



BEING & BELONGING: seeking advice François Fénelon (1651-1715)

DIALOGUE LAB

- *When you need advice, where is the first place/person you go to?*
- *Is there a piece of advice, good or bad, you were once given that has stuck with you for a long time? What was it? Why has it stuck with you?*
- *What guidance are you looking for at this time in your life? How are you seeking it?*

#1 To a friend living with difficult people

It has been a long time since I have reminded you of how committed I am to you. I want to live in Jesus-community with you. I know I haven't said it in a while, but the friendship I feel toward you is stronger than ever. With all my heart, I really do wish that you were able to experience in your home the peace and comfort that you so enjoyed when you first formed this community. It takes work to enjoy even the easiest people. Here are two necessities for living in community and friendship: abandon your many high demands and patiently tolerate the other's annoying behavior. Expect less; put up with more. You heard me say this would require work, right? True community is not for the faint of heart.

The truth is that all of us, even those who seem nearly flawless, have scads of imperfections. If we are around these supposed angelic people long enough, we will see their eccentricities and their blemishes. This shouldn't surprise us—we have a good number of faults ourselves. You have your work cut out for you. You are dealing with two flawed people (you and the other person), and no matter how good your relationship, it will eventually be difficult for both of you to endure the other. This is why we must pick up the slack for the other person in the very place where that one struggles the most (the places where the person is most annoying). We move toward the other's defects, not away. When we do this, we obey God, walking the Jesus Way. We do what the letter of Galatians encourages us to do: allow love to balance out each other's shortcomings.

You aren't passive here. You can actually take some specific actions to encourage peace and harmony in your relationship. Be quiet...a lot. Regularly corral your mind. Pray. Surrender your addiction to having your way. Renounce your haughty criticisms. Commit to stopping your self-righteous thoughts that rise out of a selfish, harsh demand to get what you want. You have no idea how much of your conflict these simple acts will resolve. If we stop listening to ourselves and to others' gossip, we will be much happier.

Be content with leading a simple life, however that fits for you. Be obedient. Bear your daily cross—you need it. It is a gift given by the pure mercy of God. The essential idea is to despise self from the heart, and to be willing to be despised, if God allows it. Feed upon God alone. Saint Augustine says that his mother lived on prayer. You do the same, and die to everything else. We can live toward God only as we allow our self to continually die.

- *Why does Fenelon point us to being "quiet...a lot"?*
Have you seen this approach be effective in maintaining friendships?
- *What does "simple life" mean to you?*

#2 To a judgmental friend

Dear friend:

Your heart needs to grow. The way you respond to others' weaknesses reveals that you have a small heart. I know you can't stop the immediate, subconscious opinions or biases that

take shape in your head, wondering what your friends are up to or what angle your friends are playing. What's worse, I know you can't put the brakes on the negative effect others' failings have on you. But you can do this: put up with your friends' obvious defects. Then will all the other defects you imagine they might have, don't judge....Don't allow another's imperfections rob you of the beauty of friendship.

The ironic truth is that the person most matured by grace is the same person least annoyed by those of us who are grade-A messes. The large-hearted person accepts people where they are. We shouldn't be surprised when we see gaping defects in good people, and we shouldn't try to fix them or keep using our long finger to point out their faults. Instead, keep quiet. Just let people be and let God dive into their clutter. Our interference will just muddle up the transformation God has in mind. The truth is that, even in the most mature person, God often chooses to leave some weaknesses...God likes to leave reminders of our humanity and our need. Remember, all of this—then and now—is God's work. It isn't ours.

Each of us must do the hard work of participating in the ways God is cleaning us up. And part of your hard work is putting up with other people's faults. You know how hard and painful it is when God cleans you up; so why don't you expend your energy trying to help others' experience be less hard and less painful? Rather than condemning them, comfort them. I know the way you struggle with this: your reaction when you see a friend's fault isn't usually to go and correct the friend, but rather you withdraw and your heart grows smaller.

Having said all this, don't now hold back when you see my faults. If you think you see a fault in me—and if you are wrong—you really haven't done any harm. Don't worry about it. If your words wound me, then my sensitive reaction proves only that you have discovered some raw place that needs to be revealed. On the other hand, if your words don't wound me, you will have been kind to me, allowing me to exercise humility and to submit to another's correction. Since I am looked to as a spiritual leader, I have a greater responsibility to live humbly...I need this kind of simplicity, and I need it from you. It won't strain our friendship. I believe it will make our friendship all the stronger.

