

St Dorotheus of Gaza (505 – 565?)

INSTRUCTION VI

On Refraining from Judging one's Neighbour

69. Brothers, if we call to mind the words of the holy old men, if we study them carefully at all times, then it will be difficult to commit sin; it will be difficult to neglect ourselves. For if, as they tell us, we do not despise things that are minor and seem to us to be of no account, then we shall not fall into things that are great and serious. As I am always telling you, from these trivial things, from saying, 'What does this matter? What does that matter?' the soul acquires a bad habit, and begins to despise even great things.

Do you see how serious a failure it is to judge your neighbour? Indeed, what is more serious than this? For indeed what does God hate or turn away from so much as this? As the Fathers also say: 'Nothing is worse than judging.' And similarly, from these apparently paltry things, a person ends up in a situation of great evil. For from accepting a small suspicion about the neighbour, from saying, 'I mean, what does it matter if I listen to what that brother is saying? What does it matter if I say just this one thing myself? What does it matter if I just see where this brother is going, or what that stranger is doing?' the soul begins to neglect its own sins and to concentrate on the neighbour, and finally from this it begins to pass sentence on the neighbour, to talk him down, and to set him at nought... and from this, it falls itself into the very things it judges [in the other]. And since it fails to meditate on its own evils, or to weep – as the Father used to say – over its own death, it can never set itself straight in anything, but is always at work on the neighbour. And nothing provokes God to anger so much, nothing strips a person so naked and causes him to be abandoned as speaking ill of the neighbour, or judging him, or setting him at nought.

70. For it is one thing to talk people down, another to condemn them and another again to set them at nought. For talking people down is when we say, 'Such-and-such has lied,' or 'He got angry,' or 'He committed fornication,' or what have you. This person has already talked the other person down; that is: he has spoken evil about him, he has broadcast his sins in a way that is controlled by the passions.

Condemning people is saying, 'Such-and-such is a liar,' or 'he is inclined to anger,' or, 'he is a fornicator'. For here, the person saying these things is judging the very disposition of the other's soul, and he has made a pronouncement about the whole of the other person's life, saying, 'He *is* such-and-such a thing,' and judging that the other actually *is* whatever this thing is. This is a serious business. For it is one thing to say that someone got angry, and another to say that he or she is an angry person, and in this way to make a pronouncement about the person's whole life. So this business of judging people is graver than any other sin, since Christ himself said: 'Hypocrite; first take out the plank that is in your own eye, and then you will be able to see clearly enough to take out the splinter from your brother's eye.' He compared the neighbour's sin to the splinter, while the business of judging he compared to the plank, so grievous a thing is it to pass judgment on others, perhaps even more so than any other sin. That Pharisee who came and gave thanks to God on account of his virtue was not telling a lie when he did so; he was

speaking the truth. And it was not for this that he was condemned. For we are bound to give thanks to God, whenever we are found worthy to do some good thing, as his co-workers and with his assistants. Therefore, as I said, [the Pharisee] was not condemned because he said, 'I am not like other people,' but because, turning towards the Tax Collector, he said, 'Nor am I like this Tax Collector here.' This was what weighed him down with guilt, for he judged the very person of the Tax Collector, the very disposition of his soul, and to put it simply, his whole life. And thus it was the Tax Collector that went away justified, rather than the Pharisee.

71. For nothing is more serious, nothing more grievous – as I am so often saying – as judging the neighbour, or setting him at nought. Why do we not rather pass judgment on ourselves and our own evil deeds, of which we have such accurate knowledge, and concerning which we will have to give an account to God? Why do we steal the act of judging, which belongs to God? What demand are we to make of one of God's creatures? Ought we not to tremble, when we hear what happened to that great old man, who heard that one of the brothers had fallen into sin, and said: 'O, he has done evil!?' Do you not know how terrible is the story about him that is found in the *Annals of the Old Men*? It says that that one of the holy angels took the soul of that sinner to [the old man] and said to him: 'Look, the man you judged has died; what are your orders about where I should take him? To the kingdom, or to be punished?' Could anything ever be more fearful than this burden? For what do the angel's words to the old man mean, if not: 'Since you are the judge of the righteous and of sinners alike, give me my instructions with respect to this poor soul. Will you take pity on it? Will you punish it?' So that holy old man, overwhelmed by the experience, spent the time he still had to live in sighing, with tears and with countless hardships, begging God to forgive him on account of that sin. And this after having fallen on his face at the feet of the angel and receiving pardon! For when the angel said, 'Behold, God has shown you how serious a thing it is to judge; do not do it anymore,' this was a word of forgiveness. And yet nevertheless, the soul of that old man would not let go of its grief until he died.

