

Lesson ten: The Virtue of Hope Or: Striving for Heaven

As we saw in the previous lesson, Faith reveals to us God's supernatural plan for our lives. With faith we know that the ultimate purpose and fulfillment of each human person lies in the attainment of Heaven. Once we have this knowledge, it is time to begin working towards that objective. That's where the theological virtue of Hope enters the picture. *Hope is the virtue whereby the individual strives for Heaven as something which is possible, but not yet guaranteed.*

There are, then, three conditions needed for the virtue of hope: firstly, an active pursuit of God and Heaven; secondly, a realization that the attainment of Heaven is possible, (after all, if it wasn't possible to get to Heaven, why would anyone even try to get there?); thirdly, a realization that failing to attain Heaven is also possible, (after all, if getting to Heaven was guaranteed, why would you have to try to get there?).

Tragically, it is common to hear this striving for Heaven as something which is merely a distraction from making a difference on earth. For example, Marx once famously said that "religion is the drug of the people," and more recently, Carl Sagan stated, "Life is but a momentary glimpse of the wonder of the astonishing universe, and it is sad to see so many dreaming it away on spiritual fantasy." People frequently think that ideas about the next life are simple forms of escapism or wishful thinking that keeps us from doing any good in this world.

Yet actually the contrary is true. Those with their eyes fixed on Heaven are the ones who do the most good for earthly society. C.S. Lewis articulates this truth very clearly: "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven."¹

The fact is that those who are simply interested in conditions down here lack the power to actually affect conditions down here. Hope, the pursuit of God, Heaven, and holiness, is what charges us on towards the perfection of temporal matters. So do you really want to make a difference? Do you really want to change the world? Then start by making sure you are putting God and your supernatural destiny first.

Longing for Heaven

A critical part of hope is the desire for Heaven. Many of us know we should pursue the supernatural good, but we don't really want to. Union with God has somehow grown unattractive to a great many people. For them, Heaven has lost its appeal. Why is this, and what can we do to foster a longing for the happiness of the next life?

Well, one of the key reasons we lack a healthy attraction to God and Heaven is that our imagination about Heaven has grown very weak. When we think of Heaven, we think of a white room, or a big choir that sings "alleluia" all day long, or a bunch of people playing harps and sitting on clouds. Obviously such ideas of Heaven aren't going to thrill us; they're not going to make us excited about the next life. We have lost sight of

¹ *Mere Christianity*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 134.

the glory, the joy, the total and perfect happiness that awaits us when we finally come home to God.

Also, many of us secretly harbor the illusion that by choosing God, we're going to have to give up certain things forever. We imagine we'll miss the things of earth once we're in Heaven. This notion expresses itself in certain phrases like, "Well, you only live once, might as well enjoy it while you can."

In order to battle this mentality, we have to repeatedly remind ourselves of the truth that if we attain God, we will also attain all the good things of this world. Recall the analogy of the spring and the cups; if a person reaches the huge, unending spring of water, will he be longing for the small, finite cups of water? Of course not. Everything pleasing about the cups is present at the spring, only more so. The same is true with heaven. If we get there, we will not feel as though we have had to sacrifice certain goods, for they will all be present in Heaven, but much, much more perfectly. This is why Our Lord declared, "Everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more."²

We must therefore retrain our imaginations. We must ask ourselves "What gives me the greatest pleasure in life? What do I enjoy most?" and then realize that heaven will include that pleasure and enjoyment, only it will be far greater, and forever. Such meditation on the beauty and ecstasy of Heaven will hopefully enkindle our longing for the supernatural good, and will increase our depth of hope.

This brings us to the concept of Magnanimity, which is a virtue under the heading of Hope. Magnanimity literally means "great-souled," and it refers to a striving towards that which is most great, a desire for the highest, most noble goals. It is the ultimate ambition, the ambition to become the absolute greatest thing you can be – a saint), and to achieve the greatest accomplishment possible – union with God.

So many of us are not magnanimous; we do not set the highest goal for ourselves, but content ourselves rather with frivolous, mediocre aspirations. We fritter away our lives on lesser projects. A society without an awareness of God or a deliberate orientation towards Him is a society that has decided to simply settle for what is ordinary and mundane. As Catholics, we must be people of ambition, ambition to do great things, to change the world, to achieve high honor and glory. We must encourage a desire to do great things for God, to change the world for God, to be given the honor and glory that come from God's approval. We must not settle for anything less.

Two Forms of Hopelessness

As we saw in defining hope, for this virtue to be present the person must perceive heavenly happiness as a) something desirable and possible, and b) something not yet secure. If either of these two truths are lacking from a person's life, hope will die. Hence there are two vices which are directly opposed to the second theological virtue:

The primary threat to hope is *despair*. Despair is not simply a feeling of gloominess, or depression. Rather it is the refusal to strive after God, the refusal to make Heaven our primary goal to work for it. People succumb to despair for a variety of

² Mt 19:29.

reasons, but ultimately, the causes of despair can be narrowed down to two categories. The first is *excessive self-focus*. We concentrate on our own strengths and our own weaknesses, and we realize that our own power isn't sufficient for salvation, and so we give up on holiness and happiness. We figure we won't be able to make it. We think, "I'm too weak, I'm too sinful, why bother trying any more?" Well, of course we're too weak and sinful to achieve Heaven on our own, which is why we must keep our eyes on Christ, and beg for God's mercy and strength, realizing that "With God all things are possible."³ An excellent illustration of this danger is the story of Peter, who, as long as he kept focused on Our Lord, was able to walk on water. However, whenever his focus switched to his own personal ability and the surrounding circumstances, he began to sink. The same is true for us.

