

3.3

**FREE TO LOVE**

**CHRISTIAN CHARACTER  
AND THE BIG THREE**

## The lives of the first Christians were different.

Around 150AD, we have a letter marveling at Christian character. An author, who names himself as “Mathetes,” or “Disciple,” writes,

[T]here is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then, they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life.

*They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh.*

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### DISCUSS

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*What makes the Christian way of life different? What stands out in this letter?*

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## THE FREEDOM TO LOVE

This early letter reveals the powerful witness Christians had on the people around them. Their character demonstrated to the world that they had been saved by Jesus Christ. Today, we too are called to this same transformed way of living, to lives that are different than the culture around us—lives full of “charity, joy, peace, patience, [and] kindness” (Gal 5:22-23). But what is Christian character and how can we attain it?

Jesus taught two great commandments: love of God and neighbor (Mt 22:36-39). Love is the hallmark of Christian character, the key quality that demonstrates we are Christians: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). Without it, St. Paul says, we are “nothing” (1 Cor 13:2). It is also the basis on which we will be judged: “At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love” (CCC 1022).

This forces us to ask ourselves: How well do we love? To answer, we must first understand love. Unfortunately, our world often misunderstands love, reducing it to a positive feeling, affirmation, or an emotion. But love is so much more than these transient sentiments. Feelings change. Positivity wanes. Emotions fluctuate. The Church says, “To love is to will the good of another” (CCC 1766). It is choosing others’ good, even above our own.

This leads to a second question: Are you free to love? You might be thinking, “Of course, I am. I can do as I please.” However, that isn’t what we mean by freedom in this context. Today, we often think of freedom as the ability to act without coercion, an unhindered choice of option A or B. But that isn’t the classical understanding of human freedom. Instead of freedom *from coercion*, true freedom is freedom *for excellence*, the ability to perform a task with great skill or mastery.

Here’s an analogy: if I asked you, “Are you free to play the guitar?” You might say, “Of course” and proceed to pick up a guitar and pluck its strings. However, if you know nothing about music and

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have never practiced, your “music” is more likely to be noise than anything beautiful. Conversely, if you had taken lessons for years, studied many pieces of music, and regularly practiced for hours, you would be able to answer differently. You could say, “Of course!” and immediately play something great. Do you see the difference?

When asking, “Are we free to love?” we aren’t simply asking if we can choose one option or another. We are asking if we have cultivated the ability to choose others over ourselves, good over evil, God’s will over our own. This ability is called virtue. It is the “habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (CCC 1803). Virtue gives us the freedom to love. And, if we are honest with ourselves, we have much work to do. Whether it’s a bad habit we can’t shake, self-centered decisions that continue to burden us, or vices of anger, lust, or laziness, we all need greater virtue. We all need to grow in our ability to love.

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**DISCUSS**

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*How would you answer these questions: How well do you love?  
Are you free to love?*

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## VIRTUE AND THE HUMAN PERSON

How can we become free to love? How can we, like the first Christians, live differently than the culture around us? One helpful place to begin is understanding our human condition. We all struggle to live holy lives because something within us is broken. Therefore, let's consider our human condition so that we can learn how we need to be healed.

First, we must recognize that we were created in the image and likeness of God, capable of knowing and loving God and others. This is possible because of our higher faculties, the intellect and the will. Our intellect gives us the power to reason and to know. Our will gives us the capacity to choose. Since love is willing (or choosing) the good of another, our will is the faculty that enables us to love. In short, we have a mind to know and a will to love.

We also have lower faculties, our emotions and our senses, collectively called "passions." Our emotions allow us to experience things like joy, sadness, fear, and anger. Emotions are the seat of our action, the things that drive us toward various goods. For example, joy when we achieve a goal or anger in the face of injustice. Our

senses are our point of contact with the world, giving us the ability to see, hear, touch, taste and smell.

Before the Fall, our faculties operated in incredible harmony. Our intellect knew the good, our will chose that good, and our passions moved us toward it, rejoicing in its attainment. We can imagine the bliss that Adam and Eve must have experienced in the Garden when they clearly knew the good, chose it easily, and rejoiced in attaining it. They were totally free and unhindered. As the Catechism states, “The ‘mastery’ over the world that God offered man from the beginning was realized above all within man himself: *mastery of self*. The first man was unimpaired and ordered in his whole being” (CCC 377).

