



And if any one loves righteousness, her labors are virtues; for she teaches self-control and prudence, justice and courage; nothing in life is more profitable for men than these.

Wisdom 8:7

Christlike Character



Christlike Character

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The Purpose of Christlike Character

To lead like Jesus, we need more than techniques and people skills – we need virtue. This Bible study explores the Character of Christ through the four cardinal and three theological virtues. Along the way, we'll encounter various figures from Scripture that exemplify these virtues. We'll also discover why and how these character traits matter for our lives and form the heart of true leadership.



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Chapter 01

Jesus & True Leadership

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UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

He is one of the most influential people in history. From the beginning, he was talented and charismatic. His intelligence was second to none. His ability to strategize, accomplish his goals, and apply the best techniques, methods, and systems in pursuit of his mission was unmatched. He could persuade others and recruit them to be a part of his team with incredible effectiveness. He remained fully committed to achieving what he set out to do and didn't allow himself to be distracted by other things. And while not always perfectly successful, more often than not, his performance in pursuit of his goals was exceptional. It would not be incorrect to say that he has influenced billions of people in human history.

Who is this influential person? Who was it that had all these incredible gifts and talents and made such an impact on the world? It is the devil, Satan, the accuser, the adversary, the deceiver, the enemy of mankind.

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In today's world, leadership is often measured by a person's talents and abilities, their charisma and "people skills," their titles and positions, or their impact and influence. But just because someone possesses these qualities doesn't mean they are a good leader. At the heart of leadership is something much more important.

In the beginning, God made the world and mankind good. He designed everything in creation to bring about what was best for His people. He provided for their every need. He made a world full of order and great harmony that was meant to allow us to flourish as human beings. He knows who we are, what we are made for, and what is ultimately best for us—eternal life with Him. God Himself is the one true leader.

God also invites us to share in His leadership. He said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:28). He allowed Adam to till the soil and name the animals, sharing in His creative work. This brings us to the center of Christian leadership: participation with God in bringing about His good plan for the world. Indeed, "All true leadership is a participation in the leadership of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit."¹

¹ Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership, *True Leadership*, pp. 8-9.

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Without this foundation, leadership often devolves into mere worldly pursuits, self-aggrandizement, or worse. If we want to be great leaders, then before we consider our talents, our goals, or our influence, we need to be committed to what is good, to participating in the beautiful plan that God has for us.

Vision and Character

We often struggle to be great leaders because we are fallen creatures. Our minds are “conformed to this world” and not aligned with the “mind of Christ” (Rom 12:2, 1 Cor 2:16). We don’t readily see the world as Christ sees it, and often place value on pleasure, prestige, worldly success, ease, attention, efficiency, productivity, and comfort more than Christ does. And even when we do see things clearly, we can struggle to do it. Like St. Paul, we lament, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom 7:19). The good news for us is that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can be made new. Not only can we know the good, but we can desire it and choose it as well by acquiring virtue.

Virtue is “a habitual and firm disposition to do good,” that enables us to choose what is right consistently, promptly, easily, and with joy (CCC 1833). It allows us to not only perform good acts, but to give the very best of ourselves to God and

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others. Virtue leads us to the good life because it closes the gap between who we are today and who we know we are called to be. It directs us away from sin and toward the good. The goal of the virtuous life is to put our freedom to good use and become like God, loving as He loved, which leads to the happiness and joy that we desire most.

To be great leaders, we need vision and character, and there are two kinds of virtues that we need for this purpose, the theological and the cardinal. Both sets of virtues shape our vision and character, but there is a particular way that the theological virtues direct our vision and the cardinal virtues build our character. Let’s look at each.

Vision – The Theological Virtues

If we don’t know what life is for, what is most important, and what Christ values most, then we won’t be able to lead others well. We will be like “blind guides,” of whom Jesus says, “if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Mt 15:14). As leaders, if we hope to lead someone to a certain goal, do we know what the best goal is? Or do we understand how the smaller goals in life—a business or a family—fit into God’s larger purposes for each individual and community? Do we know the best means by which to achieve that goal? And do the right principles guide our decisions?

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Some aspects of leadership praised today might actually be despised by Christ and His example on the Cross. The world often seeks the praise of men: more likes and followers, more applause, and the satisfaction of worldly success. But Jesus lived differently. He embraced a hidden life for thirty years. Then, in His public ministry, He was misunderstood, rejected, and ultimately killed by the very people He came to serve.

Examine yourself. Are you willing to lead like Jesus? What do you value most in life? Are these the things that Christ values? Is that what you see in His example, especially in His passion and death on the cross, which is the true measure of our lives and our leadership? Do you have a vision that values patience, humility, generosity, sacrifice, and kindness? Are you convinced that the truth is worth suffering for, even when it is hidden, nobody notices, or it leads to criticism or rejection? Do you have wisdom to see the whole of life, perceiving what matters most, what is true, good, and beautiful? Do you give most of your attention to quantifiable technical, administrative, or procedural questions, or do you engage more with the deeper questions of life: Who are we? What does God want for us? How can we fulfill His good plan for our lives? If you are like most people, you need help to renew your vision.

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How can we ensure that we have the right vision, so that we can lead effectively? The answer is the theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. These virtues “relate directly to God” and are “infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life” (CCC 1812-1813). The theological virtues enable us to participate in God's divine life, draw us into a living relationship with the Holy Trinity, and are the foundation of the Christian life.

Faith elevates our intellect, so that we can see reality clearly. It allows us to value what Christ values, see what He sees, and live by same principles by which He lived. By faith we “believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us” (CCC 1814). This isn't merely accepting Catholic doctrine—though it includes that too—it's allowing our minds to be fully reshaped by Christ, so that we can see everything in a new, fuller light. Hope elevates our desires to a supernatural level enabling us to “desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (CCC 1817).

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And charity upholds and animates all the other virtues, enabling us to “love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (CCC 1822). Each of these virtues will be discussed further in future chapters.

Character – The Cardinal Virtues

But vision alone is insufficient. We also need strong moral character. If we don’t have character, the disharmony within us will prevent us from leading well. For example, we might make bad decisions because we want people to like us too much. Maybe we will gossip about people and tear them down because we want to feel important. Perhaps we won’t give the best of ourselves because we are lazy. Or maybe we will struggle to deny ourselves pleasure and comfort when good leadership requires it. In other words, we need character to act in accord with our vision. Without it, our vision will simply become a lofty ideal that we won’t be able to bring to fruition.

The cardinal virtues shape our moral character. They are “firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith” (CCC 1804). Cardinal comes from the word “cardo,” which means “hinge.” These virtues are the four habits on which the ability

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to live a moral life depends. They are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. **Wisdom 8:7** proclaims, “And if anyone loves righteousness, her labors are virtues; for she teaches self-control and prudence, justice and courage nothing in life is more profitable for mortals than these.”

Prudence perfects our intellect and “disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (CCC 1806). Justice perfects our will, driving us to give to God and others their due (CCC 1807). Fortitude perfects our desires, ensuring “firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of good” (CCC 1808). Temperance also perfects our desires, “moderat[ing] our attractions to pleasures and balance[ing]” our “use of created goods” (CCC 1809). We will discuss each of these virtues in more detail in future chapters.

The cardinal virtues can be achieved through human effort, strengthened by God’s grace. When we pursue these virtues in our everyday lives by asking for them in prayer, learning about them, practicing them, and striving to persevere in them, even when we struggle or fail, the Holy Spirit sustains us and transforms us into the people we desire to become. By growing in these virtues, we become people capable of doing the good and accomplishing what is right according to our Christian vision of the world.

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Jesus

Jesus had both perfect vision and character. He is our model of the theological and cardinal virtues. His clear vision often upended worldly wisdom: “the last will be first,” “blessed are the poor in spirit,” “seek first His kingdom,” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 5:3, 6:33, 20:16, 22:39). And not only did He teach these things, but He also had the character to act on His vision. He cared for the poor and lowly. He took the “form a servant” (Phil 2:7). And, ultimately, He gave His life for the good of others.

Then, He taught His apostles to lead like He did. Consider this episode with James and John:

James and John spent almost every day with Jesus, either seated at His feet learning about the kingdom of God or watching in amazement as He healed the sick, fed the five thousand, walked on water, and was transfigured before their eyes. But on one journey, James and John reveal that they don’t fully understand Jesus’s leadership yet. Boldly, they approach Jesus and ask, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mk 10:37). Although Jesus repeatedly predicted His own death, the two apostles still believed that Jesus would set up an earthly kingdom, defeat the Roman’s, and usher in a new age of glory for Israel. The two

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brothers were asking for elevated ranking, a place of honor in the kingdom as they perceived it.

But instead of responding directly, Jesus answers, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” (Mk 10:38). Then, He gathers the apostles together and clarifies what true leadership is all about. He points out that the rulers among the Gentiles “lord it over” others, and then firmly says, “[I]t shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (Mk 10:42–44). Jesus then points to His own example, how He “came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). By referencing His coming Passion, Jesus shows the apostles that the pinnacle of true leadership is laying down one’s life for the good of others.

Later, Jesus commissioned His apostles to imitate His example of servant leadership by washing their feet on the night of the Last Supper: “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:12–15).

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After His resurrection, the apostles went out and served just as Jesus had commanded, caring for others in love and preaching the Gospel with courage, in imitation of their master. Their outstanding lives of virtue became a bright, refreshing light, in middle of the corruption of the Roman empire. Pagans marveled at their lives, saying, “See...how they love one another!” Their leadership flowed from their vision and their character, shaped by the virtues they imitated in Christ Himself.

Application: Moral Authority

The saints are the best Christ-like leaders in history. People like St. Francis of Assisi brought about radical reform and renewal in the Church. Saints like St. Teresa of Calcutta challenged the world to uphold human dignity for all people, no matter their color, background, or economic status, and people followed them—even non-believers. But the saints were not great leaders primarily because of their gifts, talents, positions of authority, or because they used the best techniques. They were great leaders because they had moral authority.

Moral authority is the ability to lead others not by title or position, but by the way we live. But moral authority is more than simply practicing what we preach; it is a spiritual principle. As Christians, and especially as Christian leaders, we aren’t simply

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trying to do what is right—make good decisions, be kind, serve generously—as good as all that is. As Christian leaders, we want Christ to work in and through us. We want to say with St. Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). By serving like Christ, giving like Christ, and ultimately dying to ourselves for the sake of others in imitation of Christ, we aren’t merely giving of ourselves, we are allowing Him to work through us. We aren’t merely doing good things; we are becoming like Jesus. This is the leadership we are called to as Christians.

How can we begin to live in this way? What does it look like? First, it means making Christ the center of everything we do, committing ourselves to prayer, following His teachings, and receiving His grace in the sacraments. It means living honestly, humbly, and generously, inviting Christ into every corner of hearts, so that when others look at us, they will be able to see Him. If we do this, then we will be free to say, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

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So, what about you? Will you embrace your call to Christ-like leadership? The Lord is calling you to lead with the right vision and character from a place of moral authority. He is inviting you to take your place among the saints and build His kingdom. Over the course of this Bible study, take advantage of the opportunity in front of you. Study the virtues deeply, and let the Holy Spirit transform you, so that you can follow Christ's example, become more like Him, and lead like He did.

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DISCUSSION

Mark 10:35–44
Wisdom 8:7

Discussion guide for your Bible study

Please read aloud:

He is one of the most influential people in history. From the beginning, he was talented and charismatic. His intelligence was second to none. His ability to strategize, accomplish his goals, and apply the best techniques, methods, and systems in pursuit of his mission was unmatched. He could persuade others and recruit them to be a part of his team with incredible effectiveness. He remained fully committed to achieving what he set out to do and didn't allow himself to be distracted by other things. And while not always perfectly successful, more often than not, his performance in pursuit of his goals was exceptional. It would not be incorrect to say that he has influenced billions of people in human history.

01. Launching Question: Who do you think this person is? Who was it that had all these incredible gifts and talents and made such an impact on the world?

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Answer: It is the devil, Satan, the accuser, the adversary, the deceiver, the enemy of mankind.

02. Few would say that the Devil is a good leader. Yet it's hard to deny that he had many of the qualities that leadership is often measured by in today's world. If it's not merely these qualities, what is it that makes a good leader?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Draw out that leadership must also include leading others toward the good—ultimately to God and His plan for us—not merely “winning friends and influencing people.”

Please read aloud:

In today's world, leadership is often measured by a person's talents, titles, and ability to impact others. But just because someone possesses these qualities doesn't mean they are a good leader. At the heart of leadership is something much more important.

God is the one true leader. All true leadership, therefore, is a share in His own. When He created man, He said, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion... over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1:28). God invites man to participate in His leadership to bring about His good plan for the world.

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If we're wondering what a perfect leader looks like, we need to look no further than the incarnation. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, was the perfect leader. By studying his example, we can learn how to participate in God's leadership, bringing about His good plan in the world.

Let's take a moment to study Christ's leadership.

Read Mark 10:35–44

03. What do James and John ask of Jesus? What sort of leader are they imagining that Jesus is going to become?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: James and John ask Jesus for positions of power and influence in His Kingdom. They still seem to believe that Jesus is on the brink of establishing a worldly kingdom, despite Jesus' repeated predictions of his own suffering and death.

04. How does Jesus respond? What does his answer reveal about leadership in the Kingdom of God?

Allow the group to discuss.

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Answer: Jesus answers, "You do not know what you are asking" (Mk 10:38) before elaborating on the differences between "Gentile" leadership and the qualities of leadership proper to a disciple, among them the imitation of Christ (drinking His "cup," even to the point of laying down one's life for another) and humble service.

05. Christ's leadership consists in serving others and laying down his own life out of love. How does this vision of leadership clash with James and John's expectations? How might it clash with certain modern ideas of what leadership looks like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible answers: While James and John are expecting personal advantages and positions in the Kingdom, Jesus offers them the Cross with all its suffering, humiliation, and apparent failure. This paradigm of selfless service and sacrifice often clashes with a worldly ideal of leadership—filled with likes, followers, applause, and satisfaction in worldly success.

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Please read aloud:

While it may be easy to believe that we value Christ's leadership style over predominant modes of leadership, it can be helpful to pause and examine ourselves. Consider:

- Do you consistently make small decisions in light of your ultimate goal, informed by the Gospel?
- What do you value most in life? Are these the things that Christ values?
- Have you found yourself suffering to lead others well, as Christ does?
- Do you value patience, humility, generosity, and sacrifice over efficiency, results, notoriety, and success?
- Do you consistently consider the deeper questions of life: Who are we? Who is God? What does God desire for us? How can we fulfill His plan for our lives?

If you're like most people, you need help renewing your vision of leadership according to the mind of Christ.

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06. In what ways do you value Christ's vision of leadership over that of the world? In what ways does your idea of leadership need to be conformed to Christ's?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

So how are we to go about conforming our leadership to that of Christ's? For this, we will need what's called "virtue." The virtues give us both the vision and the character we need to be Christlike leaders.

Virtue is "a habitual and firm disposition to do good" (CCC 1833). It enables us to choose what is right consistently, promptly, easily, and with joy. The goal of the virtuous life is to put our freedom to good use and become like God, loving as He loved, which leads to happiness and joy.

There are two kinds of virtues we will be studying today, the "theological" virtues and the "cardinal" virtues. Though both shape our vision and character, there is a particular way in which the theological virtues shape our vision and the cardinal virtues form our character.

