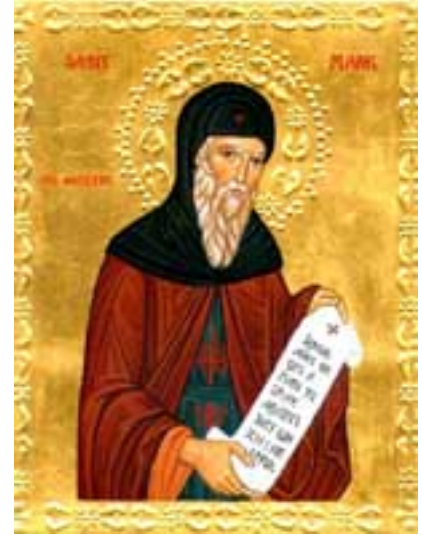


St. Mark the Ascetic
On the Spiritual Law
Two Hundred Texts



1. Because you have often asked what the Apostle means when he says that 'the law is spiritual' (Rom. 7:14), and what kind of spiritual knowledge and action characterizes those who wish to observe it, we shall speak of this as far as we can.
2. First of all, we know that God is the beginning, middle and end of everything good; and it is impossible for us to have faith in anything good or to carry it into effect except in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.
3. Everything good is given by the Lord providentially; and he who has faith that this is so will not lose what he has been given.
4. Steadfast faith is a strong tower; and for one who has faith Christ comes to be all.
5. May He who inaugurates every good thing inaugurate all that you undertake, so that it may be done with His blessing.
6. When reading the Holy Scriptures, he who is humble and engaged in spiritual work will apply everything to himself and not to someone else.
7. Call upon God to open the eyes of your heart, so that you may see the value of prayer and of spiritual reading when understood and applied.
8. If a man has some spiritual gift and feels compassion for those who do not have it, he preserves the gift because of his compassion. But a boastful man will lose it through succumbing to the temptations of boastfulness.
9. The mouth of a humble man speaks the truth; but he who speaks against the truth is like the servant who struck the Lord on the face (cf Mark 14:65).
10. Do not become a disciple of one who praises himself, in case you learn pride instead of humility.
11. Do not grow conceited about your interpretations of Scripture, lest your intellect fall victim to blasphemy.
12. Do not attempt to explain something difficult with contentiousness, but in the way which the spiritual law enjoins: with patience, prayer and unwavering hope.

13. Blind is the man crying out and saying: 'Son of David, have mercy on me' (Luke 18:38). He prays with the body alone, and not yet with spiritual knowledge.
14. When the man once blind received his sight and saw the Lord, he acknowledged Him no longer as Son of David but as Son of God, and worshipped Him (cf John 9; 38).
15. Do not grow conceited if you shed tears when you pray. For it is Christ who has touched your eyes and given you spiritual sight.
16. He who, like the blind man, casts away his garment and draws near to the Lord, becomes His disciple and a preacher of true doctrine (cf. Mark 10:50).
17. To brood on evil makes the heart brazen; but to destroy evil through self-restraint and hope breaks the heart.
18. There is a breaking of the heart which is gentle and makes it deeply penitent, and there is a breaking which is violent and harmful, shattering it completely.
19. Vigils, prayer and patient acceptance of what comes constitute a breaking that does not harm but benefits the heart, provided we do not destroy the balance between them through excess. He who perseveres in them will be helped in other ways as well; but he who is slack and negligent will suffer intolerably on leaving this life.
20. A self-indulgent heart becomes a prison and chain for the soul when it leaves this life; whereas an assiduous heart is an open door.
21. 'The iron gate that leads into the city' is a hard heart (Acts 12 : 10); but to one who suffers hardship and affliction the gate will open of its own accord, as it did to Peter.
22. There are many differing methods of prayer. No method is harmful; if it were, it would be not prayer but the activity of Satan.
23. A man wanted to do evil, but first prayed as usual; and finding himself prevented by God, he was then extremely thankful.
24. When David wanted to kill Nabal the Carmelite, but was reminded of the divine retribution and abandoned his intention, he was extremely thankful. Again, we know what he did when he forgot God, and how he did not stop until Nathan the Prophet reminded him (cf. 1 Sam. 25; 2 Sam. 12).
25. At the times when you remember God, increase your prayers, so that when you forget Him, the Lord may remind you.
26. When you read Holy Scripture, perceive its hidden meanings. 'For whatever was written in past times was written for our instruction' (Rom. 15:4).