72. Why, then, do we persist in demanding things of our neighbour? Why do we want to assume a burden that belongs to someone else? We have plenty to ponder anxiously, brethren; let each of us, then, pay attention to himself and to his own ills. To God alone does it belong to make righteous or to condemn, to him who knows about each person's condition, his strength and behaviour, his gifts and his temperament and his needs; it belongs, in other words, to the one who judges according to each of these elements, as he alone knows. For God judges a bishop one way, and a ruler in another; he judges an abbot one way, and one of the disciples another; he judges the old man in one way, and the newcomer in another; he judges the sick in one way, and the healthy in another. And who could understand any of these judgments, except the one who made all things, and who shaped all things and knows all things?

73. I remember hearing that this thing happened once: A slave ship came to land at a certain city. Now in that city there was a very holy virgin, who paid attention to herself. When she learned that that ship had come to land, she rejoiced, since she desired to buy for herself a little girl. For she thought: 'I will take her and bring her up as I desire, so that she knows nothing of the evils of this world.' And she sent and summoned the ship owner and discovered that he had two little girls such as the virgin desired for herself.

And so she immediately paid the fee with joy and took a little girl to herself. Now as the ship owner was leaving that holy woman, when he had gone only a little way there came to him some other woman who was a theatrical type, and she saw the other little girl with him, and desired to buy her, and indeed she did. She came to an agreement on the price, and went away, having bought the girl.

Consider how mysterious is God; consider his judgment! Who will be able to give an account of it? For the holy virgin took that little girl and brought her up in the fear of God, forming her for every good work, and teaching her everything about the monastic way of life, and – in short – about the sweet fragrance of the holy commandments of God. But that theatrical type, having taken the other poor girl, fitted her to be an instrument of the devil. For what else did that creature have to teach her, except how to ruin her soul? And what are we to say concerning this fearful judgment? Both of them were small; they were both sold, and neither knew where they were going. And yet one was found in the hands of God, whilst the other fell into the hands of the devil. Now, is it possible to say that what God demands of the one he will demand of the other too? How is that possible? For even if they were both to fall into fornication or some other transgression, can we say that they will both have the same judgment, even if the fault was the same in both cases? How could we admit that? The one had learned about judgment; she had learned about the Kingdom of God, having spent day and night surrounded by God's words. The other pitiful girl had never seen or heard the slightest thing about what was good, but rather the opposite: [she heard learned about] all that was base, all that was devilish. How is it possible that they will both be judged with the same strictness?

74. No human person, then, can know the judgments of God; he is the only one who comprehends all things, and can judge each thing according to what it is, as he alone ordains. Truly, it can happen that a brother does certain deeds in total simplicity, and there is one of these deeds that is more pleasing to God than the entirety of your life, and yet are you going to sit there judging him, and causing injury to your own soul in the process? And if it should happen that he becomes careless [and commits sin], how are you to know how much of a struggle he put up, and how much of his own blood he shed before he did the thing? And perhaps his fault will be found to be righteousness in the presence of God, for God sees how much he laboured, and how much affliction he endured, as I said, before he did the thing, and he has mercy on him and makes allowances for him. But while God takes pity on him, are you going to judge him and ruin your own soul too? How are you to know how many tears he poured out in the presence of God concerning this matter? And yet, whilst you see the sin, you know nothing of the brother's repentance.

It sometimes happens that we not only condemn people, but also set them at naught. For it is one thing, as I said, to judge and another to set at naught. Setting people at naught is when someone not only judges his neighbour, but also sets him at naught, as though he had a loathing for him; he detests him as he might detest something that made him feel sick, and this is worse than judging, and much more destructive.

75. Now, those who desire to be saved pay no attention to the neighbour's defects, but are always concentrating on their own, and thus they make progress. Such was that

monk who saw his brother sinning and sighed, saying: 'Woe is me! For today it is him; tomorrow it will surely be me!' Do you see how careful he was? Do you see how prepared his soul was? How did he find so quickly the way to avoid judging his brother? By saying: 'Tomorrow it will surely be me,' he was moved by fear and concern for those sins that really still lay in the future, and in this way, he escaped from the business of judging his neighbour. And he was not satisfied with this; he even went so far as to place himself below his brother, saying: 'And he does penance for his sins, whereas I certainly won't do penance; I certainly won't manage it, because I just don't have the strength to do penance.'

Do you see how enlightened this divine soul was? Not only was he able to flee from judging his neighbours, he also managed to esteem himself to be beneath the level of his neighbour. But what about us, wretches that we are? We condemn all alike, we feel repugnance for people, we set them at nought, whenever we see or hear or even suspect something about them. What is worse, we do not even stop at causing this damage to ourselves; no, we go and find another brother, and immediately start saying to him: 'This and this has happened,' and we cause harm to him, by placing sinful things in his heart. Have we no fear of the one who said, 'Woe to him who gives his neighbour something foul to drink'? We do the demons' work, and it does not worry us. For what is the work of a demon, if not causing trouble and damage? See how we collaborate with the demons, in bringing both ourselves and our neighbour to destruction. For anyone who causes damage to someone's soul is aiding and abetting the demons, just as those who work to do what is good for souls work with the holy angels.

