

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Chapter 18*

### St. Benedict and early Monasticism

On a recent trip to a neighborhood Christian Bookstore, I was amazed to see row upon row of “self help” books. These are books that one reads and applies for help in the Christian walk. They are targeted to help one with abuse issues, addictions, parenting, co-dependency, walking the Christian walk, and many others areas.

Self-help is not limited to books at a Christian bookstore. Consider many of the sermons one hears from the pulpit, as well as from television and radio. Haven't we all heard sermons and lessons on marriage and on having the right attitudes and lifestyles?

We have other outside helps for emotional and spiritual issues as well. Whether outside counselors, medications for depression, or other personal issues, we have many avenues that are designed to enable us to better and more enjoyably live productively for God.

Now one might ask, why? Why have all these self-help aids in the name of Christianity when one has the Bible? Why have self-help or outside aids when a Christian has the indwelling of the very creator of the universe, God?

The Christian answer is that God is behind the aids and God is at work in these approaches to help and to heal our fallen natures. The reason the books are for sale at a “Christian” bookstore, ostensibly, is that they are Christian books. They are written to help us understand how God and faith apply to our situations to target real problems we face today. Counselors are for the same purpose. Sermons are the expositions of Biblical principles in ways that are digestible and motivating for us to motivate and teach us much the same.<sup>1</sup>

Does this mean the Bible is deficient in what it offers to the Christian today? Of course not. The Bible gives us a historical interaction of God with his people in ways that provide what we need for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for *every* good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Even within the history we have in the Bible, it is clear

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, this coming Wednesday night Wade Liberator will be preaching on helping us break free from a life of performance into God's acceptance. Wade will give practical aids to help us realize who we are in Christ, how the Lord has accepted us, what true grace means to the believer, why we must accept ourselves, and why we must accept others.

prophets and others taught the ways of God by expounding and applying scriptures. That is the work of a teacher.

So, we have these aids to the Christian walk. I am rather confident most (if not everyone) in this class have at times read or heard sermons directed to assisting one's Christian walk. In light of that, consider this question: What have you read or heard that has not only helped you in your walk, but that you also believe will still be used by many in their walk in 1,500 years?

Although I have read a number of these books myself, I am not sure of many resources outside the Bible that I readily believe will be in use in the church in 1,500 years, should Jesus tarry that long. But, we are going to study just such a resource today: the Rule of St.. Benedict.

Our study will first put the rule into historical context with a brief review of last week. We will then take a moment to understand the personal history of Benedict before looking at his Rule and noting some of its lasting effects.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Matthew 13:1-23 records Jesus telling the "Parable of the Sower" and then explaining it to his disciples. In the parable, a farmer sows seed and the seed lands in four different places. Some seeds land on a path where birds eat it immediately; some seeds land on rocky places where healthy roots cannot grow because of insufficient soil. This seed sprouts quickly but dies just as quickly. Other seed falls in an area full of thorns that choke out the sprouting plants. Lastly, some seed falls in good soil resulting in a prolific crop.

Jesus explained that his parable concerned the kingdom of God. Some hear the gospel but do not accept it. These are the ones who are on the path where birds devour the seed. Others are lacking roots. These hear the word, accept it, but fall away when trouble and persecution set in. Those who hear the word, but are in the thorny ground, have the truth choked from them by worldliness and as a result bear no fruit. Those who hear and understand the word like good soil receiving seed, become fruitful in the kingdom. That parable, of course, applied to people living at the time Jesus taught it. We can also see that the parable applies to us today. Similarly, as we study church history, the parable clearly applies as well.

Unfortunately, as Christianity became legal and then the official religion of the Roman Empire, many who were "of faith" seemed to be, in parable terms, like the three poorer soil conditions. How do we explain this in terms of the parable? Certainly, there are people who claim the faith, but never really accept the Word (Jesus). It became easy to call one's self a Christian with all its new social

benefits without ever entering into a relationship with God through Christ. Of course, many others accept Christ, but choose either not to live in his truth, or live unfruitful lives because they hold to a truth too diluted by worldliness.

In some ways, these problems became more pronounced in Roman times because a great deal of the world, which had previously been pagan, was coming to faith from a pagan background. The concepts of right and wrong were vastly different. Idolatry and polytheism were not easily supplanted overnight! The Roman world valued as virtues and rights much that Christianity recognized as sin. After conversion, there was a lot of mentoring and discipling needed.

This week, our goal is to establish the background for understanding St. Benedict and his contributions to the church. To be fair to Benedict, we must first put him into his historical context. In that regard, we will consider the effects of the “secularization of the church,” meaning that God’s church was becoming more and more a part of the Empire and a worldly institution as opposed to something strictly set apart from culture and government.

We will then briefly bring Benedict into his historical context within the monastic movement. We will go back to the time of St. Antony (covered a number of lessons ago) and trace the further developments of monasticism up to Benedict.

This week, our goal will be to understand Benedict specifically in both his life and his legacy.

## **SECULARIZATION OF THE CHURCH**

The secularization of the church had many effects, both good and bad. If we focus on the secularization arising after Constantine gave legal authority to the church, then we see some great strides for society as Constantine and others sought to bring the Empire into the same path as the church. Perhaps, this is nowhere more evident than in the laws passed.