We'll start by looking at the theological virtues in the Catechism and consider how they shape our vision.

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Read Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 1812–1813:

The human virtues are rooted in the theological virtues, which adapt man's faculties for participation in the divine nature: for the theological virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object.

The theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being. There are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity.

07. What does the Catechism tell us about the theological virtues? How would you describe faith, hope, and love?

Note to the leader: Consider taking them one at a time. Draw out the following definitions without spending too much time on the topic.

- **Faith** elevates our intellect so that we can see reality clearly. By faith we “believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us” (CCC 1814). This

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isn't merely accepting Catholic doctrine—though it includes that too—it's allowing our minds to be fully reshaped by Christ, so that we can see everything in a new, fuller light.

- **Hope** elevates our desires to a supernatural level, enabling us to “desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (CCC 1817).
 - **Charity** perfects our will, upholding and animating all the other virtues, enabling us to “love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (CCC 1822).
08. How do the theological virtues – faith, hope, and charity – give Christian leaders the proper vision? Why are they necessary for leading well?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible Answers: The theological virtues allow us to see clearly who we are and where we are going. Faith allows us to see reality clearly, believing in God and all that God has revealed to us. Hope gives us confidence that the journey is not in vain—

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we really can arrive at perfect and eternal beatitude with God forever in heaven and bring others with us. Finally, charity animates all our activities and prayers, grounding them in love of God and love of neighbor.

Please read aloud:

Without the theological virtues, we won't know what life is truly for, what is most important, or what Christ values most. But vision alone is insufficient. We also need character to act in accord with that vision. The next set of virtues that we'll look at are known as the "cardinal" virtues, which form our character.

Read Wisdom 8:7**Please read aloud:**

Cardinal comes from the word "cardo," which means "hinge." Traditionally, these are the virtues on which every other moral virtue "hinges." The ability to live a moral life depends on mastering them.

09. What are the four cardinal Virtues? How would you define each of these virtues?

Note to the leader: Consider taking them one at a time. Draw out the following definitions without spending too much time on the topic.

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Answer:

- Prudence is "right reason in action," it "disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it" (CCC 1806).
- Justice perfects our will, driving us to give to God and others their due (CCC 1807).
- Temperance (or Self-Control) perfects our desires, "moderat[ing] our attractions to pleasures and balance[ing]" our "use of created goods" (CCC 1809).
- Fortitude (or courage) also perfects our desires, ensuring "firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of good" (CCC 1808).

10. How do the cardinal virtues form our character as Christian leaders? What would it look like if we had a proper vision (ie. faith, hope, and love) but lacked prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude?

Allow the group to discuss.

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Possible Answers: A leader that has vision but lacks character would know who he is and where to lead others, but his character would prevent him from reaching the destination. In difficult moments, he might fail in fortitude, turning away from the right path out of fear or weakness. Or perhaps this leader, because he lacks prudence, attempts to pursue some real good but with the wrong methods, priorities, or timing, preventing the effort from bearing real fruit. Or perhaps he may fail to give the best of himself to those he serves because he is lazy and intemperate in his desire for rest, ease, and comfort.

Please read aloud:

We've discussed the need for virtue in Christian leadership and discussed both the theological and cardinal virtues, which are the foundations of a virtuous life. But why do these virtues make us effective Christlike leaders? The answer lies in the lives of the saints.

Briefly share 1-2 of your favorite examples of saints and the impact they had on the Church and world.

The saints are the best Christ-like leaders in history. People followed them—often even non-believers. But the saints were not great leaders primarily because of their gifts, talents, or positions of authority. They were great

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leaders because they had moral authority, the ability to lead others simply by the way we live.

11. Have you ever been inspired by someone and desired to follow or learn from them because of the way they live? What were they like? What virtues did they possess?

Allow the group to discuss. Draw out that the reason that these people are inspiring is because they have moral authority.

12. What about you? Do you think you have moral authority? If not, what virtues might you need to grow in so that you can lead others in Christlike fashion?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Moral authority is more than simply practicing what we preach; it is a spiritual principle. As Christians, and especially as Christian leaders, we aren't merely trying to do what is right - we want Christ to live in us. We want to say with St. Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

This means making Christ the center of everything we do, committing ourselves to prayer, following His teachings, and receiving

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His grace in the sacraments. It means living honestly, humbly, and generously, inviting Christ into every corner of hearts, so that when others look at us, they will be able to see Him.

Over the course of this Bible study, take advantage of the opportunity in front of you. We'll be learning about each of the cardinal and theological virtues in more depth, examining them one at a time through various biblical characters. In learning about these virtues, we'll be better equipped to become the Christlike leaders we were meant to be.

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Chapter 02

Esther & Prudence

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UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Picture this: it all depends on you.

You find yourself in the confidence of a powerful person who has the intention and ability to destroy all the people you love most—your family, closest friends, and community. He doesn't desire to harm you, but he doesn't know you are connected to the people he's about to destroy. What would happen to you if he knew your roots? If you speak out, you expose yourself as an outsider. But if you stay silent, keeping yourself safe, you'll guarantee the loss of all those you love. How would you act? What would you do?

This is exactly what happened to Queen Esther in the Old Testament. In an unexpected turn of events, Queen Esther finds herself in an impossible situation. She is faced with a choice. If she chooses one course of action, she could lose everything, including her life. If she chooses another, she will live knowing she was complicit in the destruction of her people. The stakes couldn't be higher.

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What would you do? How would you make such a decision?

Our lives, like Esther's, are full of difficult choices: How should I approach this conversation? What career path should I pursue? Which vocation should I choose? As followers of Jesus Christ, we want to choose what is best, to live lives of excellence, giving the best of ourselves to God and others. To do that, however, requires an incredible, though often misunderstood virtue, prudence.

Esther needed prudence in this key moment—her life and the lives of others depended on it. And because she was prudent, she became a hero. In this Bible study, we will explore prudence, learn how we can grow in it, and discover how it enables us to live excellently in imitation of Jesus Christ. Let's dive into Esther's story.¹

Esther's Story Unfolds

Imagine being in Esther's shoes.

She is a Jew in exile. Over seventy years ago, a foreign people, the Babylonians, invaded Jerusalem. They destroyed the city and took the

¹ Note that different editions of the Bible number Esther differently. This text follows the RSVCE numbering.

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Jewish people away into captivity. Since then, the Jews lived as strangers in a strange land, mourning the loss of their homes and the Temple.

Then, things get worse. A second foreign power, the Persians, overcome the Babylonians. Now the Jewish people are second-class citizens under yet another dangerous enemy. Some Jews were permitted to go back to Jerusalem, but many didn't go; it was simply too dangerous.

Life under the Persians was difficult. It was not safe for the Jews to practice their faith or worship their God publicly.² Many, like Esther and her cousin Mordecai, remained faithful to the Jewish law by worshipping God in secret.

Esther isn't exactly well-positioned to respond to these challenges, either. She was born in captivity and orphaned in her youth. Mordecai adopted her and raised her as his own (Es 2:7). In many ways, she is an unlikely hero. But God has great plans for her.

The Book of Esther begins in dramatic fashion (Es 2:1-18). The King of Persia³ dismisses his queen after she disobeys him in public. To find a suitable replacement, he hosts a beauty contest and calls upon beautiful virgins from across his empire. Esther is selected by the king and is named the

² Bergsma, John, and Pitre, Brant. *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 50.

³ King Ahasuerus, pronounced uh-haz-yoo-eer-uhs

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new queen. She now finds herself in a high-ranking position, behind enemy lines, married to a king who very much wants to be obeyed and respected.

Then, tragedy strikes. The villain of the story, Haman, a high-ranking member in the king's court and an enemy of the Jewish people, becomes increasingly hostile. Every day as he enters and exits the court, he expects to be paid homage (Es 3:5). But Mordecai refuses. He must remain faithful to his God and his faith. He will not bow in obeisance to his enemy.

Furious from Mordecai's refusals, Haman hatches a sinister plan. He convinces the king that the Jewish people are disrupting the kingdom and bribes him to issue an edict announcing a day for their destruction. Mordecai, Esther, and all the Jews are now in grave danger.

Desperate to stop this massacre, Mordecai exhorts Queen Esther to intervene. Initially, she refuses. Approaching the king without being summoned was considered a capital offense (Es 4:11). Esther could be killed—she knew what happened to the previous queen. But Mordecai insists, writing, "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place... And

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who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Es 4:13-14).

Now, Esther must choose. Will she risk her life to save her people? Or will she maintain silence to save her own life? After seeking counsel, Esther resolves to intervene, fully aware that she may lose her life as a result (Es 4:16). But she cannot simply barge into the king’s presence with her request. She must be more prudent than that.

First, she asks all the Jews in the city to fast with her for three days. Then, she adorns herself in beautiful attire and prepares to meet the king. Mustering her courage, she enters his presence, her heart “frozen with fear” (Es 15:5). But the king’s spirit softens when he sees Esther turn faint. He welcomes her, embraces her, and says, “Speak to me” (Es 15:12).

Now, Esther executes her plan. Seeking to win the king’s heart, she invites him to a banquet. This is incredibly shrewd. Before she makes her request, she demonstrates her respect for the king, and the king receives her offer eagerly. He even invites her to make a request of him. But Esther decides to secure the king’s favor by hosting another banquet. She tells the king she will make her request tomorrow. The king is pleased and eagerly accepts her offer.

At the second banquet, Esther makes her petition.

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Having won the king’s favor, she reveals her Jewish identity and pleads for her people, saying, “[I]f it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to be annihilated” (Es 7:3-4).

Shocked, the king cries out, “Who is he, and where is he, that would presume to do this?” (Es 7:5). Esther reveals that it is Haman. Enraged, the king orders Haman to be hanged. He also revokes his edict concerning the Jews, not only sparing them from death but also giving them permission to defend themselves from their foes.

Esther’s prudence saved her life and the lives of all her people.

Prudence

Esther’s heroism has everything to do with her commitment to the virtue of prudence. What is prudence?

Prudence is “right reason in action.” What does this mean? Well, fundamentally, it means that to be prudent, we must think well and act well. Prudence helps us apply our right reason (our thinking) to practical things (our actions).⁴ Unfortunately,

⁴Prudence is one of the four cardinal virtues. The Catechism defines prudence as “the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and choose the right means of achieving it” (1806).

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prudence is commonly thought of as being overly cautious or slow to act, but in truth, it is quite different. It is the ability to choose what is truly best.

We can break down prudence into parts to help us easily understand how to practice it. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, there are three parts to every prudent act.⁵ They are counsel, judgment, and action. Taking a look at these parts can help us more easily identify where we can (or maybe need to) grow. Let's look at each:

- **Counsel:** First, we must know what is good in order to do it. This first step of prudence encourages us to take the time to discover what is good and what potential options might achieve that good. This often requires that we ask for the insight and wisdom of others, especially when we are young. We frequently have blind spots in our lives about what is best for us or how to achieve it; to grow in prudence, we should seek the counsel of those wiser than us. Thus, this first step is called "counsel". We also grow naturally in this part of prudence by acting and failing. Experience is a great teacher, and we will grow in prudence as we learn from our past, especially our mistakes!

⁵See *Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Second Part, Q. 47

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- **Judgment:** We cannot theorize or discern forever. After thinking through what is good and the options available to us to achieve it, we must make a firm decision about which path is the best choice at this moment. Judgment is our second step in acting prudently. After we've received counsel and deliberated about the possible paths we can choose, we move on to decision-making. This requires both an act of the intellect—in the selecting of our next steps—and of the will—in the firm resolution to pursue that path.
- **Action:** Finally, we must follow through with our intentions! Action helps us do the good. It is the part of prudence where we actually do the thing we've determined is most in line with what is truly good. Prudent people are not overly cautious or slow to act; they do not wait around and delay making choices about their actions. They act confidently and swiftly. After considering the circumstances, they do not delay in pursuing the good. After they have made a choice, they follow through.

Esther moves through all three aspects of prudence as she wrestles through the best course of action:

- First, she gets counsel from Mordecai, and though she at first does not want to abide

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by it, eventually she consents, realizing that her older, wiser cousin can see what she does not: she is unlikely to escape the harm that will be done to her people, even if she tries to protect herself.

- Next, we can see her move from a place of fear and hesitancy to decisive judgment. She assents to what is truly good, taking advantage of her circumstances for the sake of saving the lives of those she loves, despite the potential harm to herself.
- Lastly, we see Esther overcoming her fear and actually doing what she intends. After having asked for the prayers of her people, beseeching God through them for her success and their salvation, she says, “If I perish, I perish” (Es 4:16). This is a clear sign of her commitment to do what is good. Ultimately, we read that she does “everything” Mordecai asks of her.

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What about us? Are we living all three of these aspects of prudence? Counsel: Are we thinking rightly about things and seeking answers from trusted sources or are we just “going with our gut”? Judgment: Are we making clear resolutions and firm decisions or are we half-heartedly remaining on the fence? Action: Are we doing what we have resolved to do or are we only sort of doing it? If we want to be prudent, then we need all three.

Application: Excellence

Esther’s prudence also leads to something else: excellence. Excellence is one of the “Big Three” virtues in FOCUS. It is the habit by which we give the best of ourselves to our vocations and daily responsibilities while entrusting the rest to God.

Esther risked being killed for approaching the king unsummoned. But she prudently assessed that the greater good was the salvation of her people—their destiny hinged on her decision! Therefore, she chose what was most prudent, risking her own life for them and entrusting the outcome to God’s

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providence. Because of this, Esther is remembered as a genuinely excellent heroine in Scripture. Indeed, people who live excellence are the heroes we admire, the people we want to imitate.

Isn't this the kind of excellence we want in our lives also? Deep down, don't we want to be remembered as people who loved God and others deeply? To be people who chose what was good, despite the challenges, and gave our all to our relationships, our daily responsibilities, and mostly importantly, to Christ? And don't we desire to do more than merely scrape by, wasting our lives with excessive scrolling, shopping, or gaming? We want the great life that Christ promises!

Rather than being stuffy or dull, prudence makes this kind of heroic, excellent living possible. By cultivating the habit of seeing what is truly good, discerning the best path to achieve it, and actually doing what is good (prudence), we will become capable of giving the best of ourselves to God and others (excellence). Indeed, prudence makes excellence possible.

Theologian Peter Kreeft once wrote, "In heaven, I think, one of the things we will praise and thank God the most for is how wildly and wonderfully and dangerously he put the driving wheel of our

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life into our hands."⁶ Each day, we stand at a crossroads. The goings-on in our daily lives require us to decide which way to turn. Sometimes, the choices that lie before us are ordinary: Should I say what's on my mind? Should I ask for help? Should I turn left or right? And sometimes, the choices may be extraordinary: Should I risk my reputation, my security, or my life for the sake of what is good and true? Should I change my career to make more time for Christ and His mission? Should I marry this person? Whether it is in the ordinary or the extraordinary, we need prudence to think and act excellently.

In this study, let us learn how to live true excellence. Let's not succumb to the temptation to take the easy way out. Instead, like Esther, let's prudently pursue the excellence to which God calls us so that we can grow in Christlike character.

⁶Kreeft, Peter. Discernment: *Does God have one right choice for me in each decision I make?* The Coming Home Network International. Accessed at <https://chnetwork.org/2011/10/31/discernment-by-peter-kreeft/> August 6, 2026.