27. Scripture speaks of faith as 'the substance of things hoped for' (Heb. 11:1), and describes as 'worthless' those who do not know the indwelling of Jesus (cf. 2 Cor. 13:5).

28. Just as a thought is made manifest through actions and words, so is our future reward through the impulses of the heart.

29. Thus a merciful heart will receive mercy, while a merciless heart will receive the opposite.

30. The law of freedom teaches the whole truth. Many read about it in a theoretical way, but few really understand it, and these only in the degree to which they practice the commandments.

31. Do not seek the perfection of this law in human virtues, for it is not found perfect in them. Its perfection is hidden in the Cross of Christ.

32. The law of freedom is studied by means of true knowledge, it is understood through the practice of the commandments, and is fulfilled through the mercy of Christ.

33. When we are compelled by our conscience to accomplish all the commandments of God, then we shall understand that the law of the Lord is faultless (cf. Ps. 19:8. LXX). It is performed through our good actions, but cannot be perfected by men without God's mercy.

34. Those who do not consider themselves under obligation to perform all Christ's commandments study the law of God in a literal manner, 'understanding neither what they say nor what they affirm' (1 Tim. 1 :7). Therefore they think that they can fulfill it by their own works.

35. There are acts which appear to be good, but the motive of the person who does them is not good; and there are other acts which appear to be bad, while the motive of the doer is good. The same is true of some statements. This discrepancy is due sometimes to inexperience or ignorance, sometimes to evil intention, and sometimes to good intention.

36. When a man outwardly praises someone, while accusing and disparaging him in his heart, it is hard for the simple to detect this. Similarly a person may be outwardly humble but inwardly arrogant. For a long time such men present falsehood as truth, but later they are exposed and condemned.

37. One man does something apparently good, in defense of his neighbor; another, by not doing it, gains in understanding.

38. Rebukes may be given in malice and self-defense, or out of fear of God and respect for truth.
39. Cease rebuking a man who has stopped sinning and who has repented. If you say that you are rebuking him in God's name, first reveal the evils in yourself.
40. God is the source of every virtue, as the sun is of daylight.
41. When you have done something good, remember the words 'without Me you can do nothing' (John 15:5).
42. Afflictions bring blessing to man; self-esteem and sensual pleasure, evil.
43. He who suffers injustice escapes sin, finding help in proportion to his affliction.
44. The greater a man's faith that Christ will reward him, the greater his readiness to endure every injustice.
45. By praying for those who wrong us we overthrow the devil; opposing them we are wounded by him.
46. Better a human than a demonic sin. Through performing the Lord's will we overcome both.
47. Every blessing comes from the Lord providentially. But this fact escapes the notice of the ungrateful and the idle.
48. Every vice leads in the end to forbidden pleasure; and every virtue to spiritual blessing. Each arouses what is akin to it.
49. Censure from men afflicts the heart; but if patiently accepted it generates purity.
50. Ignorance makes us reject what is beneficial; and when it becomes brazen it strengthens the hold of evil.
51. Even when nothing is going wrong, be ready for affliction; and since you will have to give an account, do not make extortionate demands.
52. Having sinned secretly, do not try to hide. For 'all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we have to give an account' (Heb. 4:13).
53. Reveal yourself to the Lord in your mind. 'For man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart' (i Sam. 16:7).
54. Think nothing and do nothing without a purpose directed to God. For to journey without direction is wasted effort.