As the first Christian emperor, Constantine passed significant laws demonstrating a Christian influence on the state. For example, in 321 Constantine passed the laws making Sunday a day of rest. Under Constantine, most activities were made illegal on Sunday out of respect for the resurrection of Jesus and the recognition that people should spend Sunday in worship rather than work. There were exceptions to the rule, including farming and tending vineyards, where Sundays were considered critical work days that could not be lost. But, Sunday readily became a day for people to spend in worship and consideration of the resurrection of Jesus.

There was a general set of very important laws not clearly traced to faith that came about as a result of Christianity's influence on the government and the people. These laws centered on the treatment of people with justice and equality. Before the influence and teaching of Christian ethics, equality existed for Roman citizens, but that was about it. Certain races of people and people of ignoble birth were considered truly inferior, both physically and intellectually. There was no concept or idea that people are the same, regardless of birth or station in life. Before Christian ethics, it was not unseemly to place people into gladiatorial fights where they would lose their lives because those fighting were considered only as valuable as other animals. Similarly, the courts were not available for all people, but only for those with an adequate status in life to justify fair treatment. It was the Christian faith that brought into the Roman world the idea that one God created all people and made them in his image. As such, all people are inherently valuable and entitled to justice and fairness.

An extension of this came in the way women were treated. In the non-Christian, Roman world, as well as the heathen world, most considered women property. Now, there were always exceptions to this notion. There were a few women who stood out and some who even asserted themselves (usually through some male) as rulers. As a gender, women were not respected nor were they given many legal rights. Again, it was Constantine who gave women the right to hold property. He also stopped the law allowing women to be brought before a public tribunal to address the modesty of their dress. Constantine introduced death as punishment in certain rape cases (of widows and of virgins consecrated to God). He also made adultery laws significantly broader<sup>2</sup> and eliminated the legality of multiple wives (concubinage). The later Christian Emperor Theodosius was the first to allow women limited guardianship rights over children. He also tried to interrupt the profitable prostitution trade (though unsuccessfully).

Also in the family area, Constantine changed the laws on the rights of fathers over their children. For example, Constantine took away a father's right to kill his own child. Fathers were still allowed to abandon their children and sell them into slavery, however. It took several more centuries before these atrocities were stopped.

In this vein, the whole area of slavery is worth mentioning. Once Christian ethics began to take hold, many started to question the propriety of slavery. It is worth noting that a number of influential teachers in the church not only freed their own

---

<sup>2</sup> Prior to Constantine, adultery was defined only as illicit intercourse with a woman who was married to a free citizen. Its punishment stemmed not as much from the idea of an extra-marital affair as from the interference with the property of a Roman citizen. Under Constantine, the definition was broadened considerably.

slaves, but also taught others to do so.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, many powerful people in the church saw things differently and actually were large slave owners. To these people, Christian virtue was found in one's treatment of slaves, not in the absence of slavery.

Another area where Christianity changed the culture and the laws concerned the gladiatorial combats. Of course, where entire races and groups of people are considered so alien, so inferior in intellect and soul that they are really thought of no differently than animals, one can see how those people might be put into animal roles in fighting and arena shows. It was in the second century that the church fathers began teaching against this atrocity. Even Constantine, however, put on displays of human death in public spectacle, although this was early in his reign. However, in 325 (the same year he convened the Council of Nicea to issue orthodoxy on the divinity of Christ), Constantine issued a law that put restrictions on gladiatorial combat. Finally, in 404, Honorius abolished the bloody combat of human versus human in gladiator shows for good. He did so after a monk named Telemachus threw himself into the arena from the stands to protest the bloody spectacle. The monk, to the horror of those watching, was torn limb from limb. The final end of human-versus-beast shows never came to pass in the Western Empire. In fact, they still live on today in the form of bull fights in the Spanish portion of Western civilization.

In addition to the ways the secularization of Christianity permeated the legal system and brought about good changes, there were other advantages that secularization brought to the church itself. The church became treated as a corporate entity. As such, the church could own property and exist, in a sense, as its own person. This is a right that has continued into Western civilization today.

Under Constantine, there was an initial release of clergy from a number of normal obligations of other people in the Empire. For example, clergymen were not

---

<sup>3</sup> None of these early church fathers came out and taught against slavery as an institution. The closest was probably John Chrysostom (studied in an earlier lesson). Chrysostom taught that all men were made equal, and before the fall, there was nothing that would justify any type of slavery. But, even Chrysostom believed that the fall brought about three areas of discipline and punishment that changed the rights of people. He taught that people fell under governing authority, women became subject to men, and slaves came into subjection to masters, all as a divine discipline. At least Chrysostom went the extra step and asserted that Christ taught that the fullest responsibility of the one in authority is to love the one in service fully. This view results in liberation of the slave as well as responsible behavior toward women and the governed. While Chrysostom never outright called for Christians to release all slaves, he did rail against those who held slaves for "luxury" reasons. He also taught that the New Testament church members in Jerusalem freed all of their own slaves. Other church fathers we have studied who argued and taught that Christians should free slaves include Ambrose and Augustine.

required to pay most taxes. Nor were clergymen pressed into military duty or lower manual labor jobs. Certain of these rights were removed (especially that of limited taxes) when it became apparent that many were joining the clergy, not because of “calling,” but rather as part of a tax dodge!

Constantine gave a number of properties to the church. He also built a great number of buildings that were given to the church as well. During this time, the church became a major property holder.

