

# Saint John of the Ladder

## Study #1

**Structure of the Ladder** (John Chryssavgis, Ascent to Heaven, Holy Cross Press, 1989)

Steps 1-3: the break with the world

Steps 4-26: the active life (praxis)

A.) 4-7: **4 Fundamental Virtues**

- Obedience (4)
- Repentance (5)
- Remembrance of Death (6)
- Joyful Sorrow (7)

B.) 8-26 **The Passions and their Corresponding Virtues**

Steps 27-30: the contemplative life (theoria)

**Praxis & Theoria**

“There can really be no sharp differentiation between the two: they are all but identical: praxis and theoria are interdependent, two aspects of a single reality. . .Perhaps the way of interpreting the ladder in John’s sense would be to say that one can reach the top in ascent, even while still working one’s way up lower down and, by the same token, still be on the lower rungs and yet have reached the top.” (John Chryssavgis, Ascent to Heaven, p. 15-16.)

**Each step contains:**

- A.) **Introductory Statement**
- B.) **A series of short definitions**
- C.) **An exposition of the theme**
- D.) **A summery with an exhortation**

**A. The Break with the World**

1. Renunciation
2. Detachment
3. Exile

**B. The Practice of the Virtues**

4. Obedience
5. Repentance
6. Remembrance of Death
7. Joyful Sorrow

**The Struggle against the Passions**

**A.) Passions predominantly non-physical (i.e. mind & heart)**

- 8. Anger
- 9. Malice
- 10. Slander
- 11. Talkativeness
- 12. Falsehood
- 13. Despondency

**B.) Physical and Material Passions (body)**

- 14. Gluttony
- 15. Lust
- 16-17. Avarice

**C.) Physical & Material Passions**

- 18-20. Insensitivity
- 21. Fear
- 22. Vainglory
- 23. Pride (also blasphemy)

**Higher Virtues of the “Active Life”**

- 24. Simplicity
- 25. Humility
- 26. Discernment

**C. Union with God (Transition to the “Contemplative Life“)**

- 27. Stillness
- 28. Prayer
- 29. Dispassion
- 30. Love

**I. Understanding the Body & the Flesh**

1. Christ came to glorify the whole human person (Chryssavgis, p.38)  
A human person is body and soul together - interdependent both make us a person

- 2. The Fathers distinguish between various levels of human existence
  - a.) Man as created by God
  - b.) Man as fallen
  - c.) Man as deified
- 3.) Body is positive and negative

*“The body embodies sin but is not sinful; the body is not sanctity but is to be sanctified.”  
(Chryssavgis, p.46)*

- a.) Essentially good created according to the image and likeness of God
  - image* denotes our potential
  - likeness* denotes the extent of realization of that potential

b.) The body as negative in its fallen state of sub-coming to sin

### **3 Ways to carry out the Struggle against sin**

#### **1. Movement towards Christ and away from sin**

Step 1. Renunciation of the world

“... have defined renunciation well by saying that it is hostility to the body.” (Climacus)

Step 3. Exile

“All Christians should practice this exile, understood as a movement away from the flesh.”

#### **2. Aim at becoming kings and priests**

a.) Rule over the flesh and order it to be ruled by Christ the king.

“We should not suppress our flesh but educate it: we should rule over it, rather than let it rule us as a tyrant. John states, ‘Become like a king and treat your body like a slave.’ At the same time, as priests we should offer the flesh up to God knowing that He alone is the king who governs, that he alone can transfigure us and fill the emptiness that has entered into us when we moved away from him.”(Chryssavgis, p.57)

#### **3. Mortifying the Flesh: put it to death that it may rise again.**

a.) askesis = spiritual discipline i.e., fasting, prayers, prostrations, confession

“An Athonite monk once told me that one wears out one’s body in askesis in order to tear away the flesh from the earthly and sinful desires; and in this ‘wearing out,’ in the continual struggle -day and night, with the endless services, hundreds of prostrations, fasting and bodily labor -one senses that ‘something heavenly occurs even within the body.’ It is felt that death is being conquered here and now.” (Chryssavgis, p.58)

## **II. Step I: On the Renunciation of the World**

*John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Holy Transfiguration Monastery , 1979*

#### **1. Withdraw from the world in order to shake off the burden of sins - divine mourning leads to struggle against the passions.**

“The man who has withdrawn from the world in order to shake off the burden of sins should ...not cease from his hot a fiery streams of tears and voiceless heartfelt groaning until he too, sees that Jesus has comes to him and rolled away the stone of hardness from his heart, and loosed. . .our mind, from the bands of sin, and ordered his attendant angels: loose him from passions, and let him go to blessed dispassion.” (Climacus, p. 5)

#### **2. Withdraw and seek a Director/Spiritual Father. (p. 5)**

#### **3. The Foundation of innocence, temperance and fasting (p.6)**

#### **4. When the souls betrays itself and loses its fervor, let it investigate the reason for losing it.**

(p.7)

**5. Withdraw from the world out of love for God (p.7)**

**6. The exhortations:**

**a.) Eagerly run the course as men called by our God (p. 7)**

**b.) Seek to please the Lord -prepared to give an account of at the last day. (p. 7)**

**c.) Fear the Lord - more than wild animals. (p. 7)**

**“For I have seen men who were going to steal and were not afraid of God, but, hearing the barking of dogs, they at once turned back; and what the fear of God could not achieve was done by the fear of animals.” (p. 7)**

**d.) Let us love God at least as much as we respect friends.**

**“For I have often seen people who had offended God and were not in the least perturbed by it. And I have seen how those same people provoked their friends in some trifling matter, and then employed every artifice, every device, every sacrifice, every apology, both personally and through friends and relatives, not sparing gifts, in order to gain their former love.” (p. 7)**

**e.) Living in the world is not an excuse.**

**“ ‘We have wives and are beset with social cares, and how can we live a solitary life?’ I replied to them, ‘Do all the good you can; do not speak evil of anyone; do not steal from anyone; do not lie to anyone; do not be arrogant towards anyone; do not hate anyone; do not be absent from the divine services; be compassionate to the needy; do not offend anyone; do not wreck another man’s domestic happiness, and be content with what your own (spouses) can give you. If you behave in this way, you will not be far from the kingdom of heaven.’ (p. 9)**

**f.) Conflicts are to be expected**

**“But when God sees courageous souls, He has often been known to act in this way: He lets them have conflicts from the very beginning in order to crown them sooner. But the Lord hides this contest from those in the world.” (p. 9)**

**g.) The temptation to be lax and not to mortify the flesh**

**“Let no one, when he is young, listen to his enemies, the demons, when they say to him: ‘Do not wear out your flesh, lest you make it sick and weak.’ For you will scarcely find anyone. . .who is determined to mortify his flesh, although he might deprive himself of many pleasant dishes. “ (p. 10)**