55. Because God's justice is inexorable, it is hard to obtain forgiveness for sins committed with complete deliberation.
56. Distress reminds the wise of God, but crushes those who forget Him.
57. Let all involuntary suffering teach you to remember God, and you will not lack occasion for repentance.
58. Forgetfulness as such has no power, but acquires it in proportion to our negligence.
59. Do not say; 'What can I do? I don't want to be forgetful but it happens.' For when you did remember, you cheated over what you owed.
60. Do good when you remember, and what you forget will be revealed to you; and do not surrender your mind to blind forgetfulness.
61. Scripture says: 'Hell and perdition are manifest to the Lord' (Prov. 15:11. LXX). This refers to ignorance of heart and forgetfulness.
62. Hell is ignorance, for both are dark; and perdition is forgetfulness, for both involve extinction.
63. Concern yourself with your own sins and not with those of your neighbor; then the workplace of your intellect will not be robbed.
64. Failure to do the good that is within your power is hard to forgive. But mercy and prayer reclaim the negligent.
65. To accept an affliction for God's sake is a genuine act of holiness; for true love is tested by adversities.
66. Do not claim to have acquired virtue unless you have suffered affliction, for without affliction virtue has not been tested.
67. Consider the outcome of every involuntary affliction, and you will find it has been the destruction of sin.
68. Neighbors are very free with advice, but our own judgment is best.
69. If you want spiritual health, listen to your conscience, do all it tells you, and you will benefit.
70. God and our conscience know our secrets. Let them correct us.

70a. He who toils unwillingly grows poor in every way, while he who presses ahead in hope is doubly rich.

71. Man acts so far as he can in accordance with his own wishes; but God decides the outcome in accordance with justice.

72. If you wish not to incur guilt when men praise you, first welcome reproof for your sins.

73. Each time someone accepts humiliation for the sake of Christ's truth he will be glorified a hundredfold by other men. But it is better always to do good for the sake of blessings in the life to come.

74. When one man helps another by word or deed, let them both recognize in this the grace of God. He who does not understand this will come under the power of him who does.

75. Anyone who praises his neighbor out of hypocrisy will later abuse him and bring disgrace upon himself.

76. He who is ignorant of the enemy's ambush is easily slain; and" he who does not know the causes of the passions is soon brought low.

77. Knowledge of what is good for him has been given to everyone by God; but self-indulgence leads to negligence, and negligence to forgetfulness.

78. A man advises his neighbor according to his own understanding; but in the one who listens to such advice, God acts in proportion to his faith.

79. I have seen unlearned men who were truly humble, and they became wiser than the wise.

80. Another unlearned man, upon hearing them praised, instead of imitating their humility, prided himself on being unlearned and so fell into arrogance.

81. He who despises understanding and boasts of ignorance is unlearned not only in speech but also in knowledge (cf 2 Cor. 1 1 :6).

82. Just as wisdom in speech is one thing and sound judgment another, so lack of learning in speech is one thing and folly another.

83. Ignorance of words will do no harm to the truly devout, nor will wisdom in speaking harm the humble.

84. Do not say: 'I do not know what is right, therefore I am not to blame when I fail to do it.' For if you did all the good about which you do know, what you should do next

would then become clear to you, as if you were passing through a house from one room to another. It is not helpful to know what comes later before you have done what comes first. For knowledge without action 'puffs up', but 'love edifies', because it 'patiently accepts all things' (1 Cor. 8:1; 13:7).

85. Understand the words of Holy Scripture by putting them into practice, and do not fill yourself with conceit by expatiating on theoretical ideas.

86. He who neglects action and depends on theoretical knowledge holds a staff of reed instead of a double-edged sword; and when he confronts his enemies in time of war, 'it will go into his hand, and pierce it' (2 Kgs. 18:21), injecting its natural poison.

87. Every thought has its weight and measure in God's sight. For it is possible to think about the same thing either passionately or objectively.

88. After fulfilling a commandment expect to be tempted: for love of Christ is tested by adversity.

89. Never belittle the significance of your thoughts, for not one escapes God's notice.

90. When you observe some thought suggesting that you seek human fame, you can be sure it will bring you disgrace.

91. The enemy, understanding how the justice of the spiritual law is applied, seeks only the assent of our mind. Having secured this, he will either oblige us to undergo' the labors of repentance or, if we do not repent, will torment us with misfortunes beyond our control. Sometimes he encourages us to resist these misfortunes so as to increase our torment, and then, at our death, he will point to this impatient resistance as proof of our lack of faith.

92. Many have fought in various ways against circumstances; but without prayer and repentance no one has escaped evil.

93. Evils reinforce each other; so do virtues, thus encouraging us to still greater efforts.

94. The devil belittles small sins; otherwise he cannot lead us into greater ones.

95. Praise from others engenders sinful desire, while their condemnation of vice, if not only heard but accepted, engenders self-restraint.

