1 Listen, my son, to the teaching of your master 1 and turn your heart to hear 2; willingly accept and effectively carry out the advice given by a loving father; 3  
2 so that you may come back to him by the toil of obedience, from whom you went astray through the sloth of disobedience. 4

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1 Prov 4: 20 (6: 20). The opening ‘Listen’ recalls the exhortations found in Wisdom literature, even though not quoted directly. It establishes the tone of the RB as practical wisdom on how to live the monastic life. The themes of the first verse are: attention of the whole person (Listen), good will (turn your heart), and implementation (carry out). The word ‘Listen’ also recalls the Shema, or declaration of faith, of the Israelites in the OT: “Listen, Israel: the Lord our God is the one, the only Lord. You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.” (Deut 6: 4,5).

A similar opening is found in a text by Pseudo-Basil, which was probably written in Lérins in the 5th century. That text is less obscure about the source of the teaching being passed on: “These words come from me, but they are created by a divine source. I transmit to you not a new teaching, but what I myself learned from the fathers.”

This verse is the only place where St Benedict uses ‘Son’ of the monk (apart from the quotation in RB 2:29). It is characteristic of a Master-Disciple relationship. Was the ‘master’ of this verse St Benedict himself, or (as Adalbert de Vogüé suggests), the anonymous author of the ‘Rule of the Master’ from which St Benedict draws so freely? That monastic text repeatedly says, “The Lord has replied through the Master.” ‘Master’ could also refer to Christ, who is introduced as our Lord and King in verse 3, but this would imply a too close correspondence between the Rule and the Gospel. The RB is not Scripture!

Note the correspondence between this verse and what St Benedict says of the Abbot’s teaching in RB 2: 24, which also speaks of a loving father.

2 The heart is where we encounter God. The phrase ‘ear of the heart’ was commonly used by the Fathers of the Church, referring to the spiritual senses. Already St Benedict introduces the fundamental theme of humility: it is not for us to speak, but to listen and respond. “One of the ancient Fathers said: Without humility all toil is vain. Humility is the precursor of love.” (Vit. Patr. 7,13,7.)

The same adverb, ‘willingly’, is found in RB 4:55: “Listen willingly to Holy Reading”. Lectio Divina is modelled on the same pattern: Listen, ponder, carry out.

3 St Augustine has a similar saying, “Let us return to him from whom we had departed by sin” (De Civ. Dei 11,28). Obedience is one of the main monastic virtues (cf. RB 5, 71, 72), but there is a more fundamental reference here to disobedience as sin (cf. Rom 5: 19), so that obedience to God becomes inseparable from the idea of faithfulness. ‘The toil of obedience’ hints that this will be the main work of the monk. V. Patr. 5,14,15: “The ancient Fathers used to say: ‘In those who are beginning monastic life, God seeks above all else a laborious obedience.”

‘Sloth’ is one of the capital vices. The word comes up again in RB 48:23 in connection with the neglect of reading (translated ‘lazy’) and in RB 73: 7 at the end of the Rule. Sloth, or ‘acedia’ is defined by Abbot Holzherr as a coldness towards religion. Our liberation from entanglement in sin is awaited from Christ, to whom we must turn.
To you then my words are now addressed, who are renouncing your own desires and, on entering the service of Christ the Lord our true King, are taking up the strong and glorious arms of obedience.

Now first of all, whenever you begin to undertake any good work, beg him with most earnest prayer to bring it to completion; he who has so graciously counted us among his sons must never be saddened by evil deeds of ours.

For we must always use the good things he has bestowed on us in obedience to him, so that he may not one day disinherit his sons like an angry father, nor yet, like a dread lord provoked by our bad behaviour, hand us over to eternal punishment, as wicked servants who have refused to follow him to glory.

‘Renouncing [your] own desires’ is a phrase found in the literature of the Desert Fathers (Verba Seniorum: Vitae Patrum V, 1, 9 & Rufinus: Hist. mon. in Aegypto, 31) but has an echo also in the baptismal formula, “Do you renounce Satan?” The Rule of the Master speaks of monastic life as a refusal to take up again the sins renounced at baptism. The Latin verb abrenuatio (renounce) was often used by early monks to mean the wholesale rejection of a worldly lifestyle, so Cassian could term the monastic life as simply abrenuntiatio (a repudiation, renunciation) in Conference 3.6. He speaks of renunciation as: 1. the forgoing of money and property, 2. as a change of one’s former lifestyle with its addictions, 3. as a change of direction from things present and material to things future and invisible. St Basil writes: “In this world a soldier is always prepared and willing to obey and order, wherever he is sent. He will not dare to excuse himself on account of his wife or children. All the more will a soldier of Christ not let himself be detained by anything from obeying the order of his king. A soldier of this world goes to war against a visible foe. But against you an invisible enemy will never cease to do battle.” (Admonitio, 11). St Benedict often repeats this condemnation of our own desires (another translation of propriis voluntatibus is ‘self-will’), e.g. RB 5:13. He sees it as a source of sin, and also as incompatible with obedience.

