—
80 love. We may act rightly, yet without doing our right actions from the love of God. Other
81 motives, short of love, are good in themselves; these we may have, and not have love.
82 Now I do not think that this defect arises from any one cause, or can be removed by any
83 one remedy; and yet still, it does seem as if abstinence and fasting availed much
84 towards its removal; so much so, that, granting love *is* necessary, then these are
85 necessary; assuming love to be the characteristic of a Christian, so is abstinence. You
86 may think to dispense with fasting; true; and you may neglect also to cultivate love.

87 And here a connexion may be traced between the truth I have been insisting on, and
88 our Lord's words, when asked why His disciples did not fast. He said, that they could not
89 fast while the Bridegroom was with them; but that when He was taken from them, then
90 they would fast. The one thing, which is all in all to us, is to live in Christ's presence; to
91 hear His voice, to see His countenance. His first disciples had Him in bodily presence
92 among them; and He spoke to them, warned them, was a pattern to them, and guided
93 them with His eye. But when He withdrew Himself from the world of sense, how should
94 they see Him still? When their fleshly eyes and ears saw Him no more, when He had
95 ascended whither flesh and blood cannot enter, and the barrier of the flesh was
96 interposed between Him and them, how should they any longer see and hear Him?
97 "Lord, whither goest Thou?" they said; and He answered to Peter, "Whither I go thou
98 canst not follow Me now, but thou shalt follow Me afterwards." They were to follow Him
99 through the veil, and to break the barrier of the flesh after His pattern. They must, as far
100 as they could, weaken and attenuate what stood between them and Him; they must
101 anticipate that world where flesh and blood are not; they must discern truths which flesh
102 and blood could not reveal; they must live a life, not of sense, but of spirit; they must
103 practise those mortifications which former religions had enjoined, which the Pharisees
104 and John's disciples observed, with better fruit, for a higher end, in a more heavenly
105 way, in order to see Him who is invisible. By fasting, Moses saw God's glory; by fasting,
106 Elijah heard the "still small voice;" by fasting, Christ's disciples were to express their
107 mourning over the Crucified and Dead, over the Bridegroom taken away: but that
108 mourning would bring Him back, that mourning would be turned to joy; in that mourning
109 they would see Him, they would hear of Him, again; they would see Him, as they
110 mourned and wept. And while they mourned, so long would they see Him and rejoice—
111 for "blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted;" they are "sorrowful, yet
112 always rejoicing;" hungering and thirsting after and unto righteousness,—fasting in
113 body, that their soul may hunger and thirst after its true good; fasting in body, that they
114 may be satisfied in spirit; in a "barren and dry land, where no water is," [Ps. lxxiii. 2.] that
115 they may look for Him in holiness, and behold His power and glory. "My heart is smitten
116 down, and withered like grass (says the Psalmist), so that I forget to eat my bread. For
117 the voice of my groaning, my bones will scarce cleave to my flesh. I am become like a
118 pelican in the wilderness, and like an owl that is in the desert. I have watched, and am
119 even as a sparrow that sitteth alone upon the house-top." "All day long have I been
120 punished, and chastened every morning." And what was the consequence?
121 "Nevertheless, I am alway by Thee: for Thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou
122 shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and after that receive me with glory. Whom have I in
123 heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of Thee? My
124 flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."
125 [Ps. cii. 4-7; lxxiii. 13, 22-25.]

126 Such was the portion which St. Paul and St. Timothy received, when they gave up this
127 world and its blessings; not that they might not have enjoyed them had they chosen; but
128 because they might, and yet gave them up, therefore they received blessings out of
129 sight instead. And in like manner, applying this to ourselves, it is our duty also to be
130 ever moderate, and at times to abstain, in the use of God's earthly gifts; nay, happy is it
131 for us, if God's secret grace call us on, as it called St. Paul and Timothy, to a more

132 divine and tranquil life than that of the multitude. It is our duty to war against the flesh as
133 they warred against it, that we may inherit the gifts of the Spirit as they inherited them. If
134 Saints are our patterns, this surely means that we must copy them.