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DISCUSSION

RSVCE:
 Esther 2:1-11, 15-18
 Esther 3:1-6, 8-11
 Esther 4:1-17
 Esther 14
 Esther 15:1-16, 5:3-5 and
 7:1-10

NAB:
 Esther 2:1-11, 15-18
 Esther 3:1-6, 8-11
 Esther 4:1-17
 C:12-30
 Esther D:1-16, 5:3-5 and
 7:1-10

Discussion guide for your Bible study

Note to the Leader: Different Bible translations number Esther passages differently. Passages for the RSVCE and NAB are given in this study.

01. Launching Question: What qualities come to mind when you think of a “hero”? Who do you consider a hero and why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Many qualities contribute to a heroic character and heroic actions. One quality we’re going to dive into today is the virtue of prudence. Now, at first, prudence may not sound at all like it has anything to do with heroism. However, we will find in our discussion that heroic action depends on prudence. But first, let’s ask: what’s prudence?

Share a brief introduction to the virtue of prudence (doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time). Refer to CCC 1806.

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Please read aloud:

This study explores what prudence is, how we can grow in it, and how it enables us to live excellently in imitation of Jesus. To accomplish this, we’ll turn our attention to the Book of Esther and witness her struggle but ultimate success as she makes a prudent decision with consequential effects.

For context, Esther is a Jew in exile under Persian rule. Life under the Persians was difficult. It was not safe for the Jews to practice their faith or worship their God publicly.¹ Esther was born in captivity, orphaned in her youth, and adopted by her cousin Mordecai. In many ways, she is an unlikely hero. But God has great plans for her. We enter the story immediately after the King of Persia (Ahasuerus²) dismisses his queen (Vashti) after she disobeys him in public.

Read Esther 2:1-11, 15-18 (RSVCE and NAB)

02. Write your own observation question about the situation Esther finds herself in. You may also write an understanding question to discuss what this situation might mean for her.

Allow the group to discuss.

¹ Bergsma, John and Pitre, Brant, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 50.

² King Ahasuerus, pronounced uh-haz-yoo-eer-uhs

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Answers may include: Esther is selected by the king and named the new queen. She now finds herself in a high-ranking position, behind enemy lines, married to a king who demands strict respect and obedience.

03. Why might Mordecai have charged Esther not to share “her kindred or her people” with the King, or, in other words, that she is a Jew?

Answer: Mordecai was asking her to protect herself.

04. Would you say that concealing her identity is prudent or imprudent? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Many answers are welcome. Whether a specific action is prudent often depends on many variables. One action done a certain way can be prudent, but the same action done a different way may be imprudent. In Esther’s case, an argument for either prudence or imprudence can be made.

Read Esther 3:1–6, 8–11 (RSVCE and NAB)

05. In this passage, the villain of the story,

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Haman, a high-ranking member in the king’s court and an enemy of the Jewish people, becomes increasingly hostile. What does Haman seek to do? How might this affect Esther, the new queen?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Haman seeks to have all the Jews destroyed because they are not paying him the homage he demands. Esther is now in a precarious situation. Should she reveal her identity in an attempt to save her people? Or should she remain silent to preserve her own life?

06. We may never face dire circumstances like Esther and Mordecai did. But we will certainly face difficulties of many kinds. Have you ever found yourself in a difficult or seemingly impossible situation? How did you navigate it?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Haman’s plan to eradicate the Jewish people continues to move forward. He offers the king a great sum of money to persuade him to issue a letter calling for their destruction. Let’s continue the story as Mordecai and Esther learn of this horrible news.

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Read Esther 4:1-17 RSVCE and NAB

The virtue of prudence has three essential parts: counsel, judgement, and action. By counsel, we seek to discover what is best and the right means of achieving it. By judgment, we decide what to do. And by action, we carry out our decision.

07. How does Esther exercise counsel and judgment (note: action will come later)? What good does she seek, and what means does she judge to be best to achieve it? What factors must she consider in her decision?

Answer: Esther recognizes the predicament of her people and their need to be freed from this unjust decree. She also knows that approaching the king could lead to her death. Initially, she refuses to approach the king. But after receiving counsel from Mordecai, she resolves to approach the king, even if it means she might die.

08. How does Mordecai's counsel help Esther make her decision?

Answer: Esther realizes that her older, wiser cousin can see what she does not: she cannot escape the harm that will be done to her people, even if she tries to protect herself. He counsels her, saying,

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“Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” emphasizing that she may be uniquely situated and therefore called in her particular circumstances to act on behalf of her people.

09. We can often be tempted to make decisions without seeking counsel. Why is it important for us to think rightly about our lives and get good advice before making important decisions?

Allow the group to discuss

Optional: Read Esther's prayer (Esther 14 RSVCE or C:12-30 NAB) to see how she clearly struggled with intense fear but ultimately entrusted herself to God.

10. “And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” This statement could be said of each of you, each Christian, and each person alive today. You've been made for such a time as this, and the trajectory of our lives (and our character) hinges upon the decisions we make every day. What decisions have you made, if any, that altered the trajectory of your life? What missed opportunities may you have let pass you by because, like Esther, you may have been too scared of the consequences?

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Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Seeking good counsel and making firm decisions to do what is good are essential for living the virtue of prudence. At the same time, we must also follow through with our intended actions. Let's see how Esther follows through with her decision to intercede on behalf of her people.

Read Esther 15:1-16, 5:3-5 and 7:1-10 RSVCE (or Esther D:1-16, 5:3-5 and 7:1-10 NAB)

11. How does Esther complete the third aspect of prudence: action? How is she prudent, even in the way she takes action?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Esther performs the action that she determined was best. But she doesn't rush into the decision. She is careful to win over the king's favor first. She has people praying for her. And she makes her request to the king when the right moment is at hand. She not only does the right thing, she also does it in the right way at the right time.

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12. Prudence is sometimes misunderstood as being overly cautious or tentative. How does Esther's decision show us that prudence can also mean taking bold action to achieve what is good?

Answer: In Esther's story, prudence means making the heroic decision to risk her life for the sake of her people. Prudent people act swiftly after having come to a decision point. They are careful in their deliberation and humble in receiving counsel, but they do not stay in this stage forever; they act!

13. Esther's prudence allowed her to give the very best of herself to God and others. The name for giving of ourselves in this way is called excellence. We often want to do good things for others, but we also can struggle to do so. How can growing in prudence help us become more excellent? How does prudence help us give the best of ourselves to God and others?

Allow the group to discuss.

14. Write an application question that invites your participants to consider where in their lives they most need to grow in prudence.



Chapter 03

Tobit & Justice

Understanding / For your preparation as a leader / Page 64 - 74
Discussion / To use with your group / Page 78 - 87

UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Among the Israelites in Nineveh, Tobit was alone. He was an exile, a stranger in a strange land filled with foreign people. Even his fellow Israelites had deserted their duty to honor God's laws for the sake of blending into a pagan society.

Tobit's life could have been much easier had he done the same. He could have been more popular and had more material possessions. But easy living required a sacrifice of integrity, infidelity to God, and abandonment of the Jewish law.

What would you do if you were Tobit? Would you stay faithful to God even if no one was doing it with you? Would you follow the trends of culture out of fear or desire for acceptance? What happens when duty requires you to go against the masses, possibly sacrificing friends, status, wealth, or more?

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As we study Tobit's story, we will learn that faithfulness to God often comes with a cost. But Tobit was driven by something much deeper and stronger than a desire for acceptance. Tobit had a strong sense of justice, a virtue that enabled him to be devoted both to God and his neighbor, consistently giving each what they are owed.

Most of us associate the concept of justice with the legal field, or the current battle for social justice playing out in society. The virtue of justice, however, is not merely about what we are owed; it is primarily about what we owe to others. When lived well, the virtue of justice empowers us to become people of integrity and character capable of bringing goodness into a broken world through righteous living and works of mercy. Let's look at Tobit's story, which challenges us to live justly, even in an unjust world.

Tobit

It had been almost 300 years since the reign of King David, and the kingdom of Israel knew almost nothing but division and destruction. As Israel devolved into chaos, Tobit's tribe abandoned God.

As a young man, Tobit witnesses his relatives slide into idolatry, pagan sacrifices, sexual promiscuity, and worse. But Tobit remains faithful to God. He continues to travel to Jerusalem

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to celebrate holy days, offer tithes, and make sacrifices to God. Unlike his kinsman, Tobit generously offers alms to orphans and widows. Even when he is forced to leave his homeland to dwell in the alluring, decadent, pagan culture of Nineveh, Tobit's fidelity to God never waivers.

When his family prepares pagan food, Tobit abstains. When he learns his cousin is in need, Tobit doesn't hesitate to make an arduous journey to another province to help. He offers the food off his table and clothing off his back to care for the poor. In his most courageous act, Tobit chooses to bury the dead against the command of the Assyrian King, who murdered Israelites and left their bodies unburied as a sign of humiliation and terror. But Tobit, obedient to God's law, secretly buries them, aware that, if he gets caught, the king will make sure he joins the dead outside the city gates.

Eventually, however, the king finds out and sets out to kill him. Tobit flees while the government confiscates all his property, his entire livelihood. Imagine how Tobit must have felt. While his relatives live in comfort, he is now on the run, away from his family, and stripped of all he owns. How easy it would have been for him to reject God or compromise with the culture around him. Still, he endures, and God provides. A new king rises to power, and Tobit returns to

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his home with nothing but his wife and child. Together, they begin to rebuild their lives.

Throughout his story, Tobit remains faithful to what is most important, acting justly toward God and neighbor, and teaching others to do the same. Even when God seems distant, he instructs his son Tobiah to, "Revere the Lord all your days...and refuse to sin or to transgress his commandments. Live uprightly all the days of your life, and do not walk in the ways of wrongdoing; for those who act in accordance with truth will prosper in all their activities. To all those who practice righteousness" (4:5-6).

Things eventually turn out well for Tobit, but the road that led to such blessings was difficult. Yet, Tobit's focus was never primarily on his own sufferings, but on fulfilling his duties to God and man. This is what makes him a model of justice for us.

Justice

Justice is rendering to another what is rightly owed. It is "the moral virtue that consists of the constant and firm will to give [our] due to God and neighbor" (CCC 1807).

To understand the virtue of justice and how we are called to live it, we must first understand who God is and how he created the world. Because when we

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live justice, we align ourselves more closely with God's original vision of the world and how it was made. This brings about peace, righteousness, and human flourishing. But how do we know what we owe to other people, and how do we practically act with justice? St. Thomas Aquinas taught that justice can be separated into two main categories: what we owe God and what we owe our neighbor.

What we owe God:

St. Thomas Aquinas called justice toward God, the "virtue of religion" (CCC 1807). When we practice the virtue of religion, we give worship to God because He is God and He deserves it.

God is the Creator and ultimate End of the universe. He is the source of all things, and we are the undeserved recipients of His many blessings. When we practice the virtue of religion, we live according to these truths by making Him the center of our lives through prayer and devotion as well as participating in the sacraments.

But how often do we invert this ordering and focus our attention on what we think God "owes" us,

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rather than what we owe Him? If we are honest, we might find that we are more interested in God approving of our behavior, making our lives easier, and fulfilling our worldly desires, than we are in simply living in relationship with Him each day and loving and serving Him by giving Him what is His due: our worship, our devotion, our hearts. Of course, we have very real needs that we can bring to God in prayer, but are we also approaching Him to honor and revere Him for Who He is and not simply what we hope He might do for us?

What we owe our neighbor:

Jesus tells us that the two greatest commands are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we truly love God and want to worship Him, then we must also love others and give them their due.

But what exactly do we owe others? In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus offers us a foundational understanding of justice, "do unto others what you would have them do unto you" (Lk 6:31). We are called to treat others the way we want to be treated. We are called to treat others with the dignity they deserve as beloved men and women made in the image and likeness of God.

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Justice impacts all our relationships. Here are a few of the many things we can consider when it comes to living justly with others:

- Respecting and honoring others, even if we disagree with them, instead of disrespecting or degrading them
- Expressing gratitude to those who serve us in various ways, instead of taking the people in our lives for granted
- Speaking kindly and honestly, instead of engaging in lies, critical or complaining speech, or gossip
- Honoring our commitments, instead of breaking our word, our promises, or neglecting our responsibilities
- Working with integrity, instead of stealing time or doing the bare minimum
- Giving alms and caring for the poor and suffering, instead of neglecting our duty to serve those in need
- Paying fair wages and charging fair prices instead of scamming employees or customers

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When we consider these examples, we realize that being just toward our neighbor is a high calling. Living the virtue of justice means becoming people who act selflessly towards other people and uphold their human dignity. It requires us to tell the truth and speak justly. It means working with integrity, honoring others in our job, our schoolwork, or in our business. Living the golden rule may seem simple, but a deeper look at this concept likely reveals many opportunities for us to grow.

Tobit teaches us how to live this way. His life revolves around fulfilling his duty to God and neighbor. Even as Tobit introduces himself to us, he reveals that he is a man who boldly embodies the virtue of religion (Tobit 1:3). He understands who God is and what He has done for His people. Because Tobit remembers God with all His heart, he remains faithful to Him through hardships. He keeps God's law, travels far to celebrate feasts and offer sacrifices. He abstains from foods and practices that go against God's commands and continues to stay steadfast in his faith when he experiences repeated suffering and tragedies.

Tobit has given himself over to God's ways so completely that his love for Him spills over into the way he treats others. He acts justly toward his neighbors, but his generosity moves beyond mere duty, and overflows into love. The Church

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has a name for the kind of love Tobit gave to his neighbors: the corporal works of mercy.

Application: Works of Mercy

The Church recognizes that there are circumstances and environments where justice is lacking. There, mercy fills the gaps. “Mercy is not the opposite of justice. Rather, it should be thought of as restoring justice and right order to people’s situations and souls when they have become wrong and disordered.”¹ We can think of mercy as “as righting wrong, of lifting up those who have fallen, ever restoring all those in society (as much as is possible) to the place they should be, were the world not fallen.”²

In these cases, the Church calls us to love our neighbor by living what are called “the works of mercy.” When we fulfill them, we make a gift of ourselves to others by meeting their needs and ensuring that they are known, loved, and cared for.

Consistently throughout the Scriptures, we see that God cares deeply for the poor (Is 29:19, Prov 14:31, Ps 34:6). The corporal works of mercy specifically aim to take care of some of the most fundamental material needs of others. They are “feeding the

¹ Moloney, Daniel. *Mercy: What Every Catholic Should Know*. Augustine Institute - Ignatius Press, 2020, p. 167.

² Ibid.

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hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God” (CCC 2447).

The works of mercy flow from our love of God, but they also help to continue to establish justice in our communities. We may not be able to fix all aspects of a fallen world, only God can perform such a miracle. Still, He invites us to play a role in bringing about His kingdom on earth through daily acts of justice and mercy. When we live justice well, fulfilling our duties toward God and others, or performing works of mercy, we participate in God’s plan for restoration. Even if we are doing it alone and can’t always see the fruit of our efforts, we can trust that God is working through our simple actions to bring justice into an unjust world.

Tobit lived the works of mercy daily. He gave money to the poor, offered his own bread and clothing to those in need, cared for the orphans and the widows, and buried the dead. When he did these things, he went beyond the requirements of justice and performed the works of mercy that are so close to God’s heart.