Although the image of Christ as true King has its roots in these scriptural texts it was a characteristic way to represent Christ in the time of St Benedict – see for example the mosaics of Christ as pantakrator (Ruler of All) in the apses of Byzantine churches. St Benedict almost always emphasises the divinity of Christ and not his humanity. He thinks almost exclusively of the Risen Christ and makes little distinction between Christ and the Father (e.g. RB 2:3).

‘Entering the service’ translates militaturus which has a dual meaning in Latin of service and warfare. Although service became the normal meaning in Late Latin, the other meaning is reflected in St Benedict’s phrase ‘taking up the strong and glorious arms of obedience’. See also the military imagery in St Benedict’s description of the Anchorites in RB 1:4-5. The ultimate source is from the letters of St Paul: Eph 6:13-17. 2 Tim 2:3-4. Origen wrote, “Within yourself you must wage war. Inwardly there stands that wretched building which has to be pulled down. The enemy proceeds out of your heart” (Jes Nave Hom 5,2).

‘Most earnest prayer’: Pseudo-Basil, 11, has a similar saying: “When you begin some task, first call on the Lord, and do not fail to give him thanks when you complete it.” Since St Benedict stresses the strenuous human effort needed at the beginning of the spiritual quest in Prol. 5-45 he is perhaps here anticipating the charge of Pelagianism (reliance on our own efforts for salvation, a heresy named after the 5th century British monk Pelagius) and underlining the need for divine grace.

St Benedict may have had the importunate widow of Lk 18:1-8 in mind as an example of persistent prayer. One of the Tools of Good Works (RB 4:56) is ‘To apply ourselves often to prayer’.

There is a switch here from ‘You’ to ‘We’ as the subject of the verbs, corresponding to a shift in interest from the individual to the community. From this point onwards RB is quoting extensively from RM and giving a commentary on Psalms 34 and 15.

The allusion seems to be to the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30).

In these two verses there is a move from considering God as a loving father to a dread Lord who judges strictly. Abbot Holzherr points out that this change is due to human sin, not change in God. Disinheritance was the punishment of sons (Prol. 6), prison and flogging was for servants or slaves (Prol. 7).
So let us at long last rise up, for Scripture is rousing us and saying: ‘It is full time for us to rise from sleep’.  

Our eyes wide open to the divine light, our ears alerted, let us hearken to the voice of God which warns us every day: ‘Oh that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts’. ‘He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’. 

And what does he say? ‘Come, O sons, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.’ 

‘Run while you have the light of life, lest the darkness of death overtake you.’ 

Searching for his workman in the crowd to whom he makes this appeal, the Lord goes on to say: ‘What man is there who desires life and covets many days that he may enjoy good.’ 

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8 Rom 13:11. This is a traditional text for the beginning of the Church year, so it is a fitting quote for the beginning of the Rule. 
12 ‘Our eyes wide open to the divine light’: a possible allusion to the Transfiguration, where the drowsy disciples were startled by the shining forth of Christ and instructed by the voice from heaven (Lk 9:32). ‘Divine’ here (deificum) can mean either ‘made by God’ of ‘making divine’. It is unlikely, but just possible, that St Benedict intends a reference to the doctrine of Deification as taught by the Greek Fathers. ‘Our ears alerted’, the Latin is attonitus auribus which, though it does indeed normally mean simply ‘alerted’, has the root meaning of ‘deafened by thunder’, which would give an appropriate element of awe and wonder if St Benedict was indeed thinking of the Transfiguration here (cf. the giving of the Law and appearance of God on Mount Sinai, Ex 19:16-21). The traditional application of this psalm is to baptismal catechesis: baptism is understood as illumination with the light of Christ. In the Prologue to St John’s Gospel, the Incarnate Word is the light that enlightens every man (Jn 1:9). 