A number of these advantages to the church while seemingly positive on their face, actually had negative results. As already referenced, the tax laws produced a number of “clergy” who were no more interested in the matters of God than the man in the moon. More subtly, however, even the laws that enriched the church through property holdings had negative implications. For example, many saw no need to tithe because the church had a great deal of wealth from the state itself or from large benefactors such as Constantine.

As the clergy started receiving benefits (as well at times as outright funding) from the state, we see a number of people who, as Augustine would write, sought Jesus for profit rather than for Jesus. On a larger scale, we also see a number of churches famous for their opulence, rather than their austerity and service to mankind. A number of the wonderful people we have studied so far tried to rein this in, even selling unnecessarily extravagant property of the church to feed and tend the sick and poor.

As the church took on its new role in society, perhaps the most distressing, yet logical effect, came from the increases in “professors” as opposed to those truly faithful. By “professors,” we are not concerned with college teachers! We are talking about those who profess a faith they do not genuinely possess. For example, in the military, starting with Constantine, soldiers were to proclaim the following prayer by memory on a certain signal:

You alone we know as God. You are the King we acknowledge. You are the help we summon. By you we have won our victories, through you we have overcome our enemies. To you we render thanks for the good things past, you also we hope for as giver of those to come. To you we all come to supplicate for our Emperor Constantine and for his God’s beloved Son: That he may be kept safe and victorious for us in long, long life we plead.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book 4, 20. Cameron and Hall translation (Clarendon Press 1999).

As more and more people came into the church out of society's prompting, a clear dilution in devotion and action among the church is historically apparent.

What would biblically be considered rampant sin was often commonplace among many who called themselves "Christians." We can readily see the warning of Jesus about many who will come to him and call him "Lord," yet truly never knew him (Lk 6:46).

## RISE OF MONASTICISM

Against this background of verbal affirmation of faith, with lives of sin and disregard for the holy, comes the rise of monasticism. While early scholars saw monasticism simply a response to this laxity, more recent scholars have understood that the laxity was on one hand, but the church also exhibited vibrant piety on the other hand. This piety also drove monasticism as people sought a life reflective of contemplative devotion to the Lord and church.

We have already set out the life of St. Antony in an earlier lesson. As a father of monasticism, Antony withdrew into the desert and attempted to live a life of purity, struggling against the demons of his life usually in solitude from the world. While Antony would engage the world and teach, he spent most of his life in isolation rather than interaction.

We call the lifestyle Antony chose as one of a "hermit." Our word "hermit" comes from the Greek *eremites* (ἐρημίτης), which means, "desert." Another term used frequently in writings about hermiting is "anchoritism." This comes from the Greek *anachoreo* (ἀναχώρηο), which means, "to retire" (from human society).

Antony is considered the founder or father of "eremitical monasticism." By that it is meant that he is the founder of that aspect of monasticism where most of one's time is spent in isolation. This branch of monasticism was geographically located in the early church in areas where one could live alone more readily, especially the desert regions of northern Egypt and the Middle East. Many of these eremitical monastics would live apart from others and come together on Saturdays and Sunday for worship. Others would meet daily to recite Scripture and sing hymns together. They would also periodically participate in general conferences where they would share and fellowship together in worship, as well as discussion of certain issues that were important to the church.

Gradually, more and more of those who chose to find greater purity for themselves through isolation rather than in the frustrating secularized world of the church, started to band together. These people joined a "common life." (In Greek we have the words *koinos* (κοινός) for "common" and *bios* (βίος) for "life." Put

together, these words become what in English is “cenobitism” or a cloistered life.<sup>5)</sup>

These cloisters were gathering of men (monks<sup>6)</sup> under a common structure, in a common location, seeking to live lives of purity that set aside the extravagances of the world, seeking instead simplicity and godly focus. Just as there were cloisters springing up for men, there were also cloisters of women (nuns<sup>7)</sup>). These men and women sought to live the charge from John:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever (I Jn 2:15-17).

Over time, these monasteries/cloisters banded together somewhat under common leadership and rules. A major founder of this branch of monasticism was St. Pachomius. Around 318 he founded his first monastery in Egypt. By the time he died (around 345), several hundred monks lived in eight monasteries under his care. The monasteries had an organization similar to a military unit. The meals were held in common and the members lived in military-style barracks. Pachomius had his monks do manual labor, not only to feed themselves, but also to have money to give the poor.

Not all monasteries were so organized. Many of them (and therefore, many of the monks/nuns) were less able to find meaningful work and schedules. At times it would certainly prove true the maxim, idle hands are the devil’s workshop. This will be the area where Benedict brought about significant reform and direction. Before we get to Benedict himself, however, we should mention some additional people and movements that came between Antony and Benedict in the monastic tradition.

Monastic movements sprung up over the idea that there was great holiness that could come from a contemplative life. Time spent in devout contemplation of

---

<sup>5</sup> Technically, “cloister” comes from the Latin *claustrum* which is the Latin word for the Greek *monasterion* (μοναστήριον) or “monastery.”

<sup>6</sup> “Monk” comes from the Latin *monachus*, which comes from the Greek *monachos* (μονάχος) meaning “to live alone”.

<sup>7</sup> “Nun” comes from the Latin *nonna*, which means “chaste.”



