



## Study Guide

### *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*

## Chapter Eight: “Learning to Live a Good Life with God”

By Chris Hall

Here is the key question for this chapter, and I think, for the years remaining of our life with God: “How can we ever more deeply learn to live a good life with God?”

A good life does not appear out of a vacuum. It is the result of a series of graced, Spirit empowered choices and the practice of key spiritual disciplines. Its fundamental marker is ever-increasing love for God and our neighbor.

So, as we reflect on chapter eight, consider the following exercise: ***List on a piece of paper the key choices you have made over your lifetime that have shaped – positively or negatively – your ability to live a good life.*** Don’t rush through this exercise. Though it may be daunting and discouraging to recognize bad choices and their concrete outcomes in our thinking and living, it is encouraging to realize that our bad decisions—and the corresponding habits that have been formed—are not the last word or outcome for wise image-bearers.

The church fathers urge us to realize that new beginnings, new thought patterns, and new habits are genuinely possible. All that is required is the decision, through God’s grace, to move our thinking and behavior in a new direction. *Our past need not dictate our future.*

New learnings and behaviors are possible. Indeed, for God’s image-bearers they are commanded. Consider carefully the questions I ask on p. 214:

- How can we learn to love God and our neighbors?
- How can we learn to be less greedy?
- How can we learn to use our money and resources for the benefit of our neighbors?
- How can we learn to love our enemies?
- How can we learn to love our persecutors?

What other questions might you add to this list? Try to ask questions that directly address your life history, choices, and key habit patterns. Remember, the goal of a good life is ever increasing transformation into the image of Jesus, for he is the great image-bearer (Colossians 1:15ff).

“Who are we loving? What are we loving? Are our various loves—with their associated dispositions, inclinations, desires, and behaviors—grounded in our love for God, nourished by our love for God, or are they indicators that we have drifted far from home, from our lodestar, from the shining, loving light beaming at the core of all reality?” (p. 214)



If we forget that love for God and neighbor is the heart of a good life lived with God, we can easily fall into a stifling legalism. We can become harsh on ourselves and harsh on other people. Hence, the recall and ponder John Chrysostom's words, which I quote on p. 217. Love "*is a pathway leading of itself toward virtue*. For on the highway, if one finds a beginning, he is guided by it and has no need of one to take him by the hand. So it is in regard to love. Only lay hold on the beginning, and at once you are guided and directed by it."

Allow me to remind you of a key Renovaré principle: ***training, not trying***. If we simply try to love other people, or try to live a good life, we will soon be frustrated and discouraged. Rather, we must train to love, a training that will involve strenuous effort. ***Strenuous effort is not divorced from God's grace but is empowered by God's grace.***

We especially want to learn how to develop *ordered loves* to replace the *disordered loves* we have developed in our life's history. What are your disordered loves? You might try listing them (surround the exercise with the grace of God). As Augustine puts it (I quote him on p. 221): A well-ordered heart loves "the right thing to the right degree with the right kind of love."

When we perceive our disordered loves (a love directed toward something that was not created by God to be loved or to be loved so intensely) and discern how they have developed, we can take the next step toward wholeness and holiness; we begin to grow and nourish strategically *habits that will help us move toward healthy loves and healthy lives*. As we increasingly comprehend the dynamic between ordered loves and habit formation, Maximus the Confessor's thoughts on p. 226 will make ever greater sense:

"He who has just begun to follow a holy way of life, and has received instruction about how to act righteously, devotes himself wholly to *the practice of the virtues* in all obedience and faith, nourishing himself, as if on meat, on their manifest aspects, that is to say, on *moral training*."

Should we be surprised, then, that God's image-bearers are often described by the church fathers as athletes? "The athlete's ability to respond immediately and skillfully during the heart of the game is largely derived through the disciplined workout program he has practiced so faithfully. *Freedom and discipline, spontaneity and habit formation, fulfillment and exertion are intimately linked.*" (p. 233)

We have traveled quite a distance together in *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers*. My hope—indeed, prayer—would be that your study and practice of moral formation with the church fathers continues across the years that remain to you. I have written an introduction to their thought. The invitation I offer to you is to explore in ever greater depth their insights and practices.