St Basil has this to say about the Divine Light: “ I experience the love of God in a quite ineffable way. It can more easily be experienced than expressed . It is an indescribable light. If my speech wished to quote the comparison with lightning or thunder, the ear would not be able to bear it, to assimilate it. If you compare a blinding flash of light, the clear shining of the moon, the sunshine, all these are dark and gloomier than deepest night compared to this glory ... With our bodily eyes we do not see this splendour, but soul and mind contemplate it. When this splendour permeates the soul and mind of saints, it drives deep into them the burning impulse to love it ... “When shall I come and behold the face of God? My soul thirsts for God, the living God.”’ (RBasRuf 2,24-30). 

15 Ps 94: 8. This verse was appointed to be said ‘every day’ at the Invitatory (RB 9:3). The idea of hardness of heart is a common one among the Greek Fathers, but they propose also a remedy: “Abbot Poimen was asked by someone about hardness of heart. The venerable father answered and spoke: “Water is by nature soft, stone on the contrary hard. But when the water drips continually on a stone, it hollows it out. So too, God’s Word is delicate and mild, our heart on the contrary hard. Yet whoever hears the Word of God frequently and reflects on it, makes space within his heart for the fear of God, so that it can enter in)” (Vit. Patr. 7,29). 

16 Mt 11: 15; Rev 2: 7 

17 Ps 33: 12. The commentary on Psalm 34 (33) continues to Prol. 18. It was used in the early Church as a text for pre-baptismal catechesis. As often in the Rule, the voice of the Lord speaking here is Christ’s. The ‘fear of the Lord’ is a reverential fear before God, who is holy. In the context of conversion from sin, it may well begin as a more tangible fear based on guilt and anguish. 

18 Jn 12: 35. John had originally written ‘walk’ but St Benedict, like the Master before him, changed it to ‘run’. The idea of running occurs four times in the Prologue (13,22,44,49): the first three are in the context of a headlong flight from sin and death, but the last is much more joyful: it is a running in the Holy Spirit and not just out of fear. 

19 Ps 33: 13. Here, as elsewhere in the Prologue, St Benedict seems to abruptly change tack. ‘Searching for his workman in the crowd’ appeared to be leading us into the Parable of the Vineyard workers (Mt 20:1-16), but the second half of the verse brings us back to Psalm 33. ‘His worker’ is an
If you answer and say, 'I do', God says to you:

If you wish to have true and everlasting life, keep your tongues from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.

And when you have done this, my eyes will be upon you and my ears open to your prayers, and before you call upon me I will say, 'Here I am.'

What could be more delightful than this invitation of our Lord, dear brothers? See how in his fatherly kindness the Lord points out to us the way of life.

So then, our loins girt with faith and the practice of good works, let us travel along his ways under the guidance of the Gospel, so that we may deserve to see him who has called us into his kingdom.

If we want to make our home in that kingdom, we shall never get there unless we run to it by good works.

And now let us ask the Lord a question with the prophet and say to him: 'Lord, who shall dwell in your tent? Who shall rest on your holy mountain?'

After asking this question, brothers, let us listen to the Lord when he gives the answer and shows us the way to his tent:

'He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks the truth from his heart; who does not slander with his tongue,' expression of the monastic vocation as a special invitation from God to collaborate in his work. He is calling his workman out of the crowd – a symbol of a monastic life as a special calling? Or a fundamental call to all Christians to accept the gift of life?

The promise of eternal life is not in the psalm. There is a transition in the Latin here (16-17) from the plural to the singular implying a personal response to the Word of God, which Crist addresses to all.

Ps 33: 14, 15. ‘Seek peace’, the pursuit of peace needs sustained effort. Peace is a practical expression of love in RB 4:71-73 and 65:11. Abbot Holzherr comments that seeking for peace is in the last resort identical with ‘seeking for God’ (RB 58,7), the goal of the monk.

(Ps 33: 16). ‘My eyes will be upon you’ – intimidating for the sinner, but here in the consoling sense of God’s presence and protection.

Is 58: 9; (Is 65: 24). ‘Before you call upon me’: another expression of the precedence of divine grace, analogous to Prol. 9.

(Ps 15: 11). ‘The Lord points out’: St Benedict hears the living voice of God in the Scriptures.

(Eph 6: 14). ‘Loins girt’: Biblical language for readiness to obey God, especially recalling the Israelite exodus from Egypt in Ex 12.22. It means tying up loose clothing with a belt or cord in anticipation of work or a journey. In Lk 12:35 (“Let your loins be girded and you lamps burning, and be like (servants) waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast”) the phrase is given an eschatological sense, as in the Rule, although St Benedict reverts to the idea of a journey.

