

Lesson eight: The Supernatural Good
Or: This World is not Enough

At the beginning of this course, we pointed out that everyone desires certain things, and that these things will give us joy when we possess them. It seems, then, that if we were to possess all these goods perfectly, the result would be perfect happiness. Unfortunately, you've probably never seen anyone who's totally and in all ways perfectly happy. Did you ever know anyone who was totally and in all ways satisfied by the beauty, truth, and health in their lives? How about someone who had achieved absolutely everything they wanted, who had no strained relationships, who felt as though they and God were on *exactly* the same page? No? Me neither.

The fact is that this life doesn't offer enough to fill our hunger for the basic goods. We have an infinite desire, but the world can only provide a finite satiation. This is why so many despair; they see the disproportion between what we want and what we can get. In fact, all the great atheistic philosophers were deeply despondent because they could perceive the inability of temporal things to fulfill the human person, and because they believed in nothing greater than this world.

However, we Christians have access to some crucial information. We know that God has sent a message to Earth, a message whose contents we could never have known by our own efforts. His message said that we were made with a *supernatural, otherworldly destiny*. He told us that a direct, immediate union with God was our final goal, and that we would be satisfied with nothing less than Him. In the timeless words of St. Augustine, "You have made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."¹ Further, we know that God did some other stupendous things. He came down to earth as a man, died for us, rose again. He told us to follow His example and His instruction, and He instituted the Church as the organization through which we can pursue union with Him.

Now, this is the Good News of Christianity. It's news because we needed God to tell us about it; we couldn't have known it on our own. And it's good because it unlocks the mystery of our existence: it explains who we are, how we got here, and that infinite, everlasting happiness is within our potential. Without this good news, human life is doomed to frustration, doomed to partial happiness and ultimate discontent. Such is the relevance of the Christian message.

God: The Perfect, All-Fulfilling Good

The question, then, is how can God be our perfect happiness? Haven't we already seen that what make us happy are those basic goods we keep talking about? Knowledge, physical well-being, achievement, a sense of identity, beauty, etc..., can God really be all these things at once? Absolutely.

Did you ever notice the way we say that God *is* Goodness, He *is* Beauty, He *is* Truth, etc...? Is God chopped up into one-third goodness, one-third, beauty, one-third truth? Of course not; all of Him is goodness, truth and the rest. The reason for this is that in reality these things are all identical with each other; what is true is also beautiful is also good. There is no difference between these things in reality, only in our experience of reality.

¹ *Confessions*, Book 1, Chapter 1.

Let's try to make it a little clearer. If I clap my hands in your face, that's only one event, one thing. But you receive that one hand-clap through both your eyes and your ears. If you receive the hand-clap through your eyes, you'd call it a visual image, whereas if you receive the hand-clap through your ears, you'd call it a sound. But really, it's just one reality, one event that affected you through two different media.

Now, we have many receptors for being, many ways of being affected by outside realities. So, for example, when we receive something that fulfills us in our bodies, we'd call that reality a **physical**, or **material good**. If we receive some reality in a way that fulfills our mind and judgment, we'd call that reality **knowledge**, or **truth**. If we receive some reality in a way that fulfills our need for proportion and balance, we'd call that reality **beauty** or **aesthetic experience**. When we receive some reality that fulfills our need for active involvement, we'd call that reality **achievement**. When we receive some reality that fulfills our need for inner peace and personal identity, we'd call that reality **self-constitution**. When we receive some reality that fulfills our need for interpersonal relationships, we'd call it a **social good**. Lastly, when we receive something that fulfills our need for the supernatural, we'd call it a **religious good**.

But the point is that a lot of things in our experience can provide us with some satisfaction in all the basic goods. Take reading a book, for example. It's only one thing, but you can receive it through all your capacities for goodness: one can gain knowledge, marvel at the beauty which is expressed in the words, feel a sense of accomplishment in actually getting through the book. Ideally, you would also discover something about yourself, connect personally to the author, and maybe even enjoy the touch of the book, or the smell of the pages. So it is possible that the mere reading of the book could in some way fulfill every level of our longing for the basic goods.

The problem is that a book is a *finite* reality; before too long we'll get bored with a book, and use up its potential to satisfy. There are only so many times you can read a book before you get sick to death of it.

But with God you have an *infinite* reality, something that can satisfy you on every level, not just for a while, but forever. You'll never use up God's goodness; once you've attained union with Him, He'll be perpetually making you happy in every dimension of your person. He is perfect knowledge, the total satisfaction of our minds; perfect beauty, perfect satisfaction of our need for proportion and balance; perfect friendship, the total satisfaction of our desire to love and be loved by another; perfect self-constitution, for only when we are with God will we understand who we are and be at peace; He is the Resurrection and the Life, for only when we are with God will our bodies be totally flawless and content; He perfectly satisfies our need for achievement, for He allows us to become involved in His perfect plan of action, that is to say, when we unite with God, we'll get to do what He does. Want to do something important? Join up with God and become His coworker; lastly, He is the perfect fulfillment of our need for something that goes beyond the natures of this world. He is the ultimate goal to which all true religion tends.