God, Jesus, and spiritual life was seen as good for the individual, and ultimately, the church at large. These contemplatives were often people uniquely in a position to pray for and teach others about holiness and the divine.

In its purist form, the monastic vows of simplicity and poverty were seen as means to an end. The end purpose was to grow in loving God. The ascetic idea was removing all possible obstacles to loving God. In a sense, these people were seeking to lay down their own lives of self-fulfillment out of love and devotion to God.

The Biblical basis for the monastic approach to life was set forward using examples of Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Each spent time in solitude in the wilderness. The monastics would typically take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the abbot or abbess<sup>8</sup> (who had a role as a superintendent of sorts over the cloister). The New Testament passages that speak of property renunciation (Mk 10:17-31; Lk 18:18-30), dangers of wealth (Mt 13:32; Lk 6:20) family renunciation (Mt. 10:37-39; Lk 14:26-28), and chosen singlehood rather than marriage (1 Cor. 7:8, 25-35), were also seen as a basis for the monastic life.

As we examine the lives of monastics and the movements associated with them, we see many living in self-denial moved by a spirit of humility and love. Others live incredible lives of self-denial, but they do not always have the right motives! We do well to note here the comment of Philip Schaff, “Without love to God and charity to man, the severest self-punishment and the utmost abandonment of the world are worthless before God.”<sup>9</sup> Augustine himself said that among monks and nuns he found the best and the worst of mankind.

As we look at the different manifestations of the hermit/monastic life before Benedict, we see many examples of lives that inspire, discourage, amaze and appall! Consider just a few of the more extreme manifestations of this life of denial and contemplation.

Paul the Simple was one who prayed 300 times a day, keeping track with pebbles he kept for that purpose. Isodore of Pelusium wore only clothes of animal skins and refused to eat any meat. Macarius the Egyptian (also called “Marcarius the Elder”) would eat only once a week for a long time. He would also sleep either standing or leaning on a staff.

---

<sup>8</sup> “Abbot” comes from the Syriac *abbas*, meaning “father.” “Abbess” likewise is from the Syriac *ammas* meaning “mother.”

<sup>9</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, volume 3 at 163 (Eerdmans 1994 printing).

One of the most austere and unusual was Simeon the Stylite. Simeon spent 36 years on a pillar that was 30 to 40 feet high. He would eat only once a week. Though beset by disease, worms, and innumerable problems, Simeon denied himself any pleasure of life and stayed atop his pillar, preaching to those who came out to see him, and otherwise living in self-denial.

Some of the less impressive feats include Macarius the Younger who supposedly lay for six months naked in the desert being incessantly bit by the African gnats. Supposedly, this was a self-inflicted punishment for his earlier arbitrary killing of a gnat. Many in Mesopotamia lived much like animals eating grass for sustenance.

Many of those who chose a monastic or hermitting lifestyle lived active lives that brought them a certain victory over spiritual battles redounding to the benefit of many others. At the same time, there were many who found that withdrawal seemed to produce more sin, not less!

Into this world, came Benedict. The 21<sup>st</sup> century monastic John Michael Talbot writes,

The greatest single gift of Saint Benedict is his ability to moderate extremes in making what could be fanatical monasticism of the past into a most livable program of radical, but not fanatical Christian life for the average person of his own time and culture... This is his singular genius in the history of monasticism in both the east and west.<sup>10</sup>

Benedict brought rules of living that aided those in a monastic setting to more clearly walk with God. The same rules were used by those outside the monastic life to aid them in their walks as well.

### **BENEDICT'S PERSONAL HISTORY**

Benedict was born around 480 in Nursia (modern Norcia, Italy, north of Rome) along with his twin sister Scholastica. Our most reliable information on him comes from the writings of St. (Pope) Gregory the Great some 45 to 50 years after Benedict died.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> In personal correspondence to Mark Lanier, June 25, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> See Gregory's *Dialogues*, Book 2, "The Life of Benedict." The writings were not biographical in the sense of biographies we have today. Instead, it was written to convey the important point that in a very troubled time in history, God still worked for and through virtuous people.

Reading Gregory on Benedict does not give us that much information on the formative life experiences that went into Benedict's Rule for monastic life. What we do glean from Gregory's *Dialogue* is that Benedict was a godly man who cared deeply about holiness.

In his prologue to the Life of Benedict, Gregory sets out that Benedict led a "venerable life, blessed by grace, and blessed in name." The blessing in name is a reference to "Benedict." The Latin *benedictus* means "blessed." Gregory tells us that Benedict, even at an early age, had the mind of an old man. By this comment, he did not mean Benedict was feeble or forgetful (nor should we assume "old men" are today!) Gregory was trying to convey that at an age when young men typically sow wild oats, Benedict thought more maturely. Benedict never esteemed the world's good. Its vanities were "as nothing" to Benedict from early life on. This is especially interesting in light of the family into which Benedict was born. His parents were wealthy nobility.

The wealth and prestige of his family enabled them to send Benedict and his nurse (read that more as "nannie" or "caretaker") to Rome for his education. We do not know how long Benedict stayed in Rome, he never finished his course of studies. While studying Humanities, Benedict decided to quit and leave. He was concerned at how many students were led by their studies into sin. Rather than dabble in or get near to such sin, Benedict left Rome and went, with his nurse, to the town of Enfide (modern Affile, Italy).