‘Under the guidance of the Gospel’ – near the end of the Rule (RB 73:3) St Benedict returns to this idea; ‘For what page, what saying of the divinely inspired Old and New Testaments is not a perfectly straight rule for the life of man?’ Our life should make Christ visible to others.

1 Thess 2: 12

Ps 14: 1
27 and does no evil to his friend, nor believes ill of his neighbour.’ 29

28 And when the wicked devil makes any suggestion to him, he casts him with loathing out of his heart’s sight, persuas[ion] and all, and so brings him to naught; then seizing the thoughts in their infancy he dashes them to pieces on the rock that is Christ. 32

29 We must be men who fear the Lord and do not think highly of themselves because of their good observance, but reckoning that the good that is in them is not due to themselves but is the work of the Lord, 34 they give praise to the greatness of the Lord who works in them and say with the prophet, ‘Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory.’ 35

30 So it was that the apostle Paul did not attribute any of the success of his preaching to himself, but said, ‘By the grace of God I am what I am.’ 36

29 Ps 14: 2,3
30 (Ps 14: 4)
31 (Eph 1: 18)
32 (Ps 136: 9). Early Christian literature (e.g. the Life of Antony, 4,5) often sees the contest with evil as a struggle against the devil, for, or with, Christ. Christ himself is the Rock (cf. 1 Cor 10:4) against which everything opposed to Christ is smashed. This somewhat violent image is based on an allegorical reading of Ps 136:9. St Athanasius cites the experience of St Antony of Egypt (d.356) when he was 35 years old and living in an old pagan tomb: “... The Lord did not forget the wrestling of Antony but came to his aid. For when [Antony] looked up he saw the roof being opened, as it seemed, and a certain beam of light descending towards him. Suddenly the demons vanished from view, ... Antony entreated the vision that appeared, saying, “Where were you? Why didn’t you appear in the beginning, so that you could stop my distresses?” And a voice came to him, “I was here, Antony, but I waited to watch you struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be your helper for ever.” (VA, 10).
All monks are called to this same struggle in the ‘Desert’, where Christ also was tempted by the devil. For a monk this desert is his monastery, underlining the need for a degree of separation from ‘the world’ and its ways of thinking and acting (cf. RB 4:20). The ancient monastic literature personifies the temptations as coming from demons, but they are also part of our psychological makeup: we need to bring our ‘passions’ under the dominion of Christ: sexual temptations, gluttony, pride, depression, indifference and anger. The demons are many, the Rock is one. Cassian (d.430) says that we ought to take possession of every nook of our heart with positive forces, lest an evil spirit finds them empty and with seven others return there. (Conf. 5, 16, cf. Mt 12:43-45).
St Athanasius writes in the Life of Antony: “A pure life and the true, trusting faith in God are powerful weapons against the demons. Believe me, I know it from personal experience: Satan fears night vigils, prayer, fasting, mildness, voluntary poverty, scorn of conceited seeking for fame, humility, compassion, mastery of anger, and above all a God-fearing heart purified by the love of Christ.” (VA, 17).
Origen (d.253), sees temptations as an opportunity for critical self-knowledge: “everything that our soul absorbed into itself, and which is hidden from all except God, even from the soul itself, comes to light through temptation” (On Prayer, 29,17). Only personal sin gives the Evil One entry into our inner self (Origen, Judic Hom 3,4).
Unlike the literature of the Desert Fathers, St Benedict seldom makes allusions to the devil, in fact only six times (Prol. 28; 1:4; [38:8]; 43:8; 53:5; 54:4; 58:28), in contrast to the 37 references in the Rule of the Master.
30 (Ps 14: 4)
34 (Phil 2: 13)
35 Ps 113B: 1
36 1 Cor 15: 10
And again he said, ‘He who boasts let him boast in the Lord.’

The Lord says also in the Gospel:
‘Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock;
and the rain fell and the floods came,
and the winds blew and beat upon that house,
but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.’

In fulfilment of this, the Lord waits for us day by day to do our duty and carry out these holy admonitions.

It is for this amending of our evil ways that the days of our life are prolonged by way of truce,
as the Apostle says: ‘Do you not know that the patience of God is meant to lead you to repentance?’

For the loving Lord says: ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.’

We have now questioned the Lord, brothers, about the person who is to dwell in his tent, and we have heard the rules of living there; it remains for us then to fulfil the duties.

Therefore our hearts and bodies must be got ready for the service of holy obedience to his commands, and where nature fails in strength, let us ask the Lord to bid the help of his grace come to our aid.

And if we want to escape the torments of hell and reach life everlasting, then, while there is still opportunity and we are in this body and there is time to carry out all our duties in this life of light, we must run and be doing what will be to our advantage in eternity.