96. A self-indulgent monk has achieved nothing through his renunciation. For what he once did through possessions he still does though possessing nothing.

97. Moreover, the self-controlled man, if he clings to possessions, is a brother in spirit of this kind of monk; because they both feel inward enjoyment they have the same mother - though not the same father, since each has a different passion.

98. Sometimes a man cuts off a passion in order to indulge himself more fully, and he is praised by those unaware of his aim. He may even be unaware of it himself, and so his action is self-defeating.

99. All vice is caused by self-esteem and sensual pleasure; you cannot overcome passion without hating them.

100. Avarice is the root of all evil' (1 Tim. 6:10); but avarice is clearly a product of these two components.

101. The intellect is made blind by these three passions: avarice, self-esteem and sensual pleasure.

102. Scripture calls these three the daughters of the horseleech, dearly loved by their mother folly (cf. Prov. 30:15. LXX).

103. These three passions on their own dull spiritual knowledge and faith, the foster-brothers of our nature.

104. It is because of them that wrath, anger, war, murder and all other evils have such power over mankind.

105. We must hate avarice, self-esteem and sensual pleasure, as mothers of the vices and stepmothers of the virtues.

106. Because of them we are commanded not to love 'the world' and 'the things that are in the world' (1 John 2:15j; not so that we should hate God's creation through lack of discernment, but so that we should eliminate the occasions for these three passions.

107. 'The soldier going to war', it is said, 'does not entangle himself in the affairs of this world' (2 Tim. 2:4). For he who entangles himself with the passions while trying to overcome them is like a man who tries to put out a fire with straw.

108. If one becomes angry with one's neighbor on account of riches, fame or pleasure, one does not yet realize that God orders all things with justice.

109. When you hear the Lord saying that if someone does not renounce all that he has he 'is not worthy of Me' (Matt. 10:37), apply this not only to money but to all forms of vice.

110. He who does not know the truth cannot truly have faith; for by nature knowledge precedes faith.

111. Just as God assigns to everything visible what is appropriate, so He does also to human thoughts, whether we wish it or not.

112. If some obvious sinner who does not repent has suffered nothing before his death, you may be sure that judgment in his case will be merciless.

113. He who prays with understanding patiently accepts circumstances, whereas he who resents them has not yet attained pure prayer.

114. When harmed, insulted or persecuted by someone, do not think of the present but wait for the future, and you will find he has brought you much good, not only in this life but also in the life to come.

115. Just as the bitterness of absinth helps a poor appetite, so misfortunes help a bad character. For the first benefits the physical condition, and the second leads to repentance.

116. If you do not want to suffer evil, do not inflict it, since the suffering of it inevitably follows its infliction. 'For whatever a man sows he will also reap' (Gal. 6:1).

117. Reaping unwillingly the wickedness we deliberately sow, we should marvel at God's justice.

118. Because an interval of time elapses between sowing and reaping, we begin to think there will be no requital.

119. When you sin, blame your thought, not your action. For had your intellect not run ahead, your body would not have followed.

120. The secret sinner is worse than those who do evil openly; and so he receives a worse punishment.

121. The trickster who works mischief in secret is a snake 'lying in wait on the road and biting the horse's heel' (Gen. 49:17. LXX).

122. If you praise your neighbor to one man and criticize him to another, you are the slave of self-esteem and jealousy. Through praise you try to hide your jealousy, through criticism to appear better than your neighbor.

123. Just as sheep and wolves cannot feed together, so a man cannot receive mercy if he tricks his neighbor.

124. He who secretly mingles his own wishes with spiritual counsel is an adulterer, as the Book of Proverbs indicates (cf. Prov. 6:32-33); and because of his stupidity he suffers pain and dishonor.

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125. Just as water and fire cannot be combined, so self-justification and humility exclude one another.

126. He who seeks forgiveness of his sins loves humility, but if he condemns another he seals his own wickedness.

127. Do not leave unobliterated any fault, however small, for it may lead you on to greater sins.

128. If you wish to be saved, welcome words of truth, and never reject criticism uncritically.

129. Words of truth converted the 'progeny of vipers' and warned them 'to flee from the anger to come' (Matt. 3:7).

130. To accept words of truth is to accept the divine Word; for He says: 'He that receives you receives me' (Matt. 10:40).