- *Where do you see yourself in this letter?*
- *Do you agree with Fenelon when he tells his friend "don't now hold back when you see my faults"?*

#3 To a lonely friend

Dear friend,

We must learn contentment. What God gives, we receive gratefully. We like to believe that we can choose what God give us. We can't....Do you remember the prayer we pray, *God, let your will be done here on earth in the same way it is already being done in heaven?* That's what we need—God's will done here, in us. And the good, the beauty, of what we gain when God does what God wants in us, well, that's immense...

There simply is no community like the community we find when God is what brings us together. Our conversation really flows when what we want and what we are giving our minds to is God. Is it deep soul-friends that you so badly want? Learn to look for friends by looking deeply into God. God is the place that all real friendship, the kind that is sturdy and lasts, flows from. Do you want deep, meaningful conversation with a friend? Go into God. Sink in deep. We want true words, and God is the Living Word. We long for rich life, and God is Life....If we learn to speak and live the truth, we will discover God there.

With God, you will find all you have wanted. It will be even better than that—you will find everything you have never been able to find in any other friend. You have looked for so much from your friends. Much of what you've searched for you have never found. But you will find it in God.

#4 To a friend in need of patience with herself

Dear friend:

People who love themselves aright, even as they ought to love their neighbor, bear charitably, though without flattery, with self as with another. They know what needs correction at home as well as elsewhere, they strive heartily and vigorously to correct it, but they deal with self as they would deal with someone else they wished to bring to God. They set to work patiently, not exacting more than is practicable under present circumstances from themselves anymore from others, and not being disheartened because perfection is not attainable in a day.

Such people judge their most trivial failings unsparingly, and are not blind to their own deformity, but endure all the mortification and humiliation involved. They neglect no means of amendment, but they are not fretful while so doing. They do not heed the pettishness of pride and self-esteem, which so often mingles with that quiet resolution wherewith grace inspires us for the correction of our faults. That sort of irritable pettishness only discourages a man, makes him self-absorbed, repels him from God's service, wearies him in his way, makes him seek unworthy consolation, dries him up, distracts, exhausts him, fills him with disgust and despair of ever reaching his end. Nothing so hinders souls as this inward peevishness when it is encouraged; but if endured without consenting to it, it may be turned to good, like all other trials by which God purifies and perfects us.

The only thing to be done is to let such troubles pass away, like a headache or feverish attack, without doing anything to promote or prolong them. Meanwhile, it is good to go on with your interior practices and your exterior duties as far as possible. Prayer may be less easy, the Presence of God less evident and less comforting, outward duties may be harder and less acceptable, but the faithfulness which accomplishes them is greater, and that is enough for God.

#5 To a friend desiring to know the future

Dear friend:

Don't get all twisted up about the future. This worry pushes against grace, always at odds with what God does in you and around you. Whenever God hands you something good, something joyful and pleasurable, enjoy what God is giving of himself in the gift. Just eat it up, all of it. Don't hoard it, afraid that God might never be so kind again. Do remember how God gave the Israelites manna, honey-bread that fell from the sky onto the ground? God told them to gather just enough for each day, to enjoy it, and not to worry about whether or not it would come the next day. You do the same.

There are two unique truths about a sincere faith. First, while many subtle forces attempt to hide God, true faith always sees God—and only God—at work, right in the middle of the action. Second, true faith never delivers the sort of human certainty we constantly look for. True faith won't let us grab hold of safety or latch onto dry formulas. True faith won't let us make an unflinching rule based on God's prior action. What brings us comfort and peace *this* time won't be God's way *next* time. If we drew relief from predictable patterns, we'd trust *that* instead of trusting God. God will do what God will do. He is God, you know. We must surrender, and we must wait and obey and hope in whatever God hands to us.

This kind of –day-by-day dependence (just like Israel and the manna) is a paradox. It is both dark and peaceful. It is dark because we truly don't know how the future will play out. We give ourselves to a silent death, death by a slow fire, just like Christian martyrs of earlier centuries. They gave their lives, and so, in our own way, we must too. But this silent flame is hard to perceive. You might not see it. Those who love you might not see it. But God is burning away all you have depended on. God is burning away everything except himself. But don't worry. As I said, this day-by-day dependence, this slow, burning death is not only dark, it is also peaceful. After the burning, God will give you back everything you need. Remember, God brings life out of death. So, like Israel, eat your bread today and don't worry about tomorrow, because, as Matthew's Gospel says, 'Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.' Let tomorrow worry about tomorrow. God is feeding you today, and this God is the same God is the one for you to depend on again for food for tomorrow. This I know: before you (or any of

God's children) go without a single morsel that you need, manna will fall again, right into the middle of our desert.

