

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 12

THE VIRTUES

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INTRODUCTION

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The first purpose of the Church is to *worship* God. Put another way, it is to know God, to love God, and to enjoy him forever.

The chief expression of our worship of God is the Eucharist, in which we offer ourselves to be a “reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice” to him.

This kind of worship involves absolutely all of one’s life or else it is not real but rather a lie. So this self-offering cannot happen unless I am trying to be and trying to become exactly what God wants me to be.

So the second job of the Church is to turn her members into what God wants them to be, to make them holy, to *sanctify* them .

As the members of the Church become holy, they become bearers of God’s love and thus winsome, and also unable not to want to share the life they have received.

And their attractiveness draws others, though not necessarily everyone, into the life of the Church. Thus, sanctification automatically involves *evangelism*, the third function of the Church — the conversion of those outside the Church.

Sanctification

When we were children, all of us had heroes which we wanted to grow up and be like—and we still do secretly. That is, we are looking for the perfect embodiment of humanity.

All created being is *tendential*; that is, it tends to actualize its nature. For example, acorns tend to become oak trees, and human beings tend to become saints.

Only man, however, grows by voluntary self-direction; acorns and squirrels do not. We become largely what we choose, even when we don’t realize it. Man is responsible. (See Lecture No. 3, MAN.)

But we do not automatically know what we really want to be. No matter what Johnny may say when asked what he wants to be when he grows up, his real answer is “grown-up”.

If he says a “fireman,” that’s only because fireman seems to be the most grown-up thing to be, the most really “alive” thing to be.

Jesus is the perfect human being. So in the bottom of our hearts we want to be like him, to achieve the “likeness of God.” We want to be saints, that is, the kind of person Jesus would be if he were in my shoes, living here where I do at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The “Likeness of God”

The “likeness of God” is God’s gift, but we have a part in its cultivation; we have to choose it, or we do not acquire it. God does not force it on us.

To choose it, one must *know* what it is, how to recognize it; *desire* it and *pray* for it; and *practice* it.

Virtue is the technical name for the likeness of God. It is defined as the *disposition to act in accordance with right reason*.

It is not simply knowing what is right and wrong.

It is not simply doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong.

It is the habitual tendency to spontaneously ***choose*** and ***act*** correctly as a result of being in communion with the Truth Himself.

To some degree, everyone possesses some virtue.

Vice is the disposition to act *contrary* to right reason.

Objects of virtue

There are eight objects about which there can be right (or wrong) reason. Since the first is threefold there are ten virtues:

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|------------------------|-------------|
| 1. God the Father | Faith |
| 2. God the Son | Hope |
| 3. God the Holy Spirit | Charity |
| 4. Myself | Humility |
| 5. Other people | Benevolence |
| 6. Things | Generosity |
| 7. Circumstances | Contentment |
| 8. Duties | Diligence |
| 9. Appetites | Temperance |
| 10. Sex | Chastity |

GOD THE FATHER

Faith is the first virtue, and the source of all the other virtues. To be faithful is to be like God the Father.

God is the Creator of the universe, and so he knows what makes it tick. His commands are the instructions for its proper operation; they are *prescriptions* for our happiness.

God is smarter than I am, and God is benevolent. So it makes sense for me to trust him.

If a soldier trusts his company commander, he goes ahead into battle even though it looks to him

as if they cannot win. Faith is trusting God in that way, trusting that he is competent to be God.

Thus, there is no opposition between faith and works.

Nor is there any opposition between faith and reason. Rather, faith is reasonableness itself.

Believing in God is a moral matter in the last analysis, not an intellectual one.

There is evidence to support belief in the Christian God, but that evidence is not coercive; it leaves one free to choose to not believe.

But there is no evidence in opposition to belief in the Christian God.

Once, before we had all the sophisticated tests we do now, there was a physician who said that he felt obliged to disbelieve anything that could not be scientifically proven. He was then asked how he was sure that he was the daddy of his children. The point is that no one, not even the severest skeptic, can consistently live that way.

It is intellectually respectable to believe in God, but the person who does not choose to do so does not have to.

God wills us to exist. And because we bear his image and can make choices, he invites us to choose whether he exists or not.

Our alternative is to believe in ourselves, to put our faith in ourselves, to say: "I know what is best for me; my own wisdom is adequate and so is my own rectitude and my own power."

Everyone must believe in something. But, as G. K. Chesterton said, "Those who believe in themselves are in the madhouse."

He also said, "the man who does not believe in God will believe in anything."

Sooner or later anything less than God will break your heart.

In summary, faith begins with the conviction that "I ain't all that smart".

Fully developed, faith means that one looks at things from God's point of view; he has bought God's outlook. In that sense he has become like God. So faith is the virtue that perfects the intellect.

Faith, therefore, puts one to work in obedience to God's will.

GOD THE SON

Faith begets *Hope*. To be hopeful is to be like Jesus, God the Son. Faith puts us to work in obedience to God; Hope keeps us at it. Hope is the virtue of perseverance.