131. The paralytic let down through the roof (cf Mark 2:4) signifies a sinner reprovved in God's name by the faithful and receiving forgiveness because of their faith.

132. It is better' to pray devoutly for your neighbor than to rebuke him every time he sins.

133. The truly repentant is derided by the foolish - which is a sign that God has accepted his repentance.

134. Those engaged in spiritual warfare practice self-control in everything, and do not desist until the Lord destroys all 'seed from Babylon' (Jer. 27:16. LXX).

135. Suppose that there are twelve shameful passions. Indulging in any one of them is equivalent to indulging in them all.

136. Sin is a blazing fire. The less fuel you give it, the faster it dies down: the more you feed it, the more it bums.

137. When elated by praise, be sure disgrace will follow; for it is said: 'Whoever exalts himself will be abased' (Luke 14:11).

138. When we have freed ourselves from every voluntary sin of the mind, we should then fight against the passions which result from prepossession.

139. Prepossession is the involuntary presence of former sins in the memory. At the stage of active warfare we try to prevent it from developing into a passion; after victory it is repulsed while still but a provocation.

140. A provocation is an image-free stimulation in the heart. Like a mountain-pass, the experienced take control of it ahead of the enemy.

141 . Once our thoughts are accompanied by images we have already given them our assent; for a provocation does not involve us in guilt so long as it is not accompanied by images. Some people flee away from these thoughts like 'a brand plucked out of the fire' (Zech. 3:2); but others dally with them, and so get burnt.

142. Do not say: 'I don't want it, but it happens.' For even though you may not want the thing itself, yet you welcome what causes it.

143. He who seeks praise is involved in passion; he who laments afflictions is attached to sensual pleasure.

144. The thoughts of a self-indulgent man vacillate, as though on scales; sometimes he laments and weeps for his sins, and sometimes he fights and contradicts his neighbor, justifying his own sensual pleasures.

145. He who tests all things and 'holds fast that which is good' (1 Thess. 5:21) will in consequence refrain from all evil.

146. 'A patient man abounds in understanding' (Prov. 14: 29); and so does he who listens to words of wisdom.

147. Without remembrance of God, there can be no true knowledge but only that which is false.

148. Deeper spiritual knowledge helps the hard-hearted man: for unless he has fear, he refuses to accept the labor of repentance.

149. Unquestioning acceptance of tradition is helpful for a gentle person, for then he will not try God's patience or often fall into sin.

150. Do not rebuke a forceful man for arrogance, but point out to him the danger of dishonor; if he has any sense he will accept this kind of rebuke.

151. If you hate rebuke, it shows that the passion in which you are involved is due to your own free choice. But if you welcome rebuke, the passion is due to prepossession.

152. Do not listen to talk about other people's sins. For through such listening the form of these sins is imprinted on you.

153. When you delight in hearing evil talk, be angry with yourself and not with the speaker. For listening in a sinful way makes the messenger seem sinful.

154. If you come across people gossiping idly, consider yourself responsible for their talk - if not on account of some recent fault of your own, then because of an old debt.

155. If someone praises you hypocritically, be sure that in due course he will vilify you.

156. Accept present afflictions for the sake of future blessings; then you will never weaken in your struggle.

157. When someone supplies your bodily needs and you praise him as good in his own right apart from God, he will later seem to you to be evil.

158. All good things come from God providentially, and those who bring them are the servants of what is good.

159. Accept with equanimity the intermingling of good and evil, and then God will resolve all inequity.

160. It is the uneven quality of our thoughts that produces changes in our condition. For God assigns to our voluntary thoughts consequences which are appropriate but not necessarily of our choice.

161. The sensible derives from the intelligible, by God's decree providing what is needed.

162. From a pleasure-loving heart arise unhealthy thoughts and words; and from the smoke of a fire we recognize the fuel.

163. Guard your mind, and you will not be harassed by temptations. But if you fail to guard it, accept patiently whatever trial comes.

