



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

June 1985

DRIVING

At first sight, it may seem a little strange to consider the problems of driving in a newsletter of spirituality. We do not associate it with prayer or worship or fasting or rule of life. It doesn't strike us as a spiritual activity. But as with most material activities, driving also has a spiritual side. More than anything, driving shows us whether we are succeeding at being Christians. It is an occasion for revealing a great deal about the condition of our spirituality: about how well we are doing in key areas of Christian life.

Think about how you act when you are driving. When another driver does something stupid -- makes a left turn from the right lane, say, or pulls out of a parking space without looking -- how do you react? Do you get angry with him? Are you judgmental? Do you say (to yourself or out loud), "You fool! People who drive like that shouldn't be allowed on the road." Do you expect your passenger to join you in your righteous indignation? In short, are you ready to heap condemnation upon the erring driver in an attitude of self-righteousness?

Or, how do you deal with the driver who is out to get ahead? He is the kind that is always weaving in and out on the expressway trying to find the fastest lane. He also speeds up to get through the light on yellow and does not wait for it to turn green. He drives aggressively and clearly wants to get where he is going quickly without concern for the safety and speed of the others who are on the road. How do we react to this sort of driver? Much of the time we resent him (or worse), not because he is inconsiderate but because he is successful. We get angry with him because he manages to make the light when we don't. We couch our indignation in terms of safety and common courtesy, of course. But what really galls us is that his selfishness seems to be rewarded.

We can also get upset at the circumstances beyond our control, as when we get caught in a traffic jam. It is hard to fix blame for such things, but if we get angry, that is what we try to do. We may blame the traffic officials for not arranging the construction in a less disruptive way. We may blame the other drivers for slowing down to look at the construction itself. We may blame our spouse who is navigating for getting us into the situation, even though there is no way she could have known that it was there.'

Then there are times when we wish to indulge our impatience. We are late for an appointment, or just want to get home, so we decide to speed a little (or more than a little). Or we run through a yellow light that we really could have stopped for. Or we see a line of cars waiting to turn, and instead of waiting with them we zoom around and try to merge back into line at the front. These situations show our self-centeredness directly, for in all of them we put ourselves before others. We are failing to live up to the standard our Lord has set for us: "Thou shalt love ... thy neighbor as thyself." We are being self-indulgent.

All of these situations have one thing in common: they show our self-centeredness. This is unpleasant for us to acknowledge -- which is the reason so many Christians refuse to admit that there is anything sinful about self-centered behaviour when driving. Many Christians (as well as others) seek to justify it on the basis of "Why should I have to wait because of the construction?" The fact remains that the root of the matter is self-centeredness, and if we go on feeding the root it will only grow stronger. If we are serious about being Christians, then we will be serious about getting rid of our self-centeredness. And if we are serious about getting rid of our self-centeredness, then the time will come when we will look at how we act as drivers. Those who do not drive are of course blessedly delivered from what is an occasion of sin for so many of the rest of us. But they will have other opportunities for seeing what is inside of them.

If the manifestations are impatience, resentment, and anger, what are the roots? Take the case of the construction. The impatience which arises here is based on the assumption that the world should be ordered for my convenience. The assumption is almost always unspoken, because to put it in those terms exposes it for what it is: a ludicrous falsehood. Intellectually, we know that the world is not made for our convenience but for the glory of God. Nevertheless, we often act as if we are gods, and expect creation to glorify us. Consciously, we know better; but sometimes when we are driving something else comes out.

In the case of the stupid driver, we are asserting that we are responsible for the judgment of others. We would never make such mistakes, of course, and that gives us the right to judge (and con-

demn) those who do. While this has a certain logic to it, it is not Christian. Christian dealings with other people are based not on judgment and condemnation, but on forgiveness. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Christians must recognize that all mankind stands condemned -- and redeemed -- before the throne of God. No one, then, has the right to judge except God. St. Peter advises us (I Peter 2:23) to follow Jesus' example in leaving judgment to God, so that we will be able to live our own lives in peace and quietness.

The first practical step, then, to take in our war with our driving sins is to leave judgment to God. Whenever we find ourselves judging another driver, we must remind ourselves that this is no longer our prerogative, and that God will do a better job of it anyway. We may even want to remind ourselves that if we judge (and condemn) then we too will be judged (and condemned). That should give us some incentive to give up our judgmental habits.

The next step is to consider the cause of our anger. Are we just irritated at the other driver's selfishness, or has he actually sinned against us? If the other driver has willfully endangered us, or if in his impatience he has interfered with our getting where we are going, then we are sinned against. In that case we must forgive, or at least try so far as we are able. As with judgment, we have a considerable incentive in God's offer to forgive us as we forgive others.

If, on the other hand, no sin against us is involved -- the driver's act is just stupid but doesn't really have anything to do with us -- then we must remind ourselves that his sins are no concern of ours any more than ours are of him. It is simply none of our business, and we should let go of all concern with him. Certainly we have no reason to get angry in such a situation. We have observed sin, and we might be sad to see it. But we are not directly involved in sin, either as perpetrator or victim, and so have no cause for anger or further concern. We should leave such concern with sin to God in any case.

Third, we need to practice the model of behaviour that Jesus gave us on the cross: that of suffering unavoidable pains without resentment or anger. He did not rant and rail against the injustice that was done Him. He did not cry out against the pain. He simply bore it because it was what came His way in His faithful service to His Father. By treating it in this way, His suffering did not separate Him from the Father. In our situation, it operates the same way. We need not let the self-centeredness of other drivers separate us from God. The anger and resentment and impatience will indeed divide us from God -- we do not have to react that way. We can drive -- even in the midst of incompetent and selfish drivers -- without anger. Our anger and resentment are self-indulgent anyway. We think

that because we are victimized by the self-centeredness of the other driver, we have a right to be angry. Is it not just, after all? Well, it may be just (in an earthly sort of way) but it is not Christian. As Christians we are to forgive, and it is not necessary to inflict our anger on a sinner before we forgive him. When we are driving, we allow ourselves to think that since the other driver shows no signs of penitence, we should get angry at him to compensate. Then, when he sees how bad he has been, we will forgive him.

The fact is that forgiveness -- and the lack of anger and resentment -- can occur. There is no necessity about getting angry when driving. This realization is a key step in conquering the trials of driving. To many drivers it has simply never occurred that they need not deal with bad drivers by getting angry. They just never thought that they have an alternative, and that the way is to be found in Christ.

We need not be upset by the sins of other drivers. Our communion with God gives us a much greater and deeper peace, one which need not be touched by the trials of driving. We are given the opportunity to relax in God's arms, and commit all the other drivers to His mercy. Nowhere is the injunction to bless and not curse more appropriate. If we train ourselves to invoke God's mercy upon all other drivers no matter how selfish and inconsiderate they may be, we will have little trouble in breaking the power of our bad habits in driving.

Our reactions of impatience and anger are bad habits: they are our habitual way of dealing with a given situation. As such, they can be broken by training and discipline. But it takes work. The daily recollection is a good time to think back over the day's driving to see how it has gone. We must learn to drive in God's presence: as if He was there forgiving the driver that we wish to condemn.

The aim of all the effort is not just to drive without the sins of anger and impatience and judgmentalism. It is much deeper than that. The aim is to train the will in these relatively minor manifestations so that it will be ever more perfect in its essence. The training of the minor externals of the will trains the will itself. And then the will itself will be that much more ready to obey its Lord whenever and wherever it may be called to do so. Driving may be minor in itself. But it is a prime occasion for us to be trained in the ways of our Lord, breaking the power of our self-centeredness, so that we can be remade in His image.