Jesus reminds us that when we perform the works of mercy for “the least of these my brethren,” we

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are giving that same kindness to Jesus Himself (Mt 25:40). Whatever we do to them—or do not do to them—is ultimately what we do to Him.

How many of us can say that we deeply yearn to give God His due, and care for our neighbor? We might vaguely care about living in a just society, but many of us act in self-centered ways focused on what we want and what is best for us. Tobit's story invites us to consider true justice. Are we willing to stay faithful to God when we are the only ones who remember Him? Are we willing to practice the works of mercy, regardless of our own circumstances? Tobit pursued justice regardless of the cost, and he challenges us to become the kind of people who do that same.

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DISCUSSION

Tobit 1:3–12
 Tobit 1:16–18
 Tobit 1:19–20
 Tobit 4:5–11
 Tobit 4:21

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. Launching Question: Have you ever been in a circumstance you felt was unjust or unfair? What was it and how did it make you feel?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

It makes sense that we long for justice. God created the world in justice that reflects His own perfection. Though sin entered the world and disrupted that harmony, it is the virtue of justice that empowers us to become people capable of bringing goodness into a broken world.

Share a brief introduction to the virtue of justice (giving our due to God and neighbor); explain that the virtue of justice is more than a legal term or a battle for “social justice” as we often hear about. Refer to CCC 1807.

Please read aloud:

Most of us are quick to call for justice when

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we have been wronged or feel we are owed something. That’s easy. But how often do we see justice as something we owe to others—duties towards God and neighbor? Today, we are going to explore the story of a man named Tobit to learn from his example of a just life.

To understand the context of Tobit’s story, here is a little background: It had been almost 300 years since the reign of King David, and the kingdom of Israel knew almost nothing but division and destruction. As Israel devolved into chaos, Tobit’s tribe abandoned God. As a young man, Tobit witnesses his relatives slide into idolatry, pagan sacrifices, sexual promiscuity, and worse. But Tobit remains faithful to God.

Read Tobit 1:3–12

02. How does Tobit “give his due” to God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Tobit continues to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate holy days, offer tithes, and make sacrifices to God; loving and serving Him as He asks. Significantly, Tobit gives God a prime place in his thoughts as he “remembered God with all his heart.”

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Please read aloud:

St. Thomas Aquinas called justice toward God the “virtue of religion.” When we practice the virtue of religion, we give God what He deserves because He is God: worship, devotion, obedience, etc.

But how often do we invert this ordering and focus our attention on what we think God “owes” us, rather than what we owe Him? If we are honest, we might find we are more interested in God approving of our behavior, making our lives easier, and fulfilling our worldly desires, than we are in giving Him what is His due: our worship, our devotion, our hearts.

03. Does Tobit seem more concerned about his own problems or giving to God what he deserves because He is God? Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: While engaging in works of worship or charity, Tobit is unmotivated by personal interest or gain. He simply wants to give God His due, avoiding complaint or asking for anything in return.

04. Tobit is an outstanding model of the virtue of religion, especially considering his circumstances. What are some of the ways his friends, family and other

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circumstances make loving God particularly difficult?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Everything around Tobit—the environment, the people, the culture—encourages him to forget God. Examples include: his abandonment as an orphan (1:8); the whole of his family forsaking God to practice idolatry (1:4–5); his capture and exile into a foreign pagan nation (1:10); and all his friends and family eating forbidden pagan food (1:10).

05. Tobit persisted in faithfulness alone, without the support of his friends and family. How do you personally tend to respond when everyone around you is acting unfaithfully?

Allow the group to discuss.

It’s clear that Tobit is a man capable of rising above his circumstances. He gives God what He is due, even if no one else is willing to join him. But let’s discuss how Tobit treats others, especially the people that make faithful living so difficult for him.

Read Tobit 1:16–18

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06. What are some of the ways that Tobit serves his brethren?

Answer: Tobit feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and, at the risk of his life, buries the dead.

07. We've discussed what it means to treat God justly. What do you think it means to treat others justly? Why do you think Tobit continued to treat others justly, even when they weren't just toward him?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Jesus teaches us that the two greatest commands are to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. If we love God and want to worship Him, then we must also love others and give them their due: "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you" (Lk 6:31). Most of us have heard this before, but it is easier said than done. Some of its requirements are:

Note to the leader: Optionally pull out a whiteboard and list out the following (feel free to abbreviate), encouraging your group to help you add to the list.

- Respecting and honoring others instead of disrespecting or degrading them

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- Speaking kindly and honestly instead of engaging in lies and gossip
 - Honoring commitments instead of breaking them (even small ones)
 - Listening to others with care and attention instead of distractedly wishing we were somewhere else or with someone else
 - Working with integrity instead of stealing time from employers or doing the bare minimum
 - Paying fair wages and charging fair prices instead of scamming employees or customers
08. Having considered these examples, how have you personally succeeded in giving others their due? How have you fallen short?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Tobit stops at nothing to fulfill his duty to God and neighbor. One might expect that, because of his faithfulness, Tobit would be constantly rewarded by God. However, while God does ultimately bless him, the pattern of Tobit's life reveals a path that we might not consider a blessing.

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Read Tobit 1:19–20

09. Tobit remained faithful to God in a faithless culture. And, while his family and friends remain unscathed, he is cast out of his home, stripped of his possessions, forced to run for his life—all for attempting to bury the body of a fellow Israelite. What do you think Tobit would have been feeling at this moment? Towards his brethren? Towards God? Toward “acting with justice” in general?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Despite everything, Tobit persists. A new king rises to power, and Tobit eventually returns to his home with nothing but his wife and child. Together, they begin to slowly rebuild their lives.

Throughout Tobit’s story he continues to experience suffering, misfortune, and ridicule, despite, and often because of, his righteousness. After so many hardships, it would be natural for Tobit to lose his determination to act with justice towards God and neighbor.

Later on, as a result of another attempt to bury the body of a slain relative, Tobit finds himself impoverished, disgraced, and even blinded. His world reeling, he asks God for death and gives what he believes to be his final advice to his son.

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Read Tobit 4:5–11 and 4:21

10. Write an observation question about the content of Tobit’s advice to his son. You may also write an understanding question.

Answers may include: Tobit exhorts his son to obey God’s commandments, with a particular focus on almsgiving towards the poor.

Please read aloud:

Despite great misfortune, Tobit’s convictions are completely unchanged, perhaps even strengthened. Despite having lost everything, he exhorts his son to live as he has, serving God and neighbor with justice.

The Church has a name for this kind of charity: The “Corporal Works of Mercy.” They consist in “feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God” (CCC 2447).

11. Write an understanding question about the connection between mercy and justice (often thought to be opposed). Help your participants to see that Mercy—particularly in the Corporal Works—is not opposed to Justice but actually restores it.

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Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Where justice is lacking, mercy fills the gaps. “Mercy is not the opposite of justice. Rather, it should be thought of as restoring justice and right order to people’s situations and souls when they have become wrong and disordered.” We can think of mercy as “as righting wrong, of lifting up those who have fallen, ever restoring all those in society (as much as is possible) to the place they should be, were the world not fallen.”¹

When we live justice well, we participate in God’s plan for restoration. Even if doing it alone, God will move through our actions to bring justice into an unjust world. Jesus even tells us that when we perform the works of mercy for “the least of these my brethren,” we are giving that same kindness to Jesus Himself (Mt 25:40).

12. While it can be easy to complain about injustice in the world, acts of mercy can be difficult. What about you? Are the Corporal Works of Mercy a regular part of your walk of discipleship? If not, how might you begin to live them?

Allow the group to discuss.

¹ Moloney, Daniel. *Mercy: What Every Catholic Should Know*. Austine Institute - Ignatius Press, 2020, p. 167.

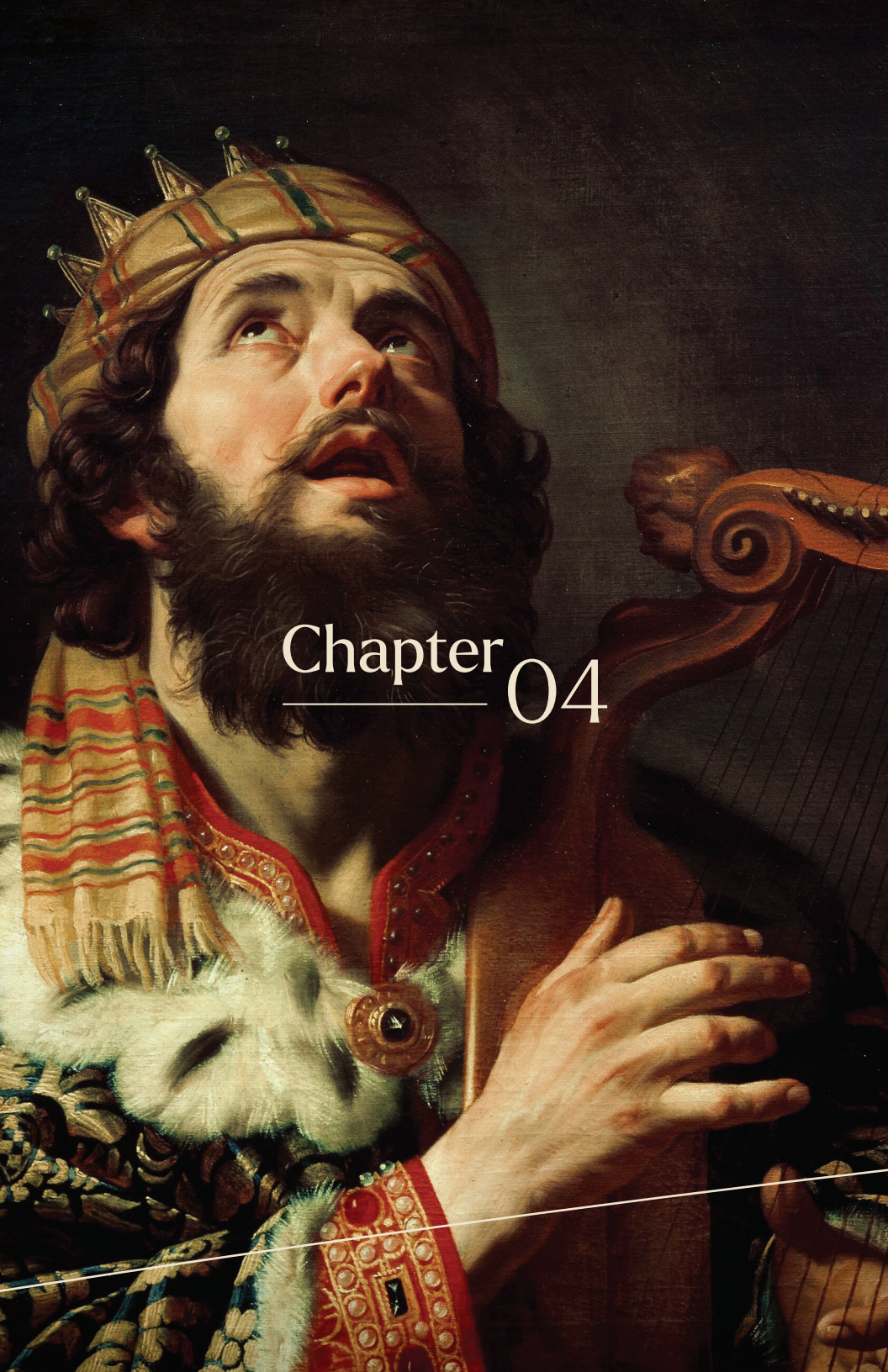
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Note to the Leader: If helpful, write out the Corporal Works of Mercy on a whiteboard or a piece of paper. Ideally your participants all leave with a specific resolution on how they might better incorporate them into their lives.

Please read aloud:

Living with justice in an unjust world is challenging. It can be easy to vaguely care about living in a just society, but difficult to live out the virtue of justice to make such a society a reality. Tobit’s story invites us to consider true justice. Are we willing to stay faithful to God when we are the only ones who remember Him? Are we willing to care for our neighbor, even when life has been unkind? Are we willing to practice the works of mercy regardless of our own circumstances?

Tobit pursued justice regardless of the cost, and he challenges us to become the kind of people who do the same.



Chapter 04

David & Temperance

Understanding / For your preparation as a leader / Page 90 - 102
Discussion / To use with your group / Page 106 - 114

UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

When David defeated Goliath and the Philistines with nothing more than a sling and a stone, he could not have imagined how God would shape his future. But one victory multiplied into many, and David became a mighty warrior. Under his leadership, Israel won battle after battle and grew into a strong, respected, and powerful nation.

But amid overwhelming triumph, David faced a different kind of battle, one that would shape his life and legacy even more deeply than his military exploits. It was not an external attack from enemies, but a conflict within his own heart.

Throughout his life, David gained access to nearly every worldly pleasure and power imaginable. And like all of us, he had natural desires and passions. Would David allow those passions to rule him? Would he use his power selfishly? Or would he moderate his desires and direct them toward the good?

God wants us to enjoy the gifts He has given

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us. He created emotions like joy, sorrow, anger, contentment, and loneliness to help guide us in our relationships and draw us closer to Him. He also gave us food, wine, sex, possessions, money, and leisure as good sources of happiness and comfort. When used properly, these gifts deepen our joy and strengthen our connection to God and others.

But how do we embrace God's good gifts in our modern culture? At any moment, we can distract ourselves by scrolling on our phones. We have instant access to endless pleasures—food, pornography, online shopping, entertainment, and more. At the same time, our culture tells us that our feelings should guide us and that self-indulgence is freedom. In such a world, how should we respond?

The Church offers an answer in the virtue of temperance—the virtue that teaches self-mastery and moderation. The temperate person can enjoy created goods fully because their desires are rightly ordered toward what truly satisfies.

In David's story, we see both the beauty of moderation and the destruction that follows when our passions become divorced from

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what is truly good. By learning from David's victories and failures, we too can become people of temperance, free to receive God's gifts as they were meant to be enjoyed.

David

In this chapter, we will study two situations that required David to be temperate. In the first, we will explore how David needed to moderate his emotions and direct them toward what was ultimately best for him and honoring to God. In the second, we will see how David needed to temper his attraction to pleasures and how his choices affected him and his relationships.

David and Saul

King Saul loves David as a son. But over time, Saul begins to feel threatened by David's rising popularity. Saul's envy eventually becomes hatred, and he tries to kill David. Saul chases David into the mountains and, perhaps, feeling angry and betrayed, David must run for his life.

One night, David sneaks into Saul's camp and finds him asleep and unguarded, with his spear in the ground next to him. David has the perfect opportunity to kill Saul and seize the kingdom. Even David's attendant encourages him to slay his enemy, saying, "God has given your enemy

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into your hand this day; now therefore let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice" (1 Sam 26:8).

David seems to have justification for killing Saul. He has forced David to live in hiding, and in fear for his life. Not only this, but he even spared Saul's life once before (1 Sam 24:1-22). David's anger at Saul's continued unjust persecution is understandable. It seems almost natural for David to desire vengeance.

But David sees a greater good. He remembers that God anointed Saul the first king of Israel, and rather than grasping the kingdom on his own terms, serving his disordered desire for vengeance or allowing his anger to overcome him, David stays his hand. He spares Saul's life, saying, "Do not destroy him; for who can put forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless? As the Lord lives, the Lord will smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed" (1 Sam 26:9-11).

David even goes a step further, seeking something better than vengeance: reconciliation. And for a time, he is successful. While Saul will never fully overcome his envy of David, for now, the two are reconciled and Saul wishes blessings upon David (1 Sam 26:25).