At Enfide, Benedict and his nurse stayed with others at the Church of St. Peter. The nurse borrowed a sieve to sift wheat. While left on the table, the sieve broke, to the horror of the nurse. Benedict saw the distress of his nurse over the accident and took the sieve, praying over it. As Gregory relates the story, God made the sieve whole, and the break could not even be identified.

Benedict's fame from this miracle quickly spread throughout the community. Rather than enjoy the praises of men, Benedict stole away from the church (leaving even his nurse behind) and went into solitude for 3 years, living out of a cave.

While in solitude, God provided for Benedict through several individuals. Gregory notes that eventually God called Benedict out of his solitude so that such a bright light should shine in the world and church (as opposed to being hidden under a bushel or in a cave!).

Gregory recounts a number of other miracles worked through the life of Benedict. In the process of the account, Gregory tells us about several attempts on

Benedict's life. The first came from a set of monks! These monks came to Benedict and asked him to head up their monastery. Benedict politely refused, explaining that his lifestyle was quite a bit different from theirs. The monks insisted, and eventually Benedict said, "okay." The monks had no idea what they were in for!

Benedict was not one to allow casual devotion to God. As that became apparent to the other monks, they decided to get rid of Benedict – for good! The monks put poison into his drink! Gregory recounts that Benedict prayed over his drink prior to the meal and the cup shattered. When it became apparent to Benedict that the other monks would kill him to get rid of him, he decided it was time to move on. In the words of Gregory, "the life of virtuous men is always grievous to those that be of wicked conditions."<sup>12</sup>

In the process of relating the life of Benedict, periodically Gregory answers questions posed to him by "Peter" (a fellow who is listening to Gregory recount the life of Benedict). Peter wonders why a godly man like Benedict would leave monks who are in such bad shape that they would attempt murder. In Peter's mind, it seems that those monks would be in greatest need of Benedict's ministry.

Gregory responds with sort of a mathematical analogy! Gregory explains that the likelihood of success among those few monks that tried to kill Benedict was far outweighed by the masses of people Benedict could influence for good if he left the murderous monks.

Benedict went out and started 12 monasteries of his own. These monasteries were home not only to the monks in each, but also to a number of children that parents would leave in the care of Benedict. These monasteries were the sites of other miraculous occurrences told us by Gregory.

Benedict likely wrote the rules for his monasteries while living and serving at the monastery he constructed at Monte Cassino (this is the place where Benedict died on March 21, 543). These rules would be the mark that Benedict would leave on church history that far exceeds any of the miracles he supposedly wrought. As Gregory recounted it, no one should be ignorant of the fact that "among so many miracles" was a "man of God" so "learned in divinity!"

## **THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT**

This brings us to the Rule of St. Benedict. This is a self-help book on steroids! It is a rule written to govern the monastic life in ways that make constructive

---

<sup>12</sup> *Dialogues*, Book 2, chapter 3.

Christian growth in community life. But it is also a simply written, clear guide to assist in general Christian holiness. The Rule of Saint Benedict has a prologue and 73 chapters. Many people have written whole books devoted to the Rule. Some of these books are critical studies, some are commentaries, and some are basic devotionals. While it would be easy for us to spend a great deal of time on the rules (as in weeks and months), we would be losing the “literacy” aspect of this class! So in the spirit of what we need to learn to be literate in church history, we will condense the Rule down to bite-size portions for this class. We will reproduce a bit of the rule here in the lesson, but it is easily accessed both in bookstores and on the internet from sources like Amazon.com.

The prologue sets out valuable information to understanding the Rule. We read that the rule is written not only for monks who seek to live productively and harmoniously in community life, but it is also written for all who seek greater holiness before God. Benedict writes, “To you, therefore, I direct my speech, you who give up your own will and take up the strong and excellent weapons of obedience to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King.”<sup>13</sup>

Having noted the Rule’s general application as an early “Self-help” book, we must quickly add that the Rule has some specific instructions for those seeking to follow a monastic life in a cloistered community. As we study the Rule, we will break down the chapters in our own organization, rather than the sequential listing of the chapters by Benedict.

## **PROLOGUE.**

This is general instruction and motivation for the Rule itself. Relying heavily on scripture, Benedict urges the Christian to use the right attitude and approach to holiness. For example, the first word in the Prologue, and hence, the first word in the Rule itself, is “Listen...,” for listening is of paramount importance in the Christian walk. Much as James said, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak” (James 1:19).

Benedict then urges his followers to beg of God, “by most earnest prayer, that he perfect whatever good you begin.” Again, although Benedict does not quote the scripture itself, this hearkens back to

---

<sup>13</sup> Most versions of the rule will have a “King James-ish” English with “thee’s” and “thou’s” and “takest” instead of “take.” As I quote it here, I am taking the liberty of changing it into vulgar (everyday) English. In fact, Benedict wrote the rule in everyday (vulgar) Latin, not classical Latin. Much like the New Testament (which was written in everyday or *Koine* Greek), thee’s and thou’s carry a holy sound, but do not really reflect the informal language of the writing.

Paul's comment to the Philippians that, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6 NAS).

Benedict does quote a good bit of scripture directly from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Attached to this lesson as an Appendix, is the Prologue. Reading it, you will note quotes from five different Psalms, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Matthew, Romans, John, 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Revelation. Not bad for eleven paragraphs!