Further, God is the source of all the goods we see in this world. All those things towards which we are attracted have their origin in God, so everything we value and long for here are present on an infinite level in Divinity. Think of all the realities in this life as cups full of quenching, refreshing water. But how did those glasses get filled up with water? Well, they were all filled from the same spring. And this spring never stops

gushing, it's an unending source of pure, perfect, water. The key, then, is to go ahead and enjoy the cups of water in your life (i.e., enjoy the created things that you have legitimately). They are good, the water inside them comes from the Great Spring, God. But make sure you don't get so distracted by the individual cups that you forget to keep your focus on the Spring as your final destination. If you just cling to an individual cup, before very long you'll drink that cup dry, and then you'll be dying of thirst. So remember, only the Spring will be ultimately quenching.

The Theological Virtues

Now, just as we needed the four cardinal virtues in order to obtain the basic, natural goods, so too we need a special set of virtues for obtaining the Supernatural Good, namely God. These virtues are **Faith, Hope, and Charity**, and were first grouped together in the writings of St. Paul: "So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love."²

They are called the Theological virtues, indicating their direct orientation to God (*theos* is the Greek word for "God"). Ultimately, the theological virtues empower us in two ways: firstly, they enable us to act upon God. When we have a theological virtue, we can make God our object; we can do things to Him; secondly, they enable us to share in God's action, that is to say, the theological virtues let us do what God does. So with faith, hope, and charity, we *act* on God and we *share* in His very activity.

But how is this possible? God is infinitely above us, infinitely greater, so how can we reach high enough to act on Him and share in His activity? The answer is that God has to raise us above our natural potential, He elevates us to more than we could naturally be on our own. Think of a little girl who wants to hug her mother, but is too small to reach up to her mother's height. In order for her wish to be fulfilled, the mom will have to stoop down pick up her little daughter for the hug. Or say a little ten-year-old boy wants to drive his father's car – obviously he can't; only grown ups can drive cars. But then imagine that the dad places his son on his lap, and steers the car by sandwiching the little boy's hands between the steering wheel and his own. In both these examples the children are helped by their parents to do something they couldn't naturally do on their own.

The same thing happens in the case of the theological virtues. We couldn't acquire them on our own; God has to infuse them (i.e., give them to us directly). They aren't like the other virtues, where if you work hard enough, eventually you'll get them. No, to get faith, hope and charity takes heavenly intervention. God has to elevate our nature by **sanctifying grace**, which is defined as a share in divine life. We receive this grace and the accompanying theological virtues through Christ at the moment of **baptism**. Hence the theological virtues are specifically Christian virtues.

A quick description of each theological virtue is as follows:

Firstly, *faith*. Like prudence, faith is a virtue of the intellect which gives us certain knowledge. Faith recognizes that God has given us information we couldn't know on our own (i.e., *revelation*), and it accepts that information as being true.

Secondly, *hope*. With this virtue, we desire God as our ultimate happiness, and we are able to pursue union with Him before all else.

² I Cor 13:13.

Thirdly, *charity*. Charity is a share in God's love, and so makes us capable of loving both God and neighbor selflessly and sacrificially, for who they are in themselves.

And what about the other virtues? Can we just forget about prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance now that we've moved on to loftier goods? Do we not need them any more? On the contrary, the natural virtues are still critical for the person trying to live a distinctively Christian life. For example, as we've already seen, a Catholic needs fortitude in order to witness to his faith. In fact the cardinal virtues come into play in a much more pronounced fashion for the Christian, because they too are elevated to pursue the supernatural good as well as the natural good.

Christ and the Supernatural Good

Since the theological virtues enable us to arrive at union with God, it is only fitting to take a moment and reflect on the Person of Christ, who is Himself the ideal of theological virtue and the perfect union between God and humanity.

First of all, Christ is the *cause* of our union with God. Without Christ's saving action in history, it would be impossible for us to gain the supernatural good for which we so ardently long. By His incarnation, His life, His suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus bought back our entry into Heaven, and so gave us the chance to share in God's goodness forever.

Christ is also the *way* to union with God. Because He is Himself both God and man, He is able to bridge the gap between divinity and humanity. He is thus the "one mediator between God and man."³ Our union with Christ (and so with God) becomes especially intense in two of the sacraments: *Baptism*, in which we are reborn in Christ, as His brothers and children of God. Baptism allows us to actually begin the union with God in Christ that culminates in the experience of Heaven; *Eucharist*, which grants the believer a profound union with Christ, both spiritually and physically. Because of the depth of this union, Vatican II declared the Eucharist to be the "Source and Summit of the Christian life."⁴

Lastly, Christ is the perfect *example* of the journey to union with God, namely, the theological virtues. His life is the perfect illustration of faith, hope, and charity, and He gave instructions for what we are to do if we would follow in His footsteps.

So throughout the next few lessons, in which we will explore each theological virtue in detail, meditate about how Christ embodies each virtue, how He made the virtues possible, and how He can help us increase in each virtue in our own lives.

³ I Tim. 2:5.

⁴ *Lumen gentium*, 11.