#6 To a spiritually lethargic friend

Dear friend:

Peace. Just sit in it. It's not your job to work up passion and fiery devotion to God. It doesn't depend on you. All you can do, all you are responsible to do, is to choose the one you will obey. Hand your will, your obedience, over to God. Don't hold anything back.

Frankly, it's irrelevant how much intense feeling you have in your spiritual life right now. The more important question to ask is this: Do I want what God wants? Humbly confess your faults. Don't hold onto your world. Abandon yourself to God. Choose to love God more than you love yourself. Desire God's name to be great. Desire God to have God's way—want that more than you want your own life. If you don't feel these things, then just *want* to feel it, hoping you will someday. In the meantime, ask God to give you this kind of love for him. He will. God will love you, and he will pour peace in your heart.

#7 To a friend with a runaway mind

Dear friend,

Plant and water peace. Ignore your runaway imagination—its incessant noise and revved-up energy does damage to your physical health and makes your soul dry as bones. With activity, you cannibalize yourself, and it is to no good end. Your fidgety ways destroy any possibility of peace or soul rest. Do you think God is able to speak in those hushed and gentle rhythms that melt the soul when you live in the hurricane your frenzy has stirred up in your mind? Be quiet, and God will soon be heard. Actually, you should be concerned about one thing (but only one): obedience.

You say you want comfort; but you are blind to the fact that you have been led to the very source of the fresh-water spring—and you refuse to drink. Peace and comfort can be discovered only in simple obedience. Be faithful and obey and pay no attention to the craziness in your mind, to all the guilt and confusion. As you do, you will soon sense the rivers of living water just as God has promised. You will be given as much as your faith is able to receive. Much, if you can believe God wants to give you much. Nothing, however, if you believe in nothing and continue to listen to the dark void your imagination has conjured up.

You trivialize authentic love when you assume that the small things that hold you hostage have also kidnapped love. This isn't true. Love is wild and free; it goes straight to God with abandon and simplicity. Satan masquerades as an angel of light. He disguises himself beautifully, under the garb of things that seem spiritual. He will use a false, overwrought love or a guilt-wracked mind against you. However, you have already experienced the trouble and danger Satan will lead you into with these intense assaults and pressures and guilt. This is serious—you absolutely must have a courageous obedience and push back Satan's very first advances. You must cut him down when he first raises his head or first slings his lies.

If you will be frank and raw with your desires, I think you will please God more than if you undertake some great spiritual feat. Telling God plainly what you want—and letting yourself want it—is better than being martyred a hundred times. Gather up all your worry and all your dread and channel that energy toward this raw desire God longs to see. If we truly love, how could we hesitate when asked to give our God pleasure? We hand God pleasure when we express our truest desires to God.

Think little and do much. If you are not careful, you will acquire so much knowledge that you will need another lifetime to put it all into practice. There is danger in thinking that you are perfect simply because you understand what it would be like to be perfect. All your beautiful theories do not help you die to yourself. Knowledge nourishes the life of Adam in you because you secretly delight in your revelation. Never trust your own power or your own knowledge. Be humble. Do not trust your old nature. Taken from *The Seeking Heart*,

#8 To a friend who restless

Dear Friend:

Your only assignment, my dear daughter, is to be strong in faith, no matter what your weaknesses. “When I am weak,” says Paul, “then am I strong.” Strength is made perfect in weakness. We are only strong in the Lord in proportion to the weakness we sense in ourselves. So your weakness will turn out to be your strength if you accept it humbly. Sometimes we are tempted to believe that weakness and humility are not compatible with the surrendered life. This is because we tend to think of surrender as that great thing we do when we want to show God how much we love Him, and how heroically we are willing to sacrifice everything. But a true surrender to God has nothing to do with such a flattering description as that.

Let me tell you what real surrender is. It is simply resting in the love of God, as a little baby rests in its mother’s arms. A perfect surrender must even be willing to quit surrendering, if that is what God wants! We renounce ourselves, and yet, God never lets us know when it is complete. If we knew, it would no longer be complete, for there is nothing that bolsters the ego quite so much as knowing that it is fully surrendered!

Surrender consists, not in doing great, heroic deeds about which self can brag, but simply in accepting whatever God sends, and not seeking to change it (unless it is His will for it to be changed). Full surrender is full peace. If we are restless and concerned about things formerly renounced, we have not genuinely surrendered. Surrender is the source of true peace; if we aren’t at peace, it is because our surrender is not complete.