**1. GENERAL TRAITS APPROPRIATE FOR MONKS.**  
(Chapters 1-2; 4-7; 21, 31-33, and 69-72)

These sections take different approaches for the Christian traits espoused. Some of the chapters deal with general Christian traits appropriate for any follower of Christ (more of the "self-help" type chapters). Other chapters deal with specific characteristics for people who take roles in the monastic community.

The general chapters are four through seven. Chapter four is reproduced in its entirety in the Appendix to this lesson. Chapter four sets out basic commands that echo scripture either verbatim or at least in spirit. It is a list of 73 things people should work on for their holiness in life. It is interesting to note not only the things that make the list, but also the ordering of the list. For example, the first instruction is, "In the first place to love the Lord God with the whole heart, the whole soul, the whole strength." The second instruction is, "Then, [love] one's neighbor as one's self." Of course, when Jesus was asked the greatest commandment, he listed these two commands as the first and second commands on which the whole law hinged.

Immediately following these two commands, Benedict put as his third instruction, "Not to kill." No doubt, this point hit close to home, considering his experience at his first monastery!

Many of the commands echo the clear ethics and instructions of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. There are also some delightful twists on the ethics taught in scripture. For example, instruction 42 reads, "To refer what good one sees in himself, not to self, but to God." This is a wonderful way to express the biblical admonitions that any good we do, is good God does through us, and never the basis for our pride. Even our salvation, Paul writes is not by our works, "lest any man should boast. For we are his

workmanship...” (Eph 2:9-10). Or, as Peter would later write, “Clothe yourself with humility...for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5).

Beyond these chapters (four through seven), we have chapters that pertain to the godliness among monks (for example, Chapter 1, where four kinds of monks are set out: (1) those in community, (2) those who are hermits, (3) those who live by any standard that please them, without regard to what is right or wrong, and (4) those who move from place to place and mooch off others. Benedict speaks very poorly of types 3 and 4!).<sup>14</sup>

## **2. SPECIFIC RULES FOR WORSHIP OF THE COMMUNITY AND THE INDIVIDUALS.**

(Chapters 8-20, 41 – 42, 49, 52)

These chapters set out the times for prayer, worship, and performing the work of God. One of the readily transparent and impressive aspects of this is the seamless integration of worship into the community life. The monks were expected to spend about a third of their waking time in prayer, a third in work and service, and a third in study and reflection. The balance is quite noteworthy.

## **3. THE STRUCTURE AND WORKINGS OF THE COMMUNITY.**

This grouping of chapters deals with counsel before decisions are made (3). They deal with disciplinary matters (23-30). They concern how much people eat, how the ill and aged are tended to, and who should work in the kitchen (34-40). These sections also concern when correcting those who fail or make mistakes (43–46). The work schedules, the timekeepers, and the other issues with work are also covered (47-48, 50-51). Rules for the elections of leaders, the admission of brethren and hospitality, and contact with the outside world are also set out (53-54, 56-67). Chapter 55 deals with

---

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 2 deals with the kind of man that is appropriate for the role of Abbot. Chapter 21 concerns the men who would be “Deans” in the monastery. Chapter 31 deals with the kind of man who would be the cellarer of the monastery (the person responsible for maintaining the food and drink of the monastery). Chapter 32 deals with the people who have oversight and responsibility for the tools of the monastery. Chapter 33 deals with whether monks should own any possessions (the answer to that is “No!” Monks should not even own a pen!). Chapters 69-71 concern interactions and disputes among the monks. Chapter 72 urges the monks to have great zeal for virtue.

the monks clothing. Finally, chapter 68 gives the response expected when a monk is asked to do something he cannot do.

These rules governed not only the monasteries for Benedict, but they also became the core rules for many monastic communities in Western Christendom even today. They have withstood the tests of time and have produced some of the church's greatest scholars, greatest missionaries, and greatest achievements (including the transcriptions of many books and scriptures that we would have lost over the centuries without their hard work and commitment).

It is interesting to note that Benedict was convinced of the need for poverty among the monastic residents, and yet even that austerity was not without balance. Whereas many of the Egyptian monks wore only rags, shunning any clothing that would be picked up if left by the side of the road, Benedict had his monks wear comfortable clothing appropriate for the weather and seasons. Similar balance was found in the life style. While the extreme ascetics would not allow themselves much sleep, Benedict provided for 6 to 8 hours sleep a night for his monks. A final point to emphasize concerns the duty to work. To Benedict, idle hands were the devil's workshop. He would not have any of that! Holiness required that his monks work, not just for the monastic community but for charity as well.

### **POINTS FOR HOME**

Our points for home will center on the basics:

1. *"...for by grace you have been saved through faith, not by works lest any man should boast..."* (Eph. 2:8-9).

Anytime we are studying Christian holiness, we do well to remember that our works and holiness are not our salvation, they are the fruit that comes from a saved life.

2. *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up"* (Gal. 6:7-10).

Yes, we are saved by grace through faith, but our works are extremely important. They are the warp and woof of our life's fabric in a real cause/effect sense. We are fooling ourselves if we think what we do



doesn't affect who we are and how we live. Holiness is the *smart* play, aside from being the obedient one.

3. *“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever”* (I Jn 2:15-17).