The second reason we despair is *attachment to sin*. Often times we really don't want to pursue God, because we know it's going to mean giving up certain sins to which we've grown accustomed. So we choose the evil habits we're used to over the promise of eternal joy.

Despair manifests itself in various ways. One of the most common symptoms of despair is *sloth*, classically called *acedia*. Acedia describes the condition of a person who resents the greatness to which he has been called, because he knows it's so different. It is the suppression of magnanimity by laziness: "I don't want to be great, to be a saint, to be a child of God, to be a hero of the faith. Do you realize what a hassle that is, and how many sacrifices it takes? No thanks, I'm happy just drifting by." Whether such an attitude stems from excessive self-focus or an attachment to sin, it is clear that giving in to this impulse will prevent the person from ever arriving at perfect happiness.

Another frequent symptom of despair is *distraction*. A vast portion of the society settles for mediocre pleasures, mediocre achievements, mediocre loves. And yet, in the back of their minds, they *know* they should be pursuing higher things. So they turn to distraction in order to forget about those higher things. It's like a student who's in the library the night before a big test. He knows he should be preparing for the test, but he doesn't want to study; he doesn't even want to think about the test. So he goes around the library in desperate search of anything that will help him procrastinate. He reads a magazine article that isn't even interesting, he doodles on the page, he strikes up a conversation with the library staff. But all the while he's very bored, and he knows deep down he should be doing studying, and he has a sick feeling in his stomach that he might fail this test.

That's our society. We know we ought to spend our time on more noble aspirations, but we really don't want to talk about it, and we don't want to think about it. So we look for anything that can distract us, anything that can drown out the guilt. Maybe that's why there's so little silence today. Ipods, stereos, t.v.s, travel, cell-phones, are there to occupy our minds with passing images of sight and sound. And yet people are bored, and sick with worry, because they know there are pressing demands on our lives which they are ignoring. This is the terrible disease of despair which we must seek to eradicate in our own lives, and in the lives of those around us.

Presumption is a kind of hopelessness which is not often discussed. This is the vice of thinking that one is guaranteed to get to heaven: "I'm as good as saved already."

³ Mt 19:26.

This, of course, inhibits the striving after God and Heaven and greatness. If you're already guaranteed, why should you bother trying?

Many people suffer from presumption either because a) they are too confident in their own powers, or b) they are confident that God will just "make everything all right" in the end. This latter error has become increasingly widespread today; it is assumed that a good Deity will welcome everyone into Heaven, and that Hell does not exist.

But the fact is that God won't force you to choose Him; He won't drag a person into Heaven. If a person chooses to live his life in such a way as to separate himself from God, God will permit that free decision to carry over into the next life. That's what Hell is: it is the person's free decision to live through eternity apart from God. And it is real; we can choose it, and we can go there forever. That's why it's so dangerous to say, "Once saved, always saved," or to deny the existence of Hell. Such a mind-frame keeps us from working for heaven, and it prevents us from seeking repentance and the removal of our sins. Presumption can be just as deadly as despair, for both stop the vital enthusiasm of hope.

Hope, Youthfulness, and Optimism

Hope is usually associated with youth; when people are young, they have their whole lives ahead of them, and there's great potential for wonderful things to happen. Hence, the proper outlook of youthfulness is a gazing ahead to the good things which are in store, to the life which hasn't really begun yet. And this is precisely the outlook of hope: hope gazes ahead to the good things which are in store for those who are faithful to God and His Church; hope looks forward to the life that hasn't really begun yet. Consequently, the key to eternal youthfulness is hope, for those who hope will always retain the proper joys of being young.

Lately, however, the population – including young people – has been growing ever more cynical. People think they are being mature by adopting a stance of disillusionment or pessimism. "Grow up," they say, "Life's tough, then you die, and that's it. We don't pretend any more; we openly admit that life is ugly and meaningless. And the sooner you can accept the harsh facts of life, the better things will be. Just try to have some good times and don't expect too much."

One can see this position embodied in a great deal of modern art, music, and literature. Music is dissonant and random, paintings are bleak and senseless, and the plots in stories lack direction and resolution. It can very trendy today to be gloomy, or depressed. It can be "cool" to be without hope.

However, the devoted Catholic rejects such a trend as empty, cowardly, and decrepit. He refuses to be morbid or dejected, for he has seen the beauty of God's world and the even greater beauty to be found in God's heaven. Hence the follower of Christ responds to life with hope, with optimistic vitality, with enthusiasm. And so he becomes something wonderful, he lives his life to the fullest, he changes the world, and he attains the supernatural good, God, who alone can give perfect happiness.