After the Fall, however, instead of inner harmony, we experience inner conflict. Our intellects are darkened and our wills weakened. We struggle to know the good, and, even when we know it, we struggle to choose it. Like St. Paul, we lament, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom 7:15). Furthermore, our passions have become inflamed. We have concupiscence, a gravitational pull toward selfishness, a “movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of human reason” (CCC 2515). We are plagued with inordinate desires for pleasure, riches, rest, food, alcohol, etc. Indeed, our condition is dire. We were made to love. Yet, how can we “will the good of another” when we struggle to know the good, are weak in choosing it, and have passions that constantly pull us away from it? With St. Paul, we are forced to cry out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24).

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### DISCUSS

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*How have you experienced the brokenness of our human condition? In what ways have you experienced the frustration of not being able to do the good you want to do?*

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## THE BIG 3

Before discussing the solution to the problem of our fallen nature, we need to address how this inner conflict affects us today. Some issues have become so prominent that they merit special attention. Let's discuss what we have termed the "Big 3": chastity, sobriety, and excellence. These virtues are especially necessary for living Christian character today.

### ***Chastity***

Contrary to much contemporary thinking, chastity is all about saying "Yes" to true love. Unfortunately, our world is saturated with disordered ideas about sexuality. Whether it is music, movies, or pornography, our culture is awash in a vision of sexuality that departs from God's loving plan. Even many Christians suffer the consequences of these errors: disordered ideas about love, sex, and marriage; compulsive behaviors; broken relationships; and feelings of shame and hopelessness because of past experiences.

As Christians, we must seek freedom in this area of our lives. Sex outside of marriage, pornography, masturbation, contraception, sexting, and other sexual sins prevent us from loving well. These sins allure us with the promise of love and pleasure, only to ensnare us by turning us away from others and toward satisfying our own desires. Sins against chastity particularly inhibit our ability to love because they introduce selfishness into an area of our lives meant for deep, intimate self-giving. Chastity, however, enables us to overcome our selfishness and love others for their own sakes, not merely because of what we get from them or how they make us feel.

Chastity also allows us to experience profound peace. The Catechism states, "[E]ither man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy" (CCC 2339). Chastity is so much more than merely not having sex before marriage. It is the ability to say "Yes" to authentic love, the love we all desire—both inside and outside of marriage. Therefore, if we are going to love well, we can't give in to a disordered vision of sexuality. We can't settle for counterfeit love. Instead, let's



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cultivate the virtue of chastity and experience the true love for which we are made.

### ***Sobriety***

Sobriety is the virtue by which we moderate our consumption of alcohol and other substances—and it is essential for living Christian character. Only a sober person is free to love, because only a person who can think clearly and choose freely can give themselves to another. Rather than a stuffy “no” to having a good time, sobriety is all about having the ability to know and choose what really matters.

We might be tempted to think that drunkenness and drug use are “no big deal.” However, reflect for just a moment: How many lives have been deeply harmed by drug and alcohol abuse? How many people are on the streets? How many families have been wounded? How many serious problems are caused: drunk driving, sexual violence, damage to people and property? While alcohol can certainly be consumed in moderation, the Scriptures are also very clear that “drunkards” will “not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:10).

The reason drugs and drinking to excess are so spiritually perilous is because they inhibit our reason. That’s why people do so many regrettable things when they are impaired—they have surrendered their ability to think clearly. Drugs and alcohol can also be incredibly



addictive. Not only do we surrender our reason when we abuse them, we also give away our freedom. Over time, we can even become dependent. And when our lives begin to revolve around substances instead of more important things, then we have lost our freedom to love. That's why St. Peter encourages us, "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). By remaining sober, we preserve the most important aspects of who we are as human beings made in God's image, our intellects and our wills, our ability to know and love.

### ***Excellence***

Excellence is the virtue by which we give the best of ourselves to God and others. Our modern world is plagued by mediocrity. Many people coast through life not knowing where to go or what to do. Many others spend their days neglecting the most important parts of life, investing all their time and energy in sometimes good, but often, lesser things: wealth, careerism, sports, fame, appearances, and the like. We need many things in life, but the most important things in life aren't things, they are persons—God and others. The virtue of excellence is about putting first things first. It is about ordering our lives toward the highest goods, giving the best of ourselves to the best things. Just imagine what our lives would be like if we didn't waste so much time on passing things and instead devoted ourselves to what was most important. That is the life we want to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

### ***Freedom***

Finally, Jesus says, whoever sins is a slave to sin (Jn 8:34). Sins against chastity, sobriety, and excellence are particularly damaging because they have a uniquely enslaving quality. The more we commit these sins, the more we struggle to know and choose what is good. Instead of focusing on others, we become fixated on ourselves. These behaviors often become habituated, and we surrender more and more of our freedom to love, opting instead for momentary satisfaction. Not only this, but serious, mortal sins, also deprive us of grace, the life of God within us, and sever our relationship with our loving Father.