So let's figure you are not a monk or nun, what can you still do to set aside some measure of worldliness and center your life more fully on loving God and mankind?

## **APPENDIX – Excerpts from The Rule of Benedict**

### **PROLOGUE**

Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart, and cheerfully receive and faithfully execute the admonitions of thy loving Father, that by the toil of obedience thou mayest return to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience thou hast gone away.

To thee, therefore, my speech is now directed, who, giving up thine own will, takest up the strong and most excellent arms of obedience, to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King.

In the first place, beg of Him by most earnest prayer, that He perfect whatever good thou dost begin, in order that He who hath been pleased to count us in the number of His children, need never be grieved at our evil deeds. For we ought at all times so to serve Him with the good things which He hath given us, that He may not, like an angry father, disinherit his children, nor, like a dread lord, enraged at our evil deeds, hand us over to everlasting punishment as most wicked servants, who would not follow Him to glory.

Let us then rise at length, since the Scripture arouseth us, saying: "It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep" (Rom 13:11); and having opened our eyes to the deifying light, let us hear with awestruck ears what the divine voice, crying out daily, doth admonish us, saying: "Today, if you shall hear his voice, harden not

your hearts" (Ps 94[95]:8). And again: "He that hath ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches" (Rev 2:7). And what doth He say? -- "Come, children, hearken unto me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Ps 33[34]:12). "Run whilst you have the light of life, that the darkness of death overtake you not" (Jn 12:35).

And the Lord seeking His workman in the multitude of the people, to whom He proclaimeth these words, saith again: "Who is the man that desireth life and loveth to see good days" (Ps 33[34]:13)? If hearing this thou answerest, "I am he," God saith to thee: "If thou wilt have true and everlasting life, keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile; turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it" (Ps 33[34]:14-15). And when you shall have done these things, my eyes shall be upon you, and my ears unto your prayers. And before you shall call upon me I will say: "Behold, I am here" (Is 58:9).

What, dearest brethren, can be sweeter to us than this voice of the Lord inviting us? See, in His loving kindness, the Lord showeth us the way of life. Therefore, having our loins girt with faith and the performance of good works, let us walk His ways under the guidance of the Gospel, that we may be found worthy of seeing Him who hath called us to His kingdom (cf 1 Thes 2:12).

If we desire to dwell in the tabernacle of His kingdom, we cannot reach it in any way, unless we run thither by good works. But let us ask the Lord with the Prophet, saying to Him: "Lord, who shall dwell in Thy tabernacle, or who shall rest in Thy holy hill" (Ps 14[15]:1)?

After this question, brethren, let us listen to the Lord answering and showing us the way to this tabernacle, saying: "He that walketh without blemish and worketh justice; he that speaketh truth in his heart; who hath not used deceit in his tongue, nor hath done evil to his neighbor, nor hath taken up a reproach against his neighbor" (Ps 14[15]:2-3), who hath brought to naught the foul demon tempting him, casting him out of his heart with his temptation, and hath taken his evil thoughts whilst they were yet weak and hath dashed them against Christ (cf Ps 14[15]:4; Ps 136[137]:9); who fearing the Lord are not puffed up by their goodness of life, but holding that the actual good which is in them cannot be done by themselves, but by the Lord, they praise the Lord working in them (cf Ps 14[15]:4), saying with the Prophet: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us; by Thy name give glory" (Ps 113[115]:1:9). Thus also the Apostle Paul hath not taken to himself any credit for his preaching, saying: "By the grace of God, I am what I am" (1 Cor 15:10). And again he saith: "He that glorieth, let him glory in the

Lord" (2 Cor 10:17).

Hence, the Lord also saith in the Gospel: "He that heareth these my words and doeth them, shall be likened to a wise man who built his house upon a rock; the floods came, the winds blew, and they beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded on a rock" (Mt 7:24-25). The Lord fulfilling these words waiteth for us from day to day, that we respond to His holy admonitions by our works. Therefore, our days are lengthened to a truce for the amendment of the misdeeds of our present life; as the Apostle saith: "Knowest thou not that the patience of God leadeth thee to penance" (Rom 2:4)? For the good Lord saith: "I will not the death of the sinner, but that he be converted and live" (Ezek 33:11).

Now, brethren, that we have asked the Lord who it is that shall dwell in His tabernacle, we have heard the conditions for dwelling there; and if we fulfill the duties of tenants, we shall be heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Our hearts and our bodies must, therefore, be ready to do battle under the biddings of holy obedience; and let us ask the Lord that He supply by the help of His grace what is impossible to us by nature. And if, flying from the pains of hell, we desire to reach life everlasting, then, while there is yet time, and we are still in the flesh, and are able during the present life to fulfill all these things, we must make haste to do now what will profit us forever.

We are, therefore, about to found a school of the Lord's service, in which we hope to introduce nothing harsh or burdensome. But even if, to correct vices or to preserve charity, sound reason dictateth anything that turneth out somewhat stringent, do not at once fly in dismay from the way of salvation, the beginning of which cannot but be narrow. But as we advance in the religious life and faith, we shall run the way of God's commandments with expanded hearts and unspeakable sweetness of love; so that never departing from His guidance and persevering in the monastery in His doctrine till death, we may by patience share in the sufferings of Christ, and be found worthy to be coheirs with Him of His kingdom.