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What would have happened if David had allowed his anger to rule him? Not only would he have sinned, but he would also have experienced real-world consequences that may have complicated his rise to the throne: division, violence, and the stain on his own soul for choosing murder over what was truly best. But instead of allowing himself to be overcome by anger or the desire for revenge, David exercised self-mastery and chose what was right. Practicing temperance made David free to receive the fullness of God's blessings and fulfill His good plan for his life.

David and Bathsheba

Years later, King David has won many victories over his enemies. He is enjoying the fruits of peace—perhaps too much. When the time comes to go to war once again, instead of joining his men, David chooses to stay home. With little to do, he stays in bed, sleeping in until the afternoon. Eventually, he gets up and goes for a stroll along the roof of his palace where he sees a woman bathing.

Struck by her beauty, David investigates. He finds out that the woman is Bathsheba, and she is married to the soldier Uriah. David summons her to the palace and sleeps with her. When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, David tries to cover it up. First, he brings her husband home from battle and tries to

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get him to lie with his wife. When he refuses, David orders his commander to place him on the front line of battle, ensuring his death. The plan is successful. Uriah dies and David marries Bathsheba.

God sees all that unfolds and rebukes David, saying, “I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; and I gave you your master’s house and the house of Israel and of Judah; and if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife” (2 Sam 12:7–10).

David recognizes his sin and repents with mourning and fasting. God accepts his repentance, but the consequences of his actions remain. David and Bathsheba’s child dies, and David’s family devolves into chaos. His sons turn against him and against each other. These family conflicts dominate the rest of David’s life.

Just as David’s first act of temperance resulted in God’s blessings. David’s failure to be temperate led to tragedy. Giving in to laziness led to giving in to curiosity, which, in turn, led to lust and, ultimately, murder. David’s choices are a chilling example of

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what can happen when we allow our passions to rule us.

Temperance

“Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will’s mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable” (CCC 1809).

Before the Fall, our intellects, wills, and passions worked in harmony. We knew what was true and good. Our wills aligned with our intellects, and our reason and will guided our appetites. We felt hunger but were never inclined to eat more than we needed. We experienced sexual desire but never in a way that used others as an object for our pleasure. Our desires aligned with what we knew to be good.

After the Fall, our inner harmony is now fractured. We struggle to know what is right and have trouble choosing it even when we know it. Our appetites are often in tension with our intellect and will, pulling us to indulge in created goods in ways that aren’t good for us.

The virtue of temperance enables us to bring our disordered passions back into alignment with right reason so that we can enjoy God’s created gifts as we were meant to. But how do

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we practice temperance so that we can enjoy God’s gifts in ways that lead to our flourishing?

Often, temperance is misunderstood as a virtue that tells us what we cannot do: Don’t drink too much, don’t eat too much, don’t watch too much television, don’t indulge in lustful thoughts or behaviors. And while temperance does require moderating our desires for certain goods, considering it only in this way misses the beauty of this virtue. Temperance, rightly understood, is not a virtue that limits our freedom, but rather it is a virtue that enhances our freedom to choose the highest, most fulfilling goods.

It is the temperate man who enjoys alcohol without surrendering his freedom in drunkenness. He delights in his meals, savoring their goodness and receiving them as gifts, rather than surrendering to his disordered desire to eat too much, too hurriedly, more than his share, or in a way that distracts himself from the relationships with the people he is with. He expresses anger at injustices in the world and allows it to motivate him to fight for the good in a healthy way, without committing injustices himself. He avoids judging others rashly, tempering his desire to assign blame when he doesn’t fully understand someone else’s situation. He rejoices in what is good, fully appreciating moments of happiness, without the need to chase

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after the next thrill. He is satisfied with having what he needs for himself and his family, without being overcome by a desire to gather more stuff—cars, houses, clothes, or the latest technology.

Most of us have had the experience of succumbing to our disordered desires. We've eaten too much, drank too much, lashed out in rage, or spent hours scrolling on our phones for no other reason than occupying our minds or numbing our boredom. These experiences teach us that rather than giving us what we truly want, failing to moderate our desires leads to dissatisfaction. As the Catechism states, "The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy" (CCC 2339). Temperance is the virtue that allows us to discover the true peace we long for, to find what truly satisfies. It gives us the freedom to enjoy God's gifts without become slaves to them.

We see many of these dynamics in David's own story. When David ordered his passions toward the good and allowed his reason to direct his behavior, it led to good decisions that blessed his life. Conversely, when he allowed his passions to govern him, it led to a slow slide in chaos, unhappiness, discontentment, and suffering. The virtue of temperance, rather than stifling of our

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desires, allows us to experience God's blessings in their fullness and prevents us allowing our passions to lead us into error, emptiness, and heartbreak.

We want to make choices that allow us to receive the good things of life that truly satisfy, and the virtue of temperance can help us unlock the good life we desire. David's story invites us to consider the importance of this virtue, not just in the big moments of our lives but also in our small, daily choices. Where do we need to practice temperance? And how might it give us more freedom to receive God's blessings and experience the fruits of a well-lived life?

Application: Chastity

Contemporary thinking often misunderstands chastity as the repression of sexual urges and impulses. But the Church teaches that chastity is "the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being" (CCC 2337). Chastity directs our sexual desires toward the good, enabling us to enjoy sex in a way that corresponds with the deepest desires of our hearts. Far from an oppressive "No," it is a resounding "Yes" to the love that we yearn for, the love for which we are made.

Chastity is all about true love, because it enables us to love others for their own sake, not merely

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because of what we get from them or how they make us feel. That is why Saint Pope John Paul II boldly states, “only the chaste man and the chaste woman are capable of true love.”¹ It is only when we are able to exercise self-control with regard our sexual desires and direct them toward the good of the other person that we can experience the full goodness of sexual love.

Tragically, the opposite is also true: without chastity, we cannot love well. Dr. Edward Sri explains,

Men and women without chastity are in a very sad situation: They are not free to love. They may have good intentions and a sincere desire to care for the beloved, but without chastity, love will never flourish for it will not be pure. It will be mixed with a tendency to view the beloved primarily in terms of sexual values. John Paul II explains that without chastity, men and women cannot selflessly love the beloved as a person because the heart is so preoccupied with emotional and sensual pleasure.²

¹ Wojtyla, Karol. *Love and Responsibility*, p. 171.

² Sri, Edward. *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love*, p. 94.

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We long for love, for closeness, for deep communion with others—these are good desires. Things like pornography, masturbation, sex outside of marriage, sexting, and other immoral sexual behaviors aren’t merely bad because “God said so,” but rather because they steal from the true love that we desire. They offer us a counterfeit version of love that can never satisfy the desires of our hearts. They offer us some sense of pleasure and connection, but one that ultimately falls short of the love, closeness, and union with another that we truly want. Therefore, if we are going to love well, we can’t give into a disordered vision of sexuality. We can’t settle for counterfeit love. Instead, let’s cultivate the virtue of chastity and experience the true love for which we are made.

Unfortunately, we are all too familiar with modern versions of David’s story. Many of us can think of how failures in chastity have affected our own lives and the lives of others. But what if David had chosen to embrace the virtue of chastity instead of giving in to his desires? What if you, or someone in your life, had done the same? How might certain situations have ended differently and for the better? How might inner emptiness, broken hearts, and failed relationships have been prevented?

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Finally, David had a contrite heart and God met him with mercy. He does the same for us. There is no sin we can commit that God cannot redeem. He wants to heal us and invites us to learn from our past sins and mistakes. Even if we have failed in chastity in very serious ways, we are not beyond God's grace. If we turn back to Him, He can "make all things new" in our lives (**Rev 21:5**). And by growing in the virtue of chastity, we can avoid the heartache that inevitably comes when we misuse our sexuality. But more importantly, we can become free to receive the fullness of sexual love as God intended for us.

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DISCUSSION

1 Sam 26:1-12
 2 Sam 11:1-5
 2 Sam 11:6-17
 2 Sam 12:7-10
 Psalm 51

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. **Launching Question:** Have you ever done something that felt great in the moment, but wasn't worth the long-term consequences?

Please read aloud:

Most of us have had the experience of succumbing to a disordered desire that leaves us with regret. We eat too much, drink too much, lash out in anger, or spend hours pointlessly scrolling. We have all too often verified what the Catechism teaches us: "Either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy" (CCC 2339).

So how can we avoid being unhappy? One of the key virtues we'll need is the virtue of temperance.

Give a brief introduction to the virtue of temperance (the moral virtue that moderates attractions to pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods). Refer to CCC 1809.

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In the story of David, King of Israel, we see both the beauty of moderation and the destruction that follows when our passions become divorced from what is truly good.

In this chapter, we will study two episodes that require David to be temperate. In the first, David moderates his emotions and directs them toward what was ultimately best for him and honoring to God. In the second, we will see how David fails to moderate his desire for pleasure and how his choices affect him and his relationships.

The first episode dates before David becomes king, when he is in the service of King Saul. At first, King Saul loved David like a son. But over time, Saul begins to feel threatened by David's rising popularity—so much so that he tries to kill David, who is forced to run for his life.

Read 1 Sam 26:1-12

02. **Why might David have been tempted to kill Saul? What reason does David give for not doing so?**

Answer: Though David had been a faithful servant of Saul, winning him battles and expanding his kingdom, Saul came out into the wilderness to hunt and kill him out of envy. David likely had some

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desire to take revenge and preserve his own life. Despite this, David respects Saul's authority as established by God.

Please read aloud:

While Saul never fully overcomes his envy of David, after he realizes that his life was spared, the two are reconciled and Saul wishes blessings upon David (1 Sam 26:9–11). This sets the stage for David to become the king of Israel through legitimate means and with God's timing. The practice of temperance makes David free to receive the fullness of God's blessing and plan for his life.

Often, temperance is misunderstood as a virtue that tells us what we cannot do: Don't drink too much, don't eat too much, don't watch too much television, don't indulge in lustful thoughts or behaviors. And while temperance does require moderating our desires for certain goods, considering it only in this way misses the beauty of this virtue.

03. How does David's story show us that temperance, rightly understood, is not a virtue that limits our freedom, but rather enhances it, allowing us to attain the higher and most fulfilling goods?

Allow the group to discuss.

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Answer: David's story is a great example of a time where temperance allows someone to attain a higher good, namely obedience to God's command and a clean conscience. Because of this, David would not carry the burden of having murdered God's anointed king and eventually come into the throne by legitimate means.

04. What might have happened if David had allowed his anger to rule him, killing Saul when he had the opportunity?

Answer: Not only would David have committed the sin of murder—a weight he would have to carry for the rest of his life, but he would have greatly complicated his own rise to the throne. Division, violence, and generational feuds between the various tribes would have been likely. Despite the strong urge to do so that must have been present, killing Saul would have ultimately been a limiting decision for David.

05. Write an application question on temperance and its fruits. Consider exploring the importance of moderating one's emotions in difficult moments.

Allow the group to discuss.

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Please read aloud:

Years later, David is king of all Israel and has won many victories over his enemies. We find him enjoying the fruits of peace—perhaps too much so.

Read 2 Sam 11:1-5

06. What does David do in this reading?

Answer: David commits adultery with a married woman, Bathsheba, impregnating her.

07. Was committing adultery with Bathsheba David's first mistake, or were there others that led up to it? What might we learn from David's negative example?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Long before his sin with Bathsheba, David remains home when he ought to be out fighting with his armies. Having neglected his duty, David is idle. He naps until late in the day and allows his eyes to wander. For us, it is a powerful reminder that failures to temper our desires in small things—idleness, scrolling, not fulfilling our duties—can lead us toward more serious faults.

Please read aloud:

We'll now see how David's lack of

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temperance leads to a downward spiral, leading him to do things he would have likely considered unimaginable beforehand.

Read 2 Sam 11:6-17

08. How far does David go to cover up his sin?

Answer: To hide his adulterous actions, David first brings Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, home from battle and tries to get him to lie with his wife. Despite multiple attempts, this plan fails, so David orders Uriah's commander to place him on the front line, ensuring his death.

09. Many people portray temperance as abstaining from certain behaviors or desires merely because "God said so." What does David's story reveal about how temperance corresponds not only with God's law but also with what is truly best for us?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: While it's true that we are bound by God's moral law and ought to obey it, situations like this reveal God's fatherly heart in giving us commands. God gives commands for our good. It would have been better for David to abstain from his desire to sleep with Bathsheba

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and avoid becoming a murderer. And it would have been better for Bathsheba to remain faithful to her husband. Intemperance is a sin not only because it offends God, but also because it hurts us, other people and, as we will see, fractures relationships.

Please read aloud:

Let's read about how God responds to David's sin.

Read 2 Sam 12:7-10

10. What are the consequences of David's failure to moderate his passions? In what ways does the punishment "fit the crime?"

Answer: David is told that violence will afflict his own house. This seems appropriate, with God treating David in the same way that David treated Uriah, only with more mercy, for he spares his life (2 Sam 12:14).

Please read aloud:

One specific sub-virtue of temperance that David fails in is called chastity. Chastity is often misunderstood as the repression of sexual urges. But the Church teaches that chastity is "the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being" (CCC 2337).

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Chastity directs our sexual desires toward the good, enabling us to enjoy sex in a way that corresponds with the deepest desires of our hearts.

11. David's attraction to Bathsheba is real. He longs for her and takes great risks to be with her—it might even be tempting to call it romantic. Yet, keeping in mind that love is not passion but "willing the good of another," can David be said to have loved Bathsheba? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: In committing adultery with her, impregnating her, and ultimately murdering her legitimate husband, David cannot be said to have truly loved Bathsheba, despite his sexual attraction to her.

Please read aloud:

David's story emphasizes an important point. Chastity is about true love. It enables us to love others for their own sake, not merely because of what we get from them or how they make us feel. That is why Saint Pope John Paul II boldly states, "only the chaste man and the chaste woman are capable of true love."¹ Because of his lack of chastity, David not only creates a terrible situation for himself, but he also finds himself unable to love well.

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12. What about you? How might the practice of chastity allow you to love more freely? How might it prevent inner emptiness, broken hearts, and failed relationships in your own life?

Optional Alternative:
How do you need to grow in chastity?

Allow the group to discuss.