Our task then is to establish a school of the Lord’s service.

In establishing this we hope that we shall not make rules that are harsh or burdensome.

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32 2 Cor 10: 17
33 Mt 7: 24, 25. St Benedict, for the sake of brevity, has omitted discussion of the last verse of Psalm 15, “Such a one will never be shaken”, but that verse explains the sequence of thought which brings us to this Gospel passage.
34 Abbot Holzherr notes (Rule p.34) that this patient waiting of the Lord can be likened that of the farmer who confidently waits for the growth of the harvest (cf. Mk 4.26-29). Only in the next three verses does St Benedict bring in the idea of ‘forbearance’ (makrothymia): a delay in the moment of God’s just judgment on our lives.
35 Rom 2: 4
36 Ezek 33: 11
37 St Benedict develops a spirituality of the ‘heart’ (following on from the opening verse of the Prologue). He expects the heart and body to act in unison: an inward faith with an outward expression.
38 In these two verses (42-44) St Benedict takes up again in summary some themes already developed in the Prologue: death and life, light and darkness, a reprieve still open and definitive decision, fear and trust, the way, and running to the goal.
39 In the Rule of the Master the term ‘school’ is used ten times to stand for the monastery. The context comes from the Gospel saying, quoted in the Rule of the Master but omitted in RB, “Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.” Mt 11: 29. This implicit quotation explains why St Benedict’s ‘school of the Lord’s
But if sound judgement should require a little strictness for the correction of faults or the preservation of charity, do not at once take fright and fly from the way of salvation which can be begun only through a narrow entrance. But as we progress in our monastic life and our faith, the heart expands and we run along the ways of God’s commandments with a delight of love that cannot be described; so that, never leaving his masterly guidance but persevering in his teaching until death in the monastery, we play our part by patience in the passion of Christ and so win our right to share in his kingdom. Amen.

HERE ENDS THE PROLOGUE

service” will avoid anything harsh or burdensome. Verses 46 to 49 are St Benedict’s own addition to material largely taken over from the Rule of the Master. They are an example of his discretion: St Benedict wishes to save his monks from unnecessary suffering and artificial trials of the kind favoured by RM and some of the earlier monastic tradition (other examples, RB 35:13; 66:5). Note the return to the second person singular: this is a personal appeal of St Benedict to the hearer. John Cassian has a similar sentiment in a passage from Abba Nesteros’ conference on ‘Divine Gifts’: [After discussion of great signs and wonders associated with false prophets:] “Therefore we must never admire those who feign these things by such miracles. Rather, we should see whether they have been made perfect by the uprooting of their vices and the correction of their behaviour, for when the grace of God is dispensed it is certainly not bestowed because of someone else’s faith or for any number of reasons but because of the person’s own zeal. [...] From this it is clear that the whole of perfection and blessedness consists not in the working of those wonders but in the purity of love.” (Cassian, Conf. 15,2,1). Love (“charity”) is the practical goal of the monastic journey. See verse 49. (Mt 7: 14) St Benedict has an optimistic spirituality which sees the journey getting easier with time. The gate remains narrow, and the road hard, but the change occurs in the person. (Ps 118: 32, “I will run the way of your commands, you open wide my heart”.) cf. John Cassian (Abba Joseph on Friendship) commenting on this verse from Ps 118: “Our hearts, therefore, should be enlarged and expanded, lest by being confined within the narrow limits of faintheartedness it will be completely filled with the turbulent emotions of wrath and we be able neither to receive in our narrow heart, in the words of the prophet, the exceedingly broad command of God”. (Cassian, Conf. 16,27,2). On the idea of the ‘enlarged heart’, see also Gregory the Great’s interpretation of St Benedict’s mystical experience when he saw “the whole world concentrated in a single sunbeam”: (Greg. Gt., Dialogues, 2, 35).

(Acts 2: 42)

(Acts 2: 42)

(Acts 2: 42) Patience is an important virtue for St Benedict: in RB 7:35, patience in the face on injustice; RB 72:5 support the failings of the brethren with patience. Here in the Prologue, patience is presented as the doorway to the Kingdom.

The final sentence of the Prologue is taken from the Rule of the Master. Persevering in the teaching of Christ carries on the theme of the monastery as a school of the Lord’s service, but there is also an echo here of St Luke’s description of the early Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-47), which John Cassian saw as the first expression of Christian monasticism. The themes of the Cross of Christ and obedience unto death will become central in RB 5 and RB 7.

(1 Pet 4: 13, Col 1:24).