As soon as a person starts trying to obey God, the Devil gets busy. When we are steadily sinking

into sin, Satan is happy to let us continue. But when we try to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling,” he always tries to stir up trouble, and then we experience opposition.

But neither obedience to God, nor disobedience, will keep you out of trouble. When God gives you trouble, it is because he desires for you exactly what you desire: i.e. your own perfection.

In every growing process there are periods of advancement, alternating with periods of consolidation. Growth occurs when the going is tough. When the going is relatively easy, it is consolidation which occurs. This applies to learning to type, or to doing arithmetic, or to sending and receiving Morse code.

From time to time, the Christian life loses its attraction and fun and becomes drudgery. These are called “dry” periods. We can quit then, or we can persevere and eventually the fun and excitement will return.

Hope looks down the road to the goal and does not let itself get diverted from it when the emotional support for the effort seems to dry up. Reality does not abide in our emotions.

A perverse or disordered act begins with your desire. Then you follow the desire and choose with the will. And then afterwards you try to rationalize in order to overcome the feelings of guilt.

But an act of integrity begins with the reason—with the judgment that it is appropriate, and then you choose it, and then you enjoy it as you remember it, instead of trying to forget it or rationalize it.

The investment of yourself in a thing causes you in time to love it. Jesus said “Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.”

For example, a mother loves her baby from the moment of its birth. That is because she has already been investing herself in it for nine months before she ever sees it.

We come to love God as a result of our investing ourselves in him: “Therefore let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race which is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the Joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” [Heb. 12: 1, 2].

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

Charity is the fruit of Hope, which is the fruit of Faith. Charity is the love of God just because he is lovable—not because he is good to me.

The love of God is an acquired taste. I had to learn to like beer and Mozart.

Charity is not giving old clothes to the poor.

The only real reason for loving any sinner is that he is made in God’s image and God loves him.

The Christian religion is a love affair between God and his Bride, the Church.

MYSELF

Faith, Hope, and Charity beget **Humility**. Humility is the disposition to act in accordance with right reason about myself.

To be humble means to be down-to-earth, with both feet on the ground about yourself. Humility and *humus* are related to each other and to *human*.

The opposite of humility is *Pride*—not to be confused with a reasonable self-respect. Attitudes both of superiority and inferiority are prideful.

Humility is not being a Casper Milquetoast and asking people to step on you; that is really pride in disguise.

Pride and humility contrasted:

- The proud man is his own center of interest. And he sees the importance of things in terms of their relation to himself.

But for the humble man, God is the center of interest. For him the importance of things depends on their relation to God and his will.

- The proud man is his own standard of values, and he judges others by his image of himself.

But the humble man judges everyone, himself included, by the standard of Christ.

- The proud man considers his own sins as trivial, or just “human,” and he considers the sins of others a

But for the humble man, all sin is equally obnoxious, because it is a repudiation of God. The humble man knows himself. When his humility is perfected, he ceases to sin. But as he gets closer to sanctity, his ability to recognize his own sins increases, and he takes them more seriously.

- The proud man is his own source of power, and he refuses to let others help him. He will never beg.

But when the humble man is in need and is unable to do and be what he believes God wants him to, he will ask for help from God and from his neighbor. To be unwilling to beg when you should beg is a form of pride.

- The proud man thinks of himself as a fascinating person in a dull and boring world when in fact he bores everyone else.

But the humble man thinks of himself as an ordinary person in an extra-ordinary world. He is never bored.

In fact, to be bored in such a universe as God has created is a sign of spiritual disorder, of sin.

Every person is really two persons or at least has two aspects. He is a member of the human race. And he is a particular individual. The most important thing that ever happened to any person has happened to every one of us: we were born.

But instead of being grateful for our existence, we strut and preen ourselves about the little details which distinguish us, and we ignore all the glorious gifts of the universe which God has given to every one who has been born.

OTHER PEOPLE

Humility begets *Benevolence*, which is the disposition to act in accordance with right reason about my fellow man, who, like me, has two sides to him.

Not only is my fellow man an individual, but he is a member of the human race, made in God's image; and thus he is entitled to my honor and respect.

Everyone needs human friendship and acceptance. But when I put a price on my friendship, then my neighbor tries to appear to be the kind of person I require him to be if I am to give him my friendship.

Sooner or later I sense that he is trying to fool me. He, meanwhile, is getting tired of the effort and begins to doubt if it is worth it. So the friendship collapses as we both get fed up.

So the kind man offers his friendship without any demands in return. This allows the other person to maintain his integrity.

The kindest thing you can do for another is to enable him to be himself, without any pressure from you. That is the way God treats us.

People are more important than things. Therefore when you lend someone something, make a mental note that you are giving it to him. No matter how good his intentions may be, he might not be able to pay you back.

Thus, if he fails to do so, since it was a gift, your relationship will not be damaged, at least as far as you are concerned.