135 Here, however, it may be objected, that there is presumption in wishing to be what
136 Apostles and their associates were. That they had high spiritual gifts which we have not,
137 and that to attempt their life without these, is all one with attempting to work such
138 miracles as they did, which any one would grant to *be* presumptuous. There is much
139 truth in such a remark so far as this, that to attempt *at once* all they did would be
140 presumptuous; we can but put ourselves in the way. God gives second and third gifts to
141 those who improve the first; let us improve the first, and then we know not how high
142 may be the spiritual faculties which at length He will give us. Who is there, who, on
143 setting out on a journey, sees before him his destination? How often, when a person is
144 making for a place which he has never seen, he says to himself, that he cannot believe
145 that at a certain time he really will be there? There is nothing in what he at present sees,
146 which conveys to him the assurance of the future; and yet, in time, that future will be
147 present. So is it as regards our spiritual course: we know not what we shall be; but
148 begin it, and, at length, by God's grace, you will end it; not, indeed, with the grace He
149 now has given, but by fresh and fresh grace, fuller and fuller, increased according to
150 your need. Thus you will *end*, if you do but begin; but begin not *with* the end; begin with
151 the beginning; mount up the heavenly ladder step by step. Fasting is a duty; but we
152 ought to fast according to our strength. God requires nothing of us beyond our strength;
153 but the utmost according to our strength. "She has done what she could," was His word
154 of commendation to Mary. Now, to forget or to miss this truth, is very common with
155 beginners, even through mere ignorance or inadvertence. They know not what they can
156 do, and what they cannot, as not having yet tried themselves. And then, when what they
157 hoped was easy, proves a great deal too much for them, they fail, and then are
158 dispirited. They wound their conscience, as being unable to fulfil their own resolves, and
159 they are reduced to a kind of despair; or they are tempted to be reckless, and to give up
160 all endeavours whatever to obey God, because they are not strong enough for every
161 thing. And thus it often happens, that men rush from one extreme to another; and even
162 profess themselves free to live without any rule of self-government at all, after having
163 professed great strictness, or even extravagance, in their mode of living.

164 This applies of course to all duties whatever. We should be very much on our guard,
165 when we are engaged in contemplating the lives of holy men, against attempting just
166 what they did; which might be right indeed in them, and yet may be wrong in us. Holy
167 men may say and do things which we have no right to say and do. Profession by word
168 of mouth, religious language, rebuking others, and the like, may be natural and proper
169 in them, and forced and out of place in us. We ought to attempt nothing but what we can
170 do. There is a kind of inward feeling which often tells us what we have a right to do, and
171 what we have not. We have often a kind of misgiving, as if what we are tempted to do
172 does not really belong to us. Let us carefully attend to this inward voice. This applies
173 especially to our devotions: common men have no right to use the prayers which
174 advanced Christians use without offending; and if they attempt it, they become *unreal*;
175 an offence which all persons, who have any faith and reverence, will endeavour

176 earnestly to avoid. But if we will thus commence our religious course, it is certain we
177 shall soon get tired of it; we shall give it up; and our devotional feelings will thus be
178 shown, by the event, to have been but a fashion or an impulse, which has no true
179 excellence in it.