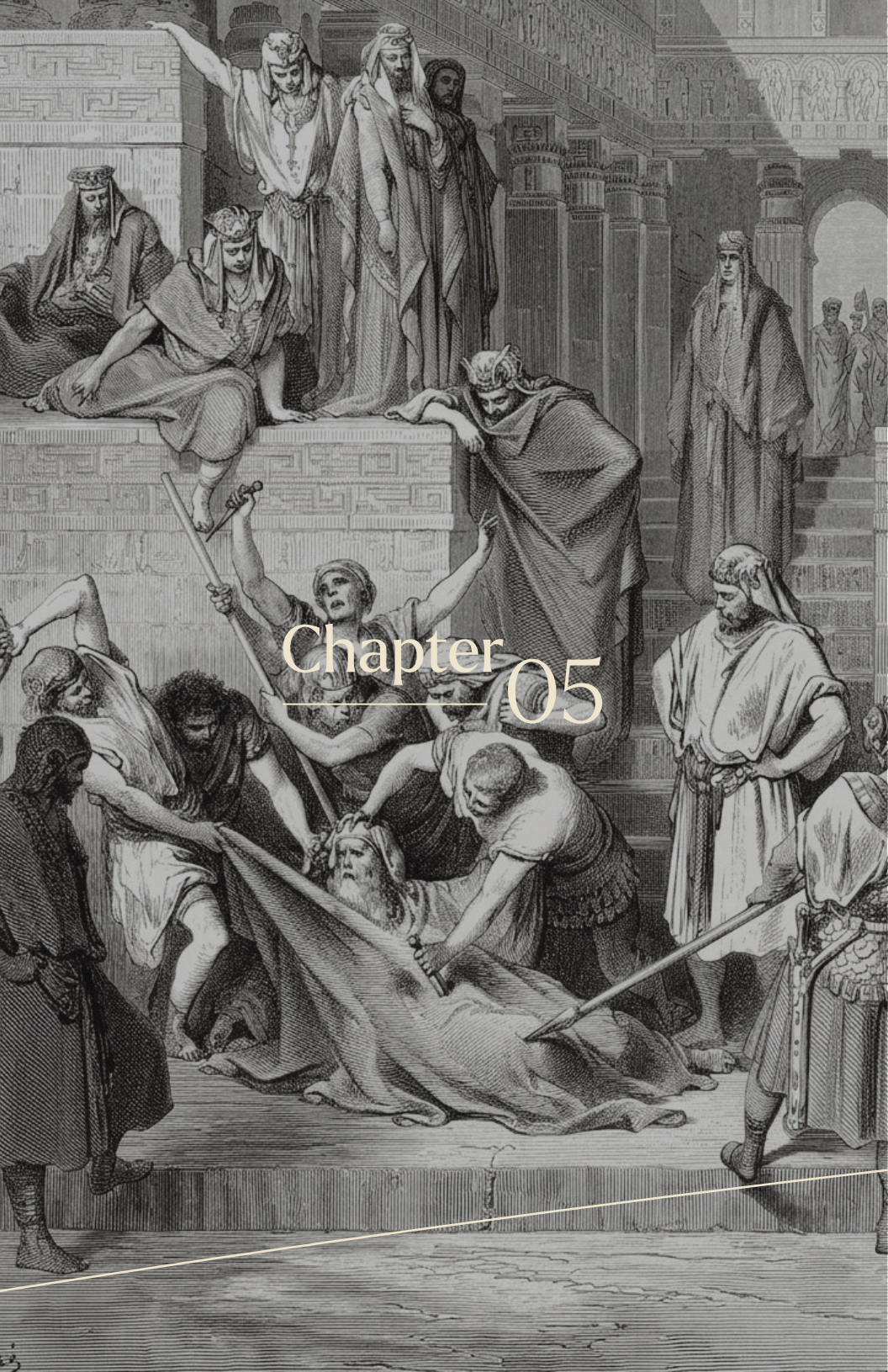
Please read aloud:

David’s story would go on to end with his repentance and God’s Mercy. When talking about chastity, it is important to remember that God does the same for us. There is no sin we can commit that God cannot redeem. He wants to heal us and invite us to learn from our past sins and mistakes. One of the most beautiful expressions of repentance in the Bible is Psalm 51, written by King David in response to his own sexual sin.

Even if we have failed in chastity in very serious ways, we are not beyond God’s grace. If we turn back to Him, He can “make all things new” in our lives (Rev 21:5). And by growing in the virtue of chastity, we can avoid the heartache that inevitably comes when we misuse our sexuality. But more importantly, we can become free to receive the fullness of sexual love as God intended for us.

Closing Prayer: Read Psalm 51 (as a group)

Notes



Chapter 05

Eleazar & Fortitude

Understanding / For your preparation as a leader / Page 118 - 129
Discussion / To use with your group / Page 132 - 140

UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Eleazar had enjoyed a long life, revered by his community for his impeccable character and wisdom. But, in his old age, everything changed and Eleazar had to make a choice: deny God, appease the government, and live; or stay faithful to God and suffer the consequences.

As he decided what to do, he considered how he had lived, how he wanted to die, and the kind of legacy he would leave behind. What would you decide if you were in his shoes? What do you hope people say about you when you die? What do you want your life to teach those who come after you?

Most of us want our lives to tell a story of greatness. We long to leave a legacy of hard work, honesty, faithfulness to the people we loved, and success in our endeavors. Accomplishing such a legacy requires fortitude, the virtue that enables us to act courageously, endure suffering, overcome hardships, and stay faithful to God despite the difficulties.

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Our current culture, however, doesn't always push us toward the virtue of fortitude. Instead, we are often enticed to fearfully shy away from the difficulty, suffering, or sacrifice that faithfulness to others and to God sometimes requires: playing your best in the game when you're losing by a lot; asking someone out on a date when you're not sure they will say yes; remaining lovingly patient when your toddler is melting down or your teenager is having an emotional outburst; having a crucial conversation with a coworker or family member that you fear might not be received well; persevering through a challenging project that suddenly got even harder; or showing up for others when we're experiencing our own pain and sorrow. Fortitude gives us the inner strength to give our best to God and others amid the various trials and sorrows we experience in ordinary daily life.

Eleazar's extraordinary example of fortitude inspires us to live this virtue in our ordinary daily lives. Over decades of small acts of courage and perseverance in his daily life with his family, friends, and community, Eleazar had mastered the virtue of fortitude, which gave him the character to perform the bigger act of courage at the end of his life and leave a legacy of wisdom and honor.

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Through Eleazar's story, we will see fortitude exemplified in two ways: in a dramatic decision to stay faithful to God no matter the consequences and in the daily decisions that make us the kind of people who are capable of such great acts. Let's dive in and learn from his example.

Eleazar

Eleazar spent his youth freely worshipping God and teaching the Jewish law in the temple. But when a domineering tyrant rises to power, he attempts to eliminate Judaism altogether. Now, government personnel, well acquainted with this respected teacher, are trying to force him to eat pork. Although eating pork may seem inconsequential to those who do not follow the Jewish faith, for a man like Eleazar, this would have been equivalent to denying God altogether. He knew well that eating such food went against God's laws. This was more than a mere matter of dietary protocol; it was a sign of faithfulness to God Himself.

Therefore, when the authorities try to coerce Eleazar to eat pork, he spits out the forbidden food and voluntarily goes to the torture rack, "welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution" (2 Mac 6:19). The officials, motivated by their old acquaintance with Eleazar, implore him to bring his own meat and pretend it is pork. He then will appear to appease the king while technically

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fulfilling the law. Eleazar, however, is unrelenting. He instead acts with courage, claiming that such a trick would mislead the many young people who look up to him and would bring disgrace upon him in his old age. He boldly declares,

For even if for the present I should avoid the punishment of men, yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by manfully giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws (2 Mac 6:26-28).

As a result, the officials conclude that Eleazar has gone mad. From their point of view, only insanity could drive a man to willingly lay down his life for something so seemingly small. Their kindness turns to hostility, and they send Eleazar to be tortured and killed. Although he suffers terribly, in the last seconds of his life, he utters his last words, "It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him" (2 Mac 6:30).

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The awe-inspiring narrative of Eleazar's martyrdom is a deeply loved example of courage and virtue for both Jews and Christians. At the end of his life, he was able to perform a great act of fortitude because all his life he had given himself to small ones, for he lived an "excellent life even from childhood" (2 Mac 6:23). It's no different for us. Becoming a person of courage does not happen in a single heroic moment, but through a lifetime of deliberate, faithful decisions. Let us explore the virtue of fortitude and discover how we can live this virtue well.

Fortitude

Most of us can admire Eleazar's heroic resolve, but if we are honest, we wonder if we would be capable of doing the same. How then can we become people of fortitude, regardless of circumstances? To find the answer, let's explore this virtue in greater detail.

"Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life" (CCC1808). Like all virtues, practicing fortitude grounds us between two extremes—what St. Thomas Aquinas called vices of excess and vices of defect.

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The first extreme is cowardice, a defect through which we shrink away from pursuing the good when we encounter difficulty, pain, or danger. Fear or a desire for an easier path forward takes over, and we act with timidity, seeking safety or comfort instead of committing ourselves to doing what is right.

The second extreme is recklessness, an excess that leads us to chase after thrills or take senseless risks in the name of bravery. When we divorce bravery from reason and act brashly, we rush into danger and can bring unnecessary harm to ourselves and others.

While the coward is weak and the reckless man is unwise, the man of fortitude perseveres in doing what is good, no matter the challenges, sufferings or sorrows. Avoiding dis-couragement, he fulfills his responsibility and persists in the love of God and neighbor.

No matter our intentions to love and obey God, our earthly home is a valley of tears full of suffering, tragedy, and injustice. How do we respond when we feel left out of a group of friends, are insecure about our looks or our performance, or when our self-worth is attacked by other people's criticism? Or what about when things don't go our way—our car breaks down, our roommate frustrates us, or when we don't get a promotion? Or how about

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when we are sad because of a broken relationship, sickness, or our spouse has hurt us? Do we give up, settle for finding comfort in lesser things, or draw back in self-protection? Or do we courageously resolve to overcome these temptations and continue to pursue what is good, despite the difficulties we face? The virtue of fortitude frees us from allowing these everyday trials to overcome us and strengthens us in accomplishing what is good, despite these challenges.

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that fortitude is expressed in two ways:

Attack: Practicing fortitude through attack means addressing difficulties head-on and directly, acting rather than standing still or giving up. When we are facing difficult circumstances or when an opportunity to do something great arises, most of us are tempted to hesitate, give up, not give our best, let the opportunity go unanswered, or ignore problems hoping they will somehow go away. Responding to challenges and opportunities directly might mean that we speak up when silence feels safer, seize opportunities even if we are afraid of the outcome, or fight for just causes. Fortitude in attack doesn't seek danger for its own sake, rather it accepts danger as the necessary cost of doing what is right.

Endurance: Fortitude through endurance means

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bearing our difficulties well, and over time, possibly surrendering to hard circumstances peacefully. It has two supporting virtues: patience, the ability to bear hardship without being overcome by sadness, anger, or resentment; and perseverance, the ability to remain steadfast through long, difficult circumstances. Exemplifying fortitude through endurance may look like battling long and painful illnesses, fighting for your marriage, or persisting through difficult projects at school and work. A soul grounded in fortitude through endurance is willing to stand its ground until God's work is done.

When the authorities gave Eleazar the choice between eating pork or going to the torture rack, he practiced fortitude through attack. He spit out the pork and walked to the torture rack for the purpose of standing up for his faith. When offered the chance to preserve his life by pretending to eat pork, he didn't even consider it. He acted by dying with honor instead of living in deceit.

Eleazar also practiced fortitude through perseverance. His second decision, the refusal to lie to save his life, resulted in persecution unto death. Despite intense bodily pain and suffering, Eleazar courageously endured the agony, honoring God with his entire life. Like Christ, he loved God and others "to the end" (Jn 13:1).

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How do we become capable of an act as great as Eleazar's? By committing to the virtue of fortitude daily in small ways. Whether it's a situation that requires patient endurance or bold action, virtues get stronger with repeated practice, and, over time, they become part of our character. Having the fortitude to give one's life begins with everyday acts of courage: choosing not to whine and complain when things aren't going well; mustering up the courage to ask someone on a date when we are nervous about getting turned down; providing boundaries for our children that may go against the current of the culture; persevering in our school work when it's difficult, no one else is studying, or our teacher seems unfair; and choosing to have difficult but necessary conversations with our loved ones to work out problems.

Application: Magnanimity

Although we only glimpse a short part of Eleazar's long life, it is clear he was a man of magnanimity. His martyrdom didn't come out of nowhere. He was likely magnanimous with his family, his friends, and the people in his community—generous with his time, service, kindness, and mercy. His martyrdom was not a mere act of duty, but a continuation of his generous gift of himself to others throughout his life.

Magnanimity is not a word we often hear in our everyday conversations, yet it is something we all

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long to embody. Magnanimity means “greatness of soul.” It is a sub-virtue of fortitude which enables us to go beyond merely avoiding evil or fulfilling our basic duties and to pursue what is great and honorable for the sake of blessing the people around us. St. Thomas Aquinas once called it, “the ornament of all virtues.”¹ The magnanimous person gives the very best of himself to accomplish great things, especially in service to other people.

When we generously give the very best of ourselves to others, we are living magnanimity. This means that we go above and beyond in our loving generosity to others in our community, parish, family, and friendships. Magnanimity might mean practicing harder and longer to ensure that you can support your teammates better in the game. It might mean volunteering at school or working to serve your community when no one else is stepping up. Magnanimous family members will go out of their way to bestow thoughtful, generous acts of kindness and service on their spouses, children, and siblings, anticipating their needs and fully engaging with them.

The virtue of magnanimity is the difference between dropping a check in the collection basket and hosting the poor at your table for a meal each day

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Second Part, Q. 129, Art. 4, accessed at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3129.htm> February 23, 2026.

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like St. Gregory the Great. Or between a father merely buying his daughter a generic birthday present and planning the perfect evening for her with a fancy dinner, flowers, china plates, and her favorite dessert followed by her favorite movie. It's not only extending forgiveness but working for the good of those who persecute us (Think of Jean Valjean, for example, in *Les Misérables*, when he freed the man who had been working to put him in prison—and might still do so—despite an angry mob clamoring for his execution!).

When we are regularly seeking comfort, consumption, and entertainment, however, we are not training our spirits to be capable of magnanimity. Rather, we end up choosing “smallness of soul”, or pusillanimity, which leaves us with that empty feeling of mediocrity, wishing we were doing something more for others with our lives.

Imagine if Eleazar had chosen to ignore the call to greatness. What if, to avoid pain, he ate pork to save his life. Would we know his name today? What would have been said about this great teacher of the law? What kind of example would he have left for those coming after him?

Instead, his decision to act magnanimously was so consequential that he became the model of courage for the entire nation of Israel and, eventually, for the

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Church. Church fathers like St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory of Nazianzus preached about his courageous act and considered him a pre-Christian martyr who set the example for those who would lay down their lives during Christian persecutions.²

What kind of impact do you want to have—with your friends, your children, your community, your Church? Where might God be inviting you to be more generous with your life and do great things for others? What do you hope others will recognize about your character? What example do you want to set for future generations? These questions encourage us to think beyond what is comfortable in the moment and give us a long-term vision of something worth giving everything for.

² John Chrysostom, “*On Eleazar and the Seven Boys*,” homily delivered one day before a feast at the shrine of the Maccabean Martyrs (pre-Christian Jewish martyrs of Antioch), Portal @ SDS Oxford, accessed at https://portal.sds.ox.ac.uk/articles/online_resource/E02697_John_Chrysostom_in_his_homily_On_Eleazar_and_the_Seven_Boys_delivered_one_day_before_a_feast_held_at_a_shrine_of_the_Maccabean_Martyrs_pre-Christian_Jewish_martyrs_of_Antioch_S00303_in_the_outskirts_of_Constantinople_defends_the_vali/13825523 September 4, 2025.

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DISCUSSION

2 Mac 6:18–22
2 Mac 6:23–29
2 Mac 6:30–31

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. Launching Question: Have you ever had the opportunity to be courageous in the face of some great evil or difficulty? How did you react?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Most of us want our lives to tell a story of greatness. We long to leave a legacy of hard work, honesty, and success. Accomplishing such a legacy, however, requires fortitude (also called courage), the virtue that enables us to endure suffering, overcome hardships, and stay faithful to God despite difficulties.