#9 To a friend discouraged by temptation

Dear friend:

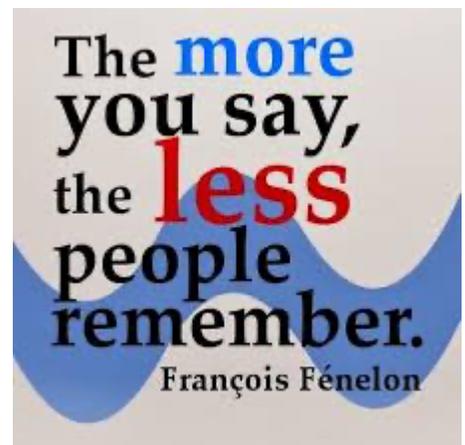
Let’s talk about the wrongs you allow yourself to fall into. I am not talking about major sins—deliberate disobedience to God on major issues is not usually a problem a committed Christian deals with on a daily basis. I am talking about not stopping a sharp word, or being deliberately quarrelsome. These things you have some control over, but you let yourself do what you want.

The closer you get to God, the more miserable things you will find in your heart. This is not a negative thing—God allows it to let you lose confidence in yourself. You will have accomplished something when you can look at your inner corruptness without anxiety or discouragement and simply trust in God. But, you should try not to let yourself fall into temptation.

There are two resources against temptation. One, be faithful to God within you. Avoid all that is better left avoided. Of course, you are not always able to avoid these situations. Some are brought to you by God and will do you no good to flee from them. The second resource is to turn to God when you are tempted. If you find that you’ve half consented to temptation, then head straight back to God. Take the example of a child who hides his face in his mother’s bosom as soon as he sees something that frightens him.

Practice staying in God’s presence so that you are able to respond to His leading immediately. In a way, there is little to do in doing the will of God. It is true that holding back nothing from God is doing quite a bit. God’s love searches the secret places within, looking for anything that resists Him.

On the other hand, Christianity is not found in a multitude of rules, nor in holding yourself back from every pleasure. Just yield yourself to God without reserve. Live in the present moment. Let God do what He sees fit without resisting Him, and agree with God without trying to justify what you want to do. Temptation is a necessary part of a Christian’s life. Don’t be upset by even the most shameful temptation. Look at God and dwell continually in His presence—He will keep your feet from falling.



#10 To a friend trying to look perfect

Your spiritual walk is a little too restless and uneasy. Simply trust God. If you come to Him, He will give you all that you need to serve Him. You really need to believe that God keeps His word. The more you trust Him, the more He will be able to give you. If you were lost in an uncrossable desert, bread would fall from heaven for you alone.

Fear nothing but to fail God. And do not even fear that so much that you let it upset you. Learn to live with your failures, and bear with the failures of your neighbors. Do you know what would be best for you? Stop trying to appear so mentally and spiritually perfect to God and man. There is a lot of refined selfishness and complacency in not allowing your faults to be revealed. Be simple with God. He loves to communicate Himself to simple people. Live day by day, not in your own strength, but by completely surrendering to God.

#11 To a friend obsessed with his faults

Dear friend,

Don't be concerned about your defects. Rather than being consumed with yourself, love. Don't stop loving. As Luke's Gospel reminds us, when we have been forgiven much, we love much. Love will overcome your faults. The problem, however, is that often we want all the warm feelings and immediate perks love brings, but we don't really want love itself. We deceive ourselves because all our hard work trying to love well isn't really for the sake of love. We often use love as yet one more self-absorbed benchmark to measure and demonstrate our (perceived) robust spiritual life. We are trying to make sure we are doing right, that we love right. When we do this...we are more occupied with the notion of love than with the person of love: Jesus. If all we pursued was Jesus, then he would consume our energy rather than all our effort alone consuming our energy. Whenever we exert our sweat trying to make sure we do the right things (i.e. that we love the right way) in an effort to make Jesus love us in return, we aren't loving Jesus. Rather, we are fixated on ourselves. If we continue to catalog our faults, hoping to muster up our own goodness to overcome these faults, then we are anxious, never at rest. We block God's healing presence. We interrupt the ways God wishes to heal us with his love. However, when we take honest stock of our faults, resting in Jesus' peace and love to overcome them, we witness this powerful force—love—doing exactly that. Love will overwhelm and consume all that we thing is so despicable. Then, so simply, these faults are gone.

Here's the irony: Usually, the shame you feel for your faults is actually more of a fault than those things you are so obsessed with. You are completely absorbed with the smaller fault. It's like a person I just spent some time with. After he read about the life of one of the saints, he was so angry at his imperfections that he completely gave up on the idea of living a life devoted to God.

I am able to see how faithful you are to God by how much peace and freedom you have in your soul. When your heart is peaceful, opening up wide to God and the world around you, then you are moving closer to God.

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