Benevolence is desiring the other person's good, that is, that God's will for him should be accomplished. And so the kind person cares whether his neighbor has the basic necessities of life and whatever else is involved. If he is hungry, he feeds him, etc.

The kind person is not put off by either the good qualities of another or by the bad. He recognizes the good as the work of God and rejoices in it and appreciates it. The bad qualities are what God intends to overcome with his help.

THINGS

Benevolence begets *Generosity*, which is the disposition to act in accordance with right reason about things.

God made everything we have, and he gave it to us for the sake of our happiness. So the beginning of generosity is to gratefully accept and enjoy all of his creatures.

Everything belongs to God; the only thing I can really call my own is the mess I make. So generosity involves using God's creatures the way God wants me to.

Nothing that God has made is evil; it is only my misuse of his creation which allows evil to enter the picture. Demons do not get into bottles; they get into people.

Everything is temporary. What God gives us in this life he also takes away from us, because he loves us and knows that we cannot be satisfied by things.

God says, "Thou shalt have none other Gods but me," because he knows there are no other genuine Gods, only partial gods, partial goods, partial reflections of him."

As was said in Lecture No. 3, God has prepared a great banquet for us, and in this life he is taking us in through the kitchen so that we can get a whiff of what is cooking for the banquet. His purpose is to whet our appetites, not to spoil our appetites.

God takes away from us lesser goods in order to give us greater ones. On the occasion of any loss, the generous person assumes that God is making room in his life for something better.

We are inclined to be like the little boy with the broken wagon who wants Daddy to fix it, but cannot stand to turn loose of it long enough for him to fix it.

In summary, generosity, then, means receiving the things God gives us gratefully and joyfully, using them carefully and responsibly, and then giving them up without regret. The generous person's attitude is "The Lord gives; the Lord takes away; blessed be the Name of the Lord."

CIRCUMSTANCES

Generosity begets *Contentment*, which is the disposition to act in accordance with right reason about circumstances.

Circumstances are frequently good or bad only because of our attitude towards them. Unhappiness is always the result of not having things the way you want them.

The virtuous man sees the hand of God in all circumstances. And when he is unable to correct what seem to be bad circumstances, he changes his attitude and looks for the good in the circumstances which do confront him.

At the very least, bad circumstances are an opportunity to draw closer to our Lord by sharing a little in his suffering.

Bad circumstances are an occasion of mortification and self-discipline. They can be seen as an opportunity to offer God something.

For example, when my car won't start in the morning and I have to walk to work, I can say, "All right God, I would be very pleased for you to have the use of my car today."

Circumstances are never permanent. But we usually act as if the present circumstances are going to last indefinitely, and they never do.

For example, during the 1939 New York World's Fair there were all sorts of predictions of what the next few years would be like. Everybody would have two-way T. V. and all sorts of other technological marvels in the next two or three years, but World War II changed all that.

Then during that war there were predictions that every family would have its own helicopter or light plane after the war. Of course it never happened.

In this world we have no permanent home. We are all pilgrims. In the Middle Ages, everyone in Europe was conscious of that fact.

It was considered to be the fulfillment of a lifelong dream to make a pilgrimage to the recently liberated Holy Land. And if one could not go himself, at least he could give hospitality to those who were on their way there.

There were some people who seemed to always be on their way there without getting any closer.

The medieval French word for Holy Land was *Sancte Terre*. So those wanderers (professional house guests) were referred to as "*saunterers*." But people tolerated that practice because they realized that we are all pilgrims.

DUTY

The disposition to act in accordance with right reason about one's duty is called *Diligence*, and it is the fruit of contentment, which alone makes it possible.

Diligence is doing one's duty when it needs to be done.

APPETITES

Diligence begets *Temperance*. Temperance means using self-discipline (and intelligence) to maintain my health so that I will be able to do my duty.

On occasion, however, virtue may involve sacrificing one's health for the sake of one's duty.

For example, a priest needs to get a good night's sleep so that he can do his duty as a priest. But on occasion, he has to sacrifice sleep in order to get up and do his duty in an emergency.

Human appetites are not automatically right and in good proportion. Unless they are disciplined,

disorder, such as laziness, drunkenness, etc., always results.

SEX

The disposition to act in accordance with right reason about sex is called *Chastity*. It may or may not mean *not* having sexual intercourse—depending on whether one is married or not.

The primary purpose of sexual intercourse is to produce children to become saints in the Kingdom of God, and in the process to sanctify the relationship between man and wife in a union which reflects the relationship between Christ and his Bride the Church. [Ephesians 5:21-33]

More about this when we discuss Holy Matrimony.

CONCLUSION

Any attempt to conquer sex without some attempt to become temperate is doomed to failure.

And any attempt to become temperate without becoming diligent is doomed.

Diligence is not possible without contentment.

Contentment cannot exist without generosity.

Generosity does not occur without benevolence.

Benevolence is not possible without humility.

Humility cannot occur without charity.

Charity is not possible without hope.

And there is no hope without faith.

When faith has become perfected, then so will all the other virtues.