Share a brief introduction to the virtue of Fortitude (or courage; firmness and/or constancy in the pursuit of the good; resists temptation/obstacles in the moral life; not a lack of fear but persistence despite fear). Refer to CCC 1808.

To gain a better understanding of this great virtue, we turn to the second book of Maccabees, where

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we find a man undergoing the ultimate test.

Eleazar was advanced in years, revered by his community, and known for his impeccable character and wisdom. But, toward the end of his life, the situation around him changed. The Jews were under relentless persecution by the pagan Greeks, and Eleazar had been singled out. He is threatened with death if he refuses to publicly eat pork, which is forbidden by his Jewish faith.

Read 2 Mac 6:18–22

02. Write an observation question that draws out Eleazar's reaction to this persecution.

Answers may include: Eleazar welcomes death instead of eating the forbidden meat, spitting it out on the ground rather than be “polluted” by unclean foods. He walks to his death on his own accord.

Please read aloud: Eleazar pursues the good both by what he does and by what he refuses to do. Hoping to break his resolve, his persecutors present him with a temptation.

03. How do Eleazar's persecutors attempt to “reason” with him? What makes their proposal so compelling?

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Answer: Eleazar's persecutors encourage him to "fake it," pretending to eat the forbidden meat. It's a compelling temptation. Such a pretense would allow him to avoid both violating the law (technically) as well a torturous death.

Please read aloud:

Like all virtues, practicing fortitude grounds us in the middle of two extremes—what St. Thomas Aquinas called vices of excess and vices of defect. In this case, the first extreme is cowardice. The coward shrinks away from pursuing the good when he encounters difficulty, pain, fear, or danger. On the other end of the spectrum is recklessness. The reckless man chases after thrills, taking senseless risks in the name of bravery.

04. Which of these extremes is being proposed to Eleazar, a temptation to cowardice or recklessness? Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: It's a temptation to cowardice. Eleazar is being tempted to forsake the good (dying and giving witness to his faith) to avoid pain and death.

Please read aloud:

Let's see how Eleazar responds.

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Read 2 Mac 6:23-29

05. The coward throws away good or even holy things for the sake of avoiding pain, difficulty, or danger. In rejecting this temptation to cowardice, what goods does Eleazar preserve?

Answers may include: The goods of being "worthy of our time of life," giving the youth a "noble example" by dying for the "holy laws," and having a clean conscience before the judgement of God.

Please read aloud:

It's not merely that Eleazar rejects the evil consequences of pretending to eat the meat. He's also ennobled by the high goods that courage will bring in the greater context of his situation.

Fortitude often operates in this way by putting suffering in its proper context. Jesus told us not to fear those who can kill the body, but those who can destroy the soul and the body in hell (Mt 10:28). With this teaching, He revealed that certain things, such as loving God and standing for justice and truth, are more important than self-preservation.

06. Eleazar appeals to various things he considers more important than self-preservation (E.g., his own honor and

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example, the good of his nation, a clean conscience before God). How do Eleazar's persecutors react to his logic? Do they seem to share his convictions?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: They believe that he's speaking "sheer madness," and become angry with him.

07. Why do you think that Eleazar's fortitude comes across as insanity to his persecutors? What does he see that they don't?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: To Eleazar's persecutors, dying to avoid eating a bit of meat seems like madness because they lack Eleazar's "eternal perspective" (the ability to see with clarity how our actions echo beyond our own lives in eternity), as well as his moral imagination that perceives the great loss such a betrayal would be for those that look up to him.

Please read aloud:

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that fortitude operates in two different ways: in attack and in endurance. Practicing fortitude through attack means addressing difficulties head-on and directly, acting

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rather than standing still or giving up. Fortitude through endurance means bearing our difficulties well, and over time, possibly surrendering to hard circumstances peacefully. It has two supporting virtues: patience, the ability to bear hardship without being overcome by sadness, anger, or resentment; and perseverance, the ability to remain steadfast through long, difficult circumstances.

08. How does Eleazar practice "fortitude in attack"? What about "fortitude in endurance"?

Answer: Eleazar practices fortitude in attack by walking up to the rack. He practices fortitude in endurance by not eating the meat his persecutors attempt to force upon him. He will also endure his suffering with perseverance.

09. Think of a situation where you lacked courage in the past. What kind of larger perspective (or "eternal perspective") might have helped you to act with virtue instead?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Eleazar's eternal perspective lends him the courage to embrace pain and death. Though he likely felt great fear, he loved God and others "to the end"

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(Jn 13:1), though it seems like insanity to the world. But who will be vindicated in the end? Let's read about his death and the impact it has on others.

Read 2 Mac 6:30–31

10. Write an observation question about the effects of Eleazar's death.

Allow the group to discuss.

Answers may include: Eleazar leaves a “memorial of courage” to all of Israel, particularly the young.

Please read aloud:

Many words could be employed to describe Eleazar's courage. One important one is magnanimity. Magnanimity means “greatness of soul.” It is the sub-virtue of fortitude that enables us to go beyond merely avoiding evil or fulfilling our basic duties, and pursue what is great and honorable. The magnanimous person gives the very best of himself to accomplish great things, especially in service to other people.

It's easy to miss this call to greatness and choose comfort and mediocrity instead. People do it every day. In receiving the call to do something great with our lives but refusing it (“this is too big for me”; “I could never do that”), one becomes pusillanimous.

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The pusillanimous man chooses “smallness of soul,” the path that's easier or more comfortable in the moment, but over time leaves him sad, empty, and wishing that he had done more with his life.

11. Imagine if Eleazar had chosen to ignore the call to greatness. What if, to avoid pain, he ate the pork to save his life. Would we know his name today? What would have been said about this great teacher of the law? How does Eleazar exemplify magnanimity?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Eleazar, after causing a great scandal and weakening the resolve of his people, would probably have faded into obscurity. He demonstrates magnanimity by choosing a truly great course of action and not simply doing the minimum.

Please read aloud:

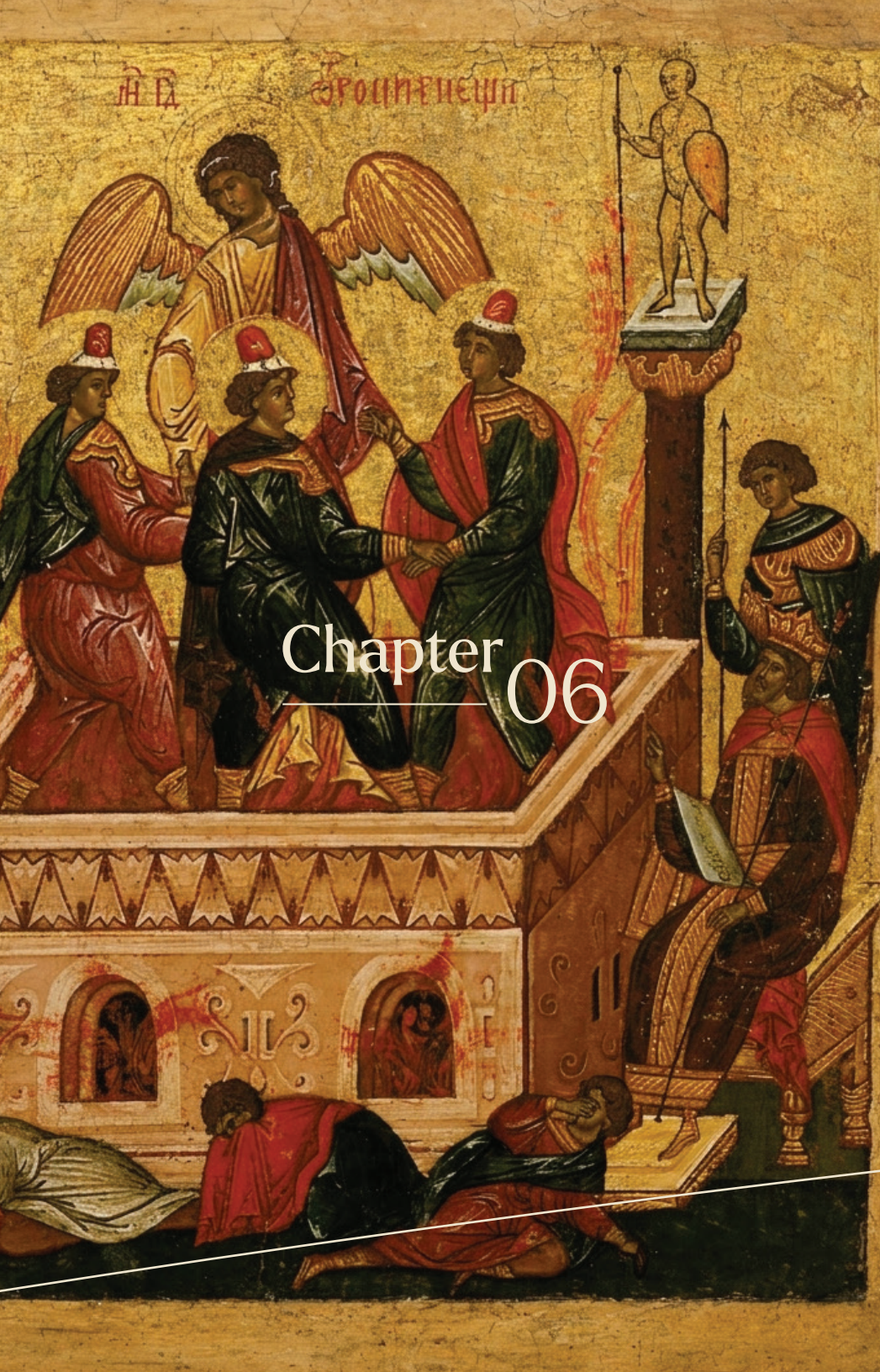
Eleazar's decision to act magnanimously was so consequential that he became the model of courage for the entire nation of Israel and, eventually, for the Church. Church fathers like St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory of Nazianzus preached about his courageous act and considered him a pre-Christian martyr who set the example for those who would lay down their lives.

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12. Eleazar's story begs the question: Are you currently living in a magnanimous way that will inspire others to live for God and for heaven? If not, what prevents you from doing so? What could magnanimity look like in your current state of life?

Allow the group to discuss.

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Chapter 06

Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael & Faith

Understanding / For your preparation as a leader / Page 144 - 155
Discussion / To use with your group / Page 158 - 166

UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael must have seen their lives flash before their eyes as the guards led them to their death. They had refused to worship the king's golden statue, and now they were about to pay the ultimate price. Before them raged the fire of a furnace and these three men were walking straight into its flames. Can you imagine willingly facing such a harrowing death? Why would they do such a thing?

Were the three Israelites simply rebels who refused to obey a foreign king? Stubborn criminals who cared little for the law? To many, they probably looked like lunatics, for only insane men would defy the king, without regard for their lives. But they were none of these things. Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were men who believed in the God of Israel.

Believers today rightly understand the concept of faith as belief in what cannot be seen. Even those who are not Christian often claim to have faith in science or humanity, because making sense of life often requires belief in what is not readily

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visible. Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael offer us a powerful example of faith in God, because they saw reality from His perspective. They trusted God with their very lives, no matter where it led.

The story of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael has become one of the most recognized narratives from the Old Testament, but this drama reveals so much more than what we might immediately notice. Their experience reveals divine mysteries that can only be fully understood when seen with the eyes of faith.

Faith enables us to believe in God and see reality as it truly is, to see God moving both in the monotony of our daily lives and in the big, crescendo moments when He reveals Himself clearly. Let's dive into this amazing story to learn how to live the theological virtue of faith in moments both big and small.

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were proud descendants of King David. As young men, they were taken captive to Babylon and forced to serve King Nebuchadnezzar. Upon their arrival, they were given the pagan names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to erase their Jewish identity and force

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them to assimilate into Babylonian culture.¹ Despite all this, the three men remained faithful to God.

Years later, King Nebuchadnezzar commands the people to bow down and worship his new golden statue. The three men refuse. When the king hears of their rejection, he is enraged and gives them an ultimatum: worship the statue or burn in a fiery furnace.

Amazingly, these men reply,

O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up (Dan 3:16–18).

When the king hears of their defiance, he orders the furnace's heat to be increased seven-fold. The three young men are bound and led to their death.

¹ Hananiah means "The Lord is gracious." His new name, Shadrach means, "command of the moon god (Aku). Mishael means "Who is like God?" His new name Meshach, means "who is Aku." Azariah means "The Lord is my help." His new name, Abednego means, "servant of Nebo." The renaming signified an attempt to erase their covenant identity and assimilate them into Babylonian culture.

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But in the fiery furnace, the three men walk upright, untouched by the flames. Realizing that God is preserving them, they sing a litany of praise among the flames, exhorting everything in the heavens and on the earth to "bless the Lord" (Dan 3:52–90).

Nebuchadnezzar witnesses the miracle and is amazed. He asks, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" (3:24). The servants say it is true, and Nebuchadnezzar replies, "But I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods" (Dan 3:25).

Imagine how King Nebuchadnezzar must have felt. Did he believe any god he worshipped could display such power?

King Nebuchadnezzar calls to the men to come out, praising the true God of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael. He recognizes that his golden statue is nothing compared to the God of Israel, and that he is no more than a mere mortal. He then declares that no other god can save in this way, commanding that no one say anything against the God of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael.

Growing up, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael had learned of God's saving power. They knew God had delivered them out of Egypt, given them manna

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in the desert, and helped them enter the land of Canaan. Their faith was formed by God's repeated revelation of Himself in the law, the prophets, the Scriptures, and His marvelous works of salvation. They believed in God and boldly attested to that belief in a culture that did not know Him.

These three faithful friends challenge us to follow in their footsteps. Let's learn about the virtue of faith and discover how the Holy Spirit wants to renew our minds and transform the way we live and witness to God in our lives.

Faith

There is more to reality than meets the eye. That's why the invisible God has revealed Himself to us. He wants us to "see" Him and understand His created world so that we can know Him, love Him, and find our happiness in Him. Our proper response to this divine self-revelation is called faith, "the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief" (CCC 1814). Faith is not a feeling. Nor is it an unreasonable "blind leap." Rather, faith is a gift, given to us by God in Baptism, that allows us to know and believe in the ultimate Truth, Christ Himself (CCC 157).

We need God's help to see reality clearly—our lives, our relationships, and the world around us.

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Because of the effects of sin, we don't always see things accurately. Our minds have been darkened, and, as a result, we tend not to see God, the world, or ourselves properly. Our wills are also weakened, making choosing the good difficult. And our emotions sometimes take over and cloud our perception of what is best. As a result, we can be tempted to value other things—money, success, popularity, etc.—too much, perhaps even more than we value God. While these passing things can be good and support human flourishing, they can never offer us the salvation, fulfillment, joy, and peace that can only be found in God.

Faith, however, enlightens our darkened minds and frees us to see everything with greater clarity, to know God as our ultimate end—the source of our happiness—and to see all the other things in this world in light of Him and His good plan for us. Said simply, "faith is the healing of our minds."² The faithful man is able to see reality as God sees it, which means seeing what truly is: God, heaven and hell, Saints and angels, the dignity of mankind, the reality of the human soul, the consequences of sin, the fruits of holiness, the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, the forgiveness of sin in confession, and Jesus's real presence in the Eucharist.

²Habinger Institute for Catholic Leadership, *True Leadership*, Sophia Consulting, LLC 2015. Cluny Media Edition, 2018. p. 44.