180 And here I will observe, what may be of use even to those who are most cautious and
181 prudent in their mode of conducting their self-denials, supposing they have seasons in
182 which they practise them, such as Lent ought to be to all of us. Be very much on your
183 guard against a reaction to a careless way of life after Lent is over. It is a caution
184 commonly and usefully given, that after a *day* of fasting we should not, when we break
185 our fast, eat unduly; now I am giving a similar warning concerning a *season* of
186 abstinence, and not only as regards eating largely, but against all laxity and self-
187 indulgence. In Lent, serious thoughts are brought more regularly before the mind. The
188 rule of abstinence which we adopt, however slight it may be in itself, acts as a continual
189 restraint and memento upon us in other things. We cannot range at will through the field
190 of thinking and wishing. We are more frequent also in prayer. And especially, if we feel
191 ourselves able to be strict in our fast, the weakness of body consequent on it is an
192 additional check upon us. Let us beware, then, lest, when this time is over, and Easter
193 comes, we fall back into a lawless state of mind, and a random life, as if God's paradise
194 were some Judaical heaven, where we might indulge ourselves the more freely in this
195 world's goods, for having renounced them for a while. This grievous consequence is
196 said actually to happen in some foreign countries, in the case of the multitude, who
197 never will have a deep and consistent devotion while the world lasts; and we should be
198 much on our guard, lest it happens to us in our degree. It will be a sad thought for
199 remembrance hereafter, if we shall find after all, that we have undone what was right
200 and profitable in our Lent exercises by a relapse in Easter-tide.

201 This, however, may be added for our encouragement, that to abstain for any length of
202 time is the beginning of a habit; and we may trust, that what we have begun will
203 continue, or tend to continue. And even though, through our frailty, we fall back (which
204 God forbid!), yet we shall find our self-denials easier next Lent. Nay, as I just now said,
205 we shall be able to do more. Self-denial will become natural to us. We shall feel no
206 desire for those indulgences, whether animal or mental, which savour of this world; and
207 our tastes and likings will begin to be formed upon a heavenly rule. To those who are
208 accustomed to self-denials, it is more painful to indulge than to abstain, as every one of
209 common self-control must know, from ordinary matters of his own experience. Persons
210 in the humbler ranks, of unrefined minds, look up to the rich, and wonder they do not do
211 this or that, which *they* would do for certain, had they the like means. The reason is, that
212 these rich persons, having a more perfect education, have too much taste and sense of
213 propriety, even though religion should be absent, to use their wealth in what may be
214 called a barbarian way. Now the same dislike of self-indulgence, in all its shapes, is
215 matured, under God's grace, in the souls of those who seek Him in the way of austerity.
216 Timothy had to be reminded by St. Paul to use a little wine; for to drink wine was a
217 trouble to Timothy, as putting him (to use a common phrase) out of his way. He was
218 happy in his own way. All men have each his own way, and they wonder at one another.
219 Each looks down upon his neighbour, because his neighbour does not like the very

220 things he likes himself. We look down on foreigners, because their way is not ours.
221 Happy he whose way is God's way; when he is used to it, it is as easy as any other
222 way—nay, much easier, for God's service is perfect freedom, whereas Satan is a cruel
223 taskmaster.

224 To conclude, let those who attempt to make this Lent profitable to their souls, by such
225 observances as have ever been in use at this season since Christianity was, beware
226 lest they lose this world without gaining the next;—for instance, as I said just now, by
227 relapsing. Or again, by observing what is in itself right in a cold and formal manner. We
228 can use the means, but it is God alone who blesses them. He alone turns the stones
229 into bread, and brings water from the hard rock. He can turn all things into nourishment,
230 but He alone can do so. Let us pray Him to bless what we venture for Him, that we may
231 not only labour, but may receive our wages, and gather fruit unto life eternal. This world
232 is a very little thing to give up for the next. Yet, if we give it up in heart and conversation,
233 we shall gain the next. Let us aim at the consistent habit of mind, of looking towards
234 God, and rejoicing in the glory which shall be revealed. In that case, whether we eat or
235 drink, or abstain, or whatever we do, we shall do all unto Him. Let us aim at being true
236 heirs of the promise; let us humbly aspire to be His elect, in whom He delighteth, holy
237 and undefiled, "blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst
238 of a crooked and perverse nation," among whom we may shine "as lights in the world,
239 holding forth the word of life."