76. Now, where do all of things come from, if not from the fact that we have no charity in us? For, if we had charity, with compassion and pain, we would hesitate to observe our neighbour's defects, as it is written: 'Charity covers a multitude of sins,' and again: 'Charity does not take any account of evils, it bears all things,' and so on. As for us then, if – as I was saying – we have charity, that charity should cover every fault, as is the case with the saints when they see people's faults. I mean, are the saints blind? Do they not see sins? Indeed, who hates sin as much as the saints do? But nevertheless, they do not hate the sinner; they do not condemn him; they do not turn away from him. Rather, they show him sympathy; they admonish him; they entreat him. They seek to heal him, as they would a sick limb. They do everything they can to save him. It is just like fishermen, when they cast a hook into the sea and catch a big fish, and they sense that it is agitated and going berserk. They do not try to pull him in there and then, heavy-handedly, otherwise the line would break and end up being destroyed. Rather, they immediately give him some line and let him go wherever he wants. And when they sense that the line has gone slack, and he has stopped writhing about, then they begin to draw him in again, little by little. In this way, the saints draw a [sinful] brother [to themselves], lovingly and with great patience, and they do not turn away from him or despise him. Or again, it is like a mother who has an unsightly son. She does not despise him or turn away from him, but dresses him beautifully and does everything she can to get him to look more graceful. So the saints are always protecting, sorting out and giving assistance to anyone who stumbles, setting him straight at the right time, so that he doesn't do any harm to anyone else, and they themselves also progress in the love of Christ.

For what did holy Ammonas do, when some brothers come to him stirring up trouble and saying, ‘Come and see, Abba; there is a woman in the cell of brother such-and-such’? What mercy and compassion he showed; what love was in his holy soul. Knowing that the brother had hidden the woman under a barrel [in his cell], he went and sat on it and told the others to search the whole cell. And when they found no one, he said to them: ‘God forgive you!’ and shamed them, helping them too not to recklessly believe ill spoken about a neighbour. As for the guilty party, when the opportune moment came, he not only protected him in the sight of God, but also straightened him out. For after he had thrown the rest of them out, he took him by the hand and said to him: ‘Have a care for yourself, brother.’ And immediately the brother felt shame and was pierced with compunction; at once, the love and compassion of the old man went right into his soul.

77. Let us too get some of this love for ourselves; let us acquire compassion for our neighbour, so that we may be saved from this dreadful business of speaking ill of people, or condemning them, or setting them at nought. Let us help one another, as we do with our own limbs. For which one of us, having a wound on his hand or his foot or one of the other limbs would despise it, or cut off his own limb, even if it were septic? Would he not be more likely to wash it and clean it, put a bandage on it, seal it up, anoint it with holy oil, pray, ask the saints to pray for it, as Abba Zosimus says? In short, he will never abandon his own limb, even if it has developed a putrid smell, but will do everything he can to bring it back to health. This is precisely how we ought to show compassion to one another, help each other or get other, more able people to help us, and do all we can in thought and deed to help ourselves and each other. For we are members of one another, as the Apostle says. For if we are all one body, and if we are all members of one another, each in his own way, then if one member suffers, all of the members suffer together with it. What do we think monasteries are all about? Aren’t they like a single body, with its different members? Those who administer the community are the head; those who keep watch and keep it on the straight and narrow are the eyes; those who benefit [the community] by their words are the mouth; the ears are those who are obedient; the hands are the workers; the feet are those who carry out various commissions and have various types of service. Are you a head? Then carry out the work of administration! Are you an eye? They keep watch and know what is going on. Are you a mouth? Then speak; work for the good of the community. Are you an ear? Then be obedient! Are you a hand? Then work! Are you a foot? Then serve. Let each one serve the community according to his own abilities, and let all be earnest is constantly helping each other, whether by teaching and putting the word of God into a brother’s heart, or by comforting him in time of affliction or giving him a hand and helping him. Each one individually according to his abilities, as I say, should be eager to unite everybody. For in the measure in which someone is united to his brother, he will be united to God.

78. And I will tell you about an image from the Fathers, so that you may understand the power of what I am saying. Imagine a circle drawn on the earth. I mean a line drawn in a round with a compass, with a centre. Now we call the centre precisely the middle of the circle. Apply your mind to what I am saying. Now imagine that this circle is the world, with God at its centre, and the lines radiating towards the centre of the circle are people’s various different ways of life. When the saints desire to come into the middle to draw near to God, as they progress along the journey inwards, they get closer to God

and to one another. And the closer they get to one another, the closer they get to God. Similarly, imagine the opposite. For when they move away from God and turn away towards the outside, you can see that the further out they go, the further apart they get from one another, and the further they are from God too.

Look: such is the nature of love. For to the extent that we are outside and do not love God, we will each be separated from our neighbour. But if we were to love God, to the extent that we drew near to him by loving him, we would be drawn together by love of our neighbour, and to the extent that we were united with our neighbour, we would be united to God.

May God make us worthy to hear these things that are so useful to us, and actually put them into practice. For to the extent that we pay attention and are zealous to put into practice what we hear, God will always illumine us and teach us his will.