As Christians, however, we have great hope. Jesus Christ came to set us free. We need not remain enslaved to our vices. While overcoming them is unlikely to be easy, it is certainly possible. No matter how deep we are in sin, Christ comes to save us.

### Notes



*Be sober,  
be watchful.  
Your  
adversary  
the devil  
prowls  
around like  
a roaring  
lion, seeking  
some one  
to devour.*

### DISCUSS

*How well are you living the virtues of chastity, sobriety, and excellence? What specifically are you battling in these areas? Be honest and clear about your struggles in these areas.*



## GROWING IN VIRTUE

How do we become free to love as Christ calls us to love? How can we overcome the deep wound of sin that we all experience? The Catechism gives us a clear gameplan: “The moral virtues grow through education, deliberate acts, and perseverance in struggle. Divine grace purifies and elevates them” (CCC 1811). Let’s review each aspect of this statement:

### *Education*

The first way we can grow in virtue is by learning about the virtues, forming our minds to see the good more clearly. By better understanding virtue, we can more easily choose virtuous actions. Some may object that merely knowing about a virtue doesn’t make us virtuous—and that is true—it is not simply a matter of knowing the right answers. However, if we don’t form our minds, we are more easily deceived. A well-formed mind enables us to discern what is good so that we might choose it in our lives.

### *Deliberate Acts*

The next step we can take to grow in virtue is to make deliberate good acts. You can think of these acts as spiritual exercises. In weightlifting, for example, we need to begin with lighter weights, because our bodies are not yet ready for heavier ones. Over time, however, as we gradually increase the weight, we become capable of lifting more. Something similar happens with virtue. If we are struggling with a vice, then making deliberate acts each day to

combat that vice helps us gain the spiritual strength we need to overcome it. It is like exercising our spiritual muscles. Over time, by continued deliberate virtuous action, we can become people of strong character.

### ***Perseverance in the Struggle***

The next step we need to take in growing in virtue is persevering in the struggle. One of the great temptations of the enemy is to convince us that we will never be free of our sin. Or, similarly, that even if we do choose what is good, that we will never find happiness in it—that virtue will always be tedious, joyless, dull, and boring. But that is simply not the case. In fact, for the virtuous person, acting virtuously actually becomes joyful. As the Catechism says, the virtues “make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life” (CCC 1804). In times of struggle and difficulty, instead of giving up, we must recommit ourselves to the development of our character. Half-hearted efforts won’t do. Only by perseverance in the struggle will we gain the virtue necessary to love as Christ loves.

### ***Calling on God’s Grace***

Finally, our brokenness can only be restored by God’s grace. Christ is our only hope for overcoming sin. Therefore, we need to dedicate ourselves to calling on His grace to conquer our vices and gain virtue. We can do this in many ways. Here are a few to consider:

- ***Daily prayer:*** By praying each day, we recognize God’s presence in our lives. Instead of relying on ourselves, daily prayer allows Him to change our hearts.
- ***Confession:*** In the Sacrament of Confession, we not only receive the grace of God’s forgiveness, but we also receive additional spiritual strength to conquer our sins.
- ***Going to Mass:*** In the Eucharist, Jesus Christ says, “This is my body given for you.” By receiving Him in Holy Communion, He transforms us into being more like Him, giving us the ability to freely give ourselves in love to others like He does for us.

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*Do you believe that virtue is possible for you? What key next steps do you need to take to overcome your sins and grow in virtue?*

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## TAKE ACTION

Growth in virtue is truly possible with God's help. At the same time, it requires that you commit to a course of action. Take a moment and reflect on your most significant struggles in the areas of sin and vice. What might it take for you to grow in virtue and overcome your faults? Here are some things for you to consider:

- Accountability from a friend or mentor
- A renewed commitment to daily prayer
- More frequent confession and/or Mass attendance
- Reflect on what causes you to be tempted towards vice and consider how you might address those feelings, relationships, or situations
- Professional help from a counselor or spiritual director
- A daily examination of conscience to help you notice your patterns of behavior
- Resources to learn more about what the Church teaches about certain issues

Don't run away from the difficult battle that may be before you. The freedom to love is possible. Step forward in confidence that, by His grace, you can attain it.

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**DISCUSS**

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*In what virtue (chastity, sobriety, or excellence) do you need to grow the most? What would it take for you to gain freedom from your sins in this area? What assistance will you need to truly overcome your vice?*

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Diognetus, [https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\\_20010522\\_diogneto\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010522_diogneto_en.html)