164. Pray that temptation may not come to you; but when it comes, accept it as your due and not undeserved.

165. Reject all thoughts of greed, and you will be able to see the devil's tricks.

166. He who says he knows all the devil's tricks falls unknowingly into his trap.

167. The more the intellect withdraws from bodily cares, the more clearly it sees the craftiness of the enemy.

168. A man who is carried away by his thoughts is blinded by them; and while he can see the actual working of sin, he cannot see its causes.

169. It can happen that someone may in appearance be fulfilling a commandment but is in reality serving a passion, and through evil thoughts he destroys the goodness of the action.

170. When you first become involved in something evil, don't say: 'It will not overpower me.' For to the extent that you are involved you have already been overpowered by it.

171. Everything that happens has a small beginning, and grows the more it is nourished.

172. Wickedness is an intricate net; and if someone is careless when partially entangled, he gets completely enmeshed.

173. Do not desire to hear about the misfortunes of your enemies. For those who like listening to such things will themselves suffer what they wish for others.

174. Do not think that every affliction is a consequence of sin. For there are some who do God's will and yet are tested. Thus it is written that the ungodly and wicked shall be persecuted (cf. Ps. 37: 28), but also that those who 'seek to live a holy life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution' (2 Tim. 3:12).

175. At a time of affliction, expect a provocation to sensual pleasure, for because it relieves the affliction it is readily welcomed.

176. Some call men intelligent because they have the power of discernment on the sensible plane. But the really intelligent people are those who control their own desires.

177. Until you have eradicated evil, do not obey your heart; for it will seek more of what it already contains within itself

178. Just as some snakes live in glens and others in houses, so there are some passions which take shape in our thoughts while others express themselves in action. It is possible, however, for them to change from one type to the other.

179. When you find that some thought is disturbing you deeply in yourself and is breaking the stillness of your intellect with passion, you may be sure that it was your intellect which, taking the initiative, first activated this thought and placed it in your heart.

180. No cloud is formed without a breath of wind: and no passion is born without a thought.

181. If we no longer fulfill the desires of the flesh, then with the Lord's help the evils within us will easily be eliminated.

182. Images already established in our intellect are more pernicious and stubborn than those which arise while we are thinking. The latter precede the former and are their cause.

183. One kind of evil dwells in the heart through long-continued prepossession; another kind attacks our thoughts through the medium of everyday things.

184. God assesses our action according to our intention; for it is said that the Lord will 'reward you according to your heart' (Ps. 20:4).

185. He who does not persevere in examining his conscience will not endure bodily suffering for God's sake.

186. The conscience is nature's book. He who applies what he reads there experiences God's help.

187. He who does not choose to suffer for the sake of truth will be chastened more painfully by suffering he has not chosen.

188. He who knows God's will, and performs it according to his power, escapes more severe suffering by suffering a little.

189. If a man tries to overcome temptations without prayer and patient endurance, he will become more entangled in them instead of driving them away.

190. The Lord is hidden in His own commandments, and He is to be found there in the measure that He is sought.

191. Do not say: 'I have fulfilled the commandments, but have not found the Lord'. For you have often found 'spiritual knowledge with righteousness', as Scripture says, 'and those who rightly seek Him shall find peace' (Prov. 16:8. LXX).

192. Peace is deliverance from the passions, and is not found except through the action of the Holy Spirit.

193. Fulfilling a commandment is one thing, and virtue is another, although each promotes the other.

194. Fulfilling a commandment means doing what we are enjoined to do; but virtue is to do it in a manner that conforms to the truth.

195. All material wealth is the same, but is acquired in many different ways; similarly, virtue is one, but is many-sided in its operations.

196. If someone makes a display of wisdom and instead of applying it talks at length, he has a spurious wealth and his labors 'come into the houses of strangers' (Prov. 5:10. LXX).

197. It is said that gold rules everything; but spiritual things are ruled by the grace of God.

198. A good conscience is found through prayer, and pure prayer through the conscience. Each by nature needs the other.

199. Jacob made for Joseph a coat of many colors (cf Gen. 37:3), and the Lord gives knowledge of truth to the gentle; as it is written, 'He will teach the gentle His ways' (Ps. 25:9. LXX).

200. Always do as much good as you can, and at a time of greater good do not turn to a lesser. For it is said that no man who turns back 'is fit for the kingdom of heaven' (cf. Luke 9:62).