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Faith has two aspects. First, by faith, we accept as true all the teachings of Christ in Scripture and Tradition. Indeed, Christ is truth itself (Jn 14:6). He cannot and does not lie. And He sent the Holy Spirit to lead His Church into “all truth” (Jn 16:13, see 1 Tim 3:5).

The second aspect goes one step further. By faith, we not only accept these teachings as true, but we believe in God Who has revealed them and entrust ourselves wholly to Him. In the words of the Catechism, faith is a “personal adherence of man to God” (CCC 150). By faith, we give ourselves to God, trusting in Him and what He has revealed to us.

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael give us a beautiful example of this kind of faith. Not only do they have a deep understanding of what God revealed—“O Lord, God of Fathers...all your judgments are true”—but they also entrusted themselves fully to God, saying, “And now with all our hearts we follow you, we fear you and seek your face” as they walked into the fire (Dan 3:26–27, 3:18).

These three young friends show us an incredible example of faith in the God of Israel, but we, as Christians, have access to something even more amazing: the theological virtue of faith. This type of faith goes beyond our natural human capacities and is infused into our souls by the power of the Holy

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Spirit in baptism. Theological faith enlightens our minds even more profoundly and unites us to God in a most intimate way, allowing us to participate in His own divine life—something beyond what Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael experienced.

Are we willing to take advantage of this gift of faith in Baptism? Are we willing to learn to see the universe with the eyes of faith? And are we willing to stake our entire lives on our belief in God?

Sometimes, we may find the first aspect of faith easier. We read a book or listen to a podcast and simply agree or assent to God and what He has revealed. However, it is much more difficult to surrender and entrust ourselves to His plan. But for faith to be complete, it must inform how we speak, act, and think about the many details of daily life: our work, our leisure, how we spend our time, how we treat the people around us, how we relate to God and put that faith into practice.

Therefore, we need to grow in both aspects of faith. First, the Church teaches us that “it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith and to understand better what He has revealed.” (CCC 158) Are we actively developing our knowledge of the faith? When we encounter something, we don’t understand, do we ask questions, get more

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information, or seek answers in Scripture or the Catechism? Do we allow Christ to constantly form our minds so that we can take on the “mind of Christ?” (1 Cor 2:16). Are we seeking to know God more intimately through prayer and the sacraments?

Secondly, we must also grow in entrusting every aspect of our lives to God and the truth He has revealed. If we believe, for example, in the power of Confession, do we receive this sacrament frequently? If we understand Christ’s teaching about money, do we give generously through tithing and almsgiving? If we accept the truth that God loves us deeply, do we treat ourselves and the people around us as beloved by God? If we believe in the truth of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, do we remain constant in attending Sunday—or even daily—Mass? If we accept what God has revealed about sexuality, do we practice chastity according to our state in life? If we believe in the bliss of heaven and the tragedy of hell, are we also eager to share Christ with others, so that they too might experience eternal life?

The miracle of the fiery furnace challenges us to follow Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael’s example. Not only does faith involve genuine belief, but it also invites us to allow that faith to transform every aspect of our lives, including the ways we think, the ways we act, and the ways we serve God and others.

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Application: Witness

The gift of faith cannot be kept to oneself. Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael didn’t only tell King Nebuchadnezzar about God’s power like a classroom teacher, they also witnessed to it with their lives. The Church teaches that a “disciple of Christ must not only keep the faith and live it, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it and spread it” (CCC 1816). Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas taught that the virtue of faith naturally leads to external expressions of that faith, particularly confessing it before others.³

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael model this witness for us. Although they lived in ancient times, Babylonian culture is not so different than our own. The people of Babylon didn’t see the world around them clearly. They worshipped and sacrificed to many different gods, hoping the gods would exalt them in return. Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael saw beyond the idolatry of their day and lived counterculturally because they had a better vision; they saw the world more clearly. They were willing to die for that vision and give “supreme witness to the truth” (CCC 2473). But they also show us that being a witness requires many smaller acts of faithfulness as well. For them,

³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Online Edition, II-II, Q. 3, art. 1. Accessed at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3003.htm> March, 5 2026.

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being a faithful witness meant not only rejecting the religion of the day, but also boldly proclaiming God's name in the public square. Before bodily suffering, faithfulness meant enduring ridicule, rejection, and being singled out for their belief.

Today, being faithful witnesses will require us to live counterculturally as well. Although we don't worship golden statues, a quick glance at billboards, commercials, and the conversations trending on social media reveals that we have idols too and still struggle to understand the world as it truly is. Being a witness requires that we resist the many cultural pressures we face, such as sexual license, substance abuse, watching pornography, chasing an extravagant lifestyle, lying, gossip, or even those mundane behaviors that are counterexamples to a Christian witness: mindlessly scrolling, failing to give others our time and attention, or simply living mediocre lives.

Being a bold and faithful witness also has a positive dimension. God calls us not only to resist the errors in our culture, but He also invites us to live in ways that demonstrate the reality of what we profess. This might include embracing Christ's teaching in our personal lives: developing a prayer life, studying the Scriptures, being faithful to our vocation, receiving the sacraments, being generous with our money, or growing in character so that the

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love, kindness, and generosity of Christ can be seen in us. It might also mean directly witnessing to Christ in our communities: inviting friends and family to church, bible study, or confession; sharing the Gospel; engaging in local pro-life work; caring for the poor; or helping those with addiction.

Pope Paul VI said,

"Above all, the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness."⁴ The story of the three men and the fiery furnace is ultimately the story of the power of faith. If God can reveal His glory and bring forth His miracles through the faithful witness of three ordinary men, He can do it in our lives as well.

⁴ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 21

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DISCUSSION

Daniel 3:1-7
 Daniel 3:8-23
 Daniel 3:24-30 (RSVCE)
 or
 Daniel 3:91-97 (NAB)

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. Launching Question: Have you ever been sure of something only to find out later that you “had it all wrong”?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

In this study, we are going to talk about seeing reality clearly. The virtue that allows us to do this is faith. Many people rightly understand faith as a belief in the unseen. Even those who are not Christian claim to have a kind of faith in science or humanity because making sense of life often requires belief in what is not always immediately apparent. But what exactly is the theological virtue of faith? How could it change the way we think, act, and live?

Share a brief introduction to the theological virtue of faith (“the virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us”; not a feeling and not an unreasonable “blind leap”). Refer to CCC 1814.

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To explore this virtue in depth, we turn to the story of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, recounted in the book of Daniel—a story so sensational that it has become one of the most recognized narratives from the Old Testament. Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were proud descendants of King David. As young men, they were taken captive to Babylon and forced to serve King Nebuchadnezzar. Upon their arrival, they were given the pagan names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to erase their Jewish identity and force them to assimilate into Babylonian culture.¹ Let’s explore their story:

Read Daniel 3:1-7

02. What does the King command the leaders of his people to do? How do they respond?

Answer: The King commands that all the leaders of his lands bow down and worship before a golden idol of his creation. In response, the leaders obey without question.

03. Based on the King’s command, what is being presented as true?

¹ Hananiah means “The Lord is gracious.” His new name, Shadrach means, “command of the moon god (Aku).” Mishael means “Who is like God?” His new name Meshach, means “who is Aku.” Azariah means “The Lord is my help.” His new name, Abednego means, “servant of Nebo.” The renaming signified an attempt to erase their covenant identity and assimilate them into Babylonian culture.

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Allow the group to discuss.

Answers may include: The “truth” on offer is that this idol, made by men, is a god worthy of being worshipped. The beat of the music, the peer pressure of a whole nation, and the promise of power compel the officials to obey this unreasonable act of worship.

Please read aloud:

While it’s unlikely that we are going to be forced to bow down to a physical idol in our time, the temptation to idolatry—placing faith in something that is not God—is alive and well. Our minds have been darkened. As a result, we can be tempted to value other things—money, success, popularity, etc.—too much, perhaps even more than we value God. While these passing things can be good and support human flourishing, they can never offer us the salvation, fulfillment, joy, and peace that can only be found in God.

04. What are some ways that you’ve been personally tempted to value other things more than you value God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Let’s now look at how Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael respond to this temptation.

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Read Daniel 3:8–23

05. How do the young men respond to the king’s threat?

Answer: They refuse to bow down to the king’s idol, even if it means death.

Please read aloud:

Faith has two aspects. First, we accept as true all that has been revealed by God. The second aspect goes one step further. By faith, we not only accept certain teachings as true, but believe in God with our whole being. In doing so, “man freely commits his entire self to God.”²

06. In what ways do Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael both believe in God and what He has revealed? In what ways do they “commit their entire selves” to God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answers may include: The three young men believe both in God and what he revealed to Israel in the 1st commandment (“You shall not have any strange gods before me”). Beyond simply knowing this commandment, they live it, refusing to bow down to an idol, despite the threat of death.

² *Dei Verbum*, par. 5

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Please read aloud:

“Faith is the healing of our mind.”³ It allows us to see things with clarity—to know God as our ultimate end and other things in the world in light of Him. When we practice the virtue of faith, we gain “eternal perspective.” We see reality as God sees it.

07. Because of their faith, what realities do Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael see that others do not?

Answer: The three young men can see past the noise of the visible world around them (threats, peer and cultural pressure, promises of power and prestige). They see that God is real, He alone is worthy of worship, and that death is far better than to bow down to an idol.

Please read aloud:

Although some think of faith as “blind belief,” true faith is grounded in reason and allows us to remain reasonable when those around us are falling into error.

08. How is the faith of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael grounded in reason? In what ways do they remain more reasonable than those around them?

³Habinger Institute for Catholic Leadership, *True Leadership*, Sophia Consulting, LLC 2015. Cluny Media Edition, 2018. p. 44.

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Allow the group to discuss.

Answers may include: The faith of these young men is grounded in the true history of their people, whom God saved and brought out of slavery. It’s far more reasonable to believe in this God than Nebuchadnezzar’s god. It’s unreasonable to worship a statue made by men, even if everyone else is going along with it. Because of their faith, the three young men not only cling to God, they also remain fully sane.

Please read aloud:

These three young friends show us an incredible example of faith in the God of Israel, but we, as Christians, have access to something even more amazing: the theological virtue of faith, which goes beyond our natural human capacities and is infused into our souls, enlightening our minds to see reality even more profoundly.

09. How is the theological virtue of faith superior to the faith of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael? Empowered by this gift, what elements of idolatry are we called to reject as the three young men did? In what ways have you personally done so?

Allow the group to discuss.

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Answer: While Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael knew much of the God’s revelation in the Old Testament, God reveals Himself most fully in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we can see God’s plan and the truth about reality with even greater clarity and completeness.

Please read aloud:

Let’s continue the story.

Read Daniel 3:24–30 (RSVCE) or 3:91–97 (NAB)⁴

10. What ends up happening to the young men? How does the king react?

Answer: God hears the prayers of the young men and spares their lives, rendering the flames unable to hurt them. The king declares the God of Israel “blessed” and decrees that anyone who speaks against the God of Israel is to be punished. In short, their witness leads to the king’s belief in God.

Please read aloud:

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael’s story is powerful because they didn’t just tell King Nebuchadnezzar about God’s power like a teacher, they witnessed to it. The Church instructs us, “The disciple

⁴ Different versions of the Bible have different verse numbers for the same text.

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of Christ must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it and spread it” (CCC 1816). Jesus likewise warns us in the Gospel, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32).

11. Why is it so important for us to witness to the faith in addition to proclaiming it in words?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer:**Please read aloud:**

Being a bold and faithful witness also requires pursuing holiness in our personal and public life. It requires that we live both counterculturally and that we demonstrate the truth about what we believe.

12. How are you witnessing to Christ and a life of holiness in the face of the many idols in today’s culture? In what ways would you still like to grow?

Allow the group to discuss. Consider using **Acts 2:42** (Prayer, Fellowship, Sacraments,

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Teachings of the Church) to help categorize various areas of discipleship to pursue.

Answers may include: Developing a prayer life, reading the scriptures, participating in the sacraments, battling our interior struggle with sin, service in our communities, inviting others to mass, bible studies or confession, prolife work, care for the poor or those fighting addiction.

Please read aloud:

Pope Paul VI said, “Above all, the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness.”⁵ The story of the three men and the fiery furnace is ultimately the story of the power of faith. If God can reveal His glory and bring forth His miracles through the faithful witness of three ordinary men, He can do it in our lives as well.

⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 21

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Chapter 07

Hannah & Hope

Understanding / For your preparation as a leader / Page 170 - 181
Discussion / To use with your group / Page 184 - 193

UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Have you ever wanted something so deeply that it consumed you? What happened if you didn't get what you wanted? How did it affect you? How did you feel if you watched others get it instead? Did you start feeling jealous? Maybe you started to question God's goodness, wondering if He cares about you when He seems to care about everyone else.

Although Hannah had many good things in her life, she likely grappled with these same feelings. She had a good desire in her heart, but day after day, year after year, that longing went unmet. She saw others get what she wanted, and it only made her feel worse. Did God care about her the way He cared about others?

Although Hannah's heartache was constant, she never gave in to despair. Instead, she brought her questions and her sadness to God, confident that He would provide. Hannah helps us understand the virtue of hope, which anchors us in God's promises and guards us from discouragement.

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It is natural to want good things—finding our vocation, getting a promotion, having a child, overcoming an addiction. But when those things don't happen, it can be tempting to allow ourselves to be overcome by sadness and think that our plight in this world is the end of the story. Hannah shows us that, no matter our circumstances we can both fully enter into our sorrows and grief and also have confidence that, one day, we can find true happiness and fulfillment in God. Hannah's hope made her generous toward God, allowing her to give back to Him all He had given to her. Let's explore her story to learn more about the virtue of hope.

Hannah

Hannah lives in a society where children are not only a blessing but essential for the family's economic survival. Women who were unable to conceive were often seen as punished by God or inferior. Hannah knows she is one of these women. She has been married for years without conceiving a child. Not only does she long to become a mother, but she likely suffers from her community's perception of her.

Hannah's relationships at home compound the issue. Her husband Elkanah, unfortunately, has another wife, Peninnah, who has given birth to many children, and Peninnah mercilessly

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mocks Hannah's childlessness, rubbing salt in the wound of her pain and disappointment.

These difficult years culminate on a trip to worship God in the temple. Elkanah offers sacrifices and, when he returns, gives his family a portion of the sacrifice. When Hannah sees Peninnah's many portions for herself and her children, she can no longer contain her anguish. She breaks down into tears and refuses to eat.

At this point, Hannah likely wonders if the stigmas were true. Was God punishing her? Did He care about her desires? Was there something wrong with her?

Yet Hannah refuses to let despair overtake her. She runs to the temple, falls on her knees, and begins to pray, "O Lord of hosts, if you will regard the troubles of your handmaid and will remember me, and not forget your handmaid, and you will give your handmaid a son, then I will dedicate him to the Lord for his entire life" (1 Sam 1:11).

Hannah finishes her prayer and—this is crucial—leaves in peace. Her desire to have a child didn't disappear because she prayed. But, by entrusting her desires and her grief to God, she places everything she wants in His hands. She trusted Him, His goodness, and His will for her life, and left the temple with serenity. Whether or not she

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ever had a child, she had confidence that God would ultimately bring about what was best for her.

God, however, does respond to Hannah's pleas. Shortly afterward, she conceives and gives birth