#### CHAPTER IV *The Instruments of Good Works*

(1) In the first place to love the Lord God with the whole heart, the whole soul, the whole strength.

(2) Then, one's neighbor as one's self (cf Mt 22:37-39; Mk 12:30-31; Lk 10:27).

(3) Then, not to kill.

(4) Not to commit adultery.

- (5) Not to steal.
- (6) Not to covet (cf Rom 13:9).
- (7) Not to bear false witness (cf Mt 19:18; Mk 10:19; Lk 18:20).
- (8) To honor all men (cf 1 Pt 2:17).
- (9) And what one would not have done to himself, not to do to another (cf Tob 4:16; Mt 7:12; Lk 6:31).
- (10) To deny one's self in order to follow Christ (cf Mt 16:24; Lk 9:23).
- (11) To chastise the body (cf 1 Cor 9:27).
- (12) Not to seek after pleasures.
- (13) To love fasting.
- (14) To relieve the poor.
- (15) To clothe the naked.
- (16) To visit the sick (cf Mt 25:36).
- (17) To bury the dead.
- (18) To help in trouble.
- (19) To console the sorrowing.
- (20) To hold one's self aloof from worldly ways.
- (21) To prefer nothing to the love of Christ.
- (22) Not to give way to anger.
- (23) Not to foster a desire for revenge.
- (24) Not to entertain deceit in the heart.

- (25) Not to make a false peace.
- (26) Not to forsake charity.
- (27) Not to swear, lest perchance one swear falsely.
- (28) To speak the truth with heart and tongue.
- (29) Not to return evil for evil (cf 1 Thes 5:15; 1 Pt 3:9).
- (30) To do no injury, yea, even patiently to bear the injury done us.
- (31) To love one's enemies (cf Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27).
- (32) Not to curse them that curse us, but rather to bless them.
- (33) To bear persecution for justice sake (cf Mt 5:10).
- (34) Not to be proud...
- (35) Not to be given to wine (cf Ti 1:7; 1 Tm 3:3).
- (36) Not to be a great eater.
- (37) Not to be drowsy.
- (38) Not to be slothful (cf Rom 12:11).
- (39) Not to be a murmurer.
- (40) Not to be a detractor.
- (41) To put one's trust in God.
- (42) To refer what good one sees in himself, not to self, but to God.
- (43) But as to any evil in himself, let him be convinced that it is his own and charge it to himself.
- (44) To fear the day of judgment.

- (45) To be in dread of hell.
- (46) To desire eternal life with all spiritual longing.
- (47) To keep death before one's eyes daily.
- (48) To keep a constant watch over the actions of our life.
- (49) To hold as certain that God sees us everywhere.
- (50) To dash at once against Christ the evil thoughts which rise in one's heart.
- (51) And to disclose them to our spiritual father.
- (52) To guard one's tongue against bad and wicked speech.
- (53) Not to love much speaking.
- (54) Not to speak useless words and such as provoke laughter.
- (55) Not to love much or boisterous laughter.
- (56) To listen willingly to holy reading.
- (57) To apply one's self often to prayer.
- (58) To confess one's past sins to God daily in prayer with sighs and tears, and to amend them for the future.
- (59) Not to fulfill the desires of the flesh (cf Gal 5:16).
- (60) To hate one's own will.
- (61) To obey the commands of the Abbot in all things, even though he himself (which Heaven forbid) act otherwise, mindful of that precept of the Lord: "What they say, do ye; what they do, do ye not" (Mt 23:3).
- (62) Not to desire to be called holy before one is; but to be holy first, that one may be truly so called.
- (63) To fulfill daily the commandments of God by works.

- (64) To love chastity.
- (65) To hate no one.
- (66) Not to be jealous; not to entertain envy.
- (67) Not to love strife.
- (68) Not to love pride.
- (69) To honor the aged.
- (70) To love the younger.
- (71) To pray for one's enemies in the love of Christ.
- (72) To make peace with an adversary before the setting of the sun.
- (73) And never to despair of God's mercy.

Behold, these are the instruments of the spiritual art, which, if they have been applied without ceasing day and night and approved on judgment day, will merit for us from the Lord that reward which He hath promised: "The eye hath not seen, nor the ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love Him" (1 Cor 2:9). But the workshop in which we perform all these works with diligence is the enclosure of the monastery, and stability in the community.

## **HOMEWORK**

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-3:11. This week we add 1 John 3:12-13. We provide all verses below for your help!

**1John 1:1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen

and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

**1:5** This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

**1John 2:1** My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. **2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. **3** And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. **4** Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, **5** but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: **6** whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. **7** Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. **8** At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. **9** Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. **10** Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. **11** But whoever hates



his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

**12** I am writing to you, little children,  
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

**13** I am writing to you, fathers,  
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,  
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children,  
because you know the Father.

**14** I write to you, fathers,  
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,  
because you are strong,  
and the word of God abides in you,  
and you have overcome the evil one.

**15** Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **16** For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. **17** And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

**18** Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. **19** They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. **20** But

you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. **21** I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. **22** Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. **23** No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. **24** Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. **25** And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.

**26** I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. **27** But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. **28** And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. **29** you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

**1John 3:1** See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. **2** Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. **3** And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. **4** Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. **5** You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. **6** No one who abides in him

keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. **7** Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. **8** Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. **9** No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. **10** By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

**11**For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. **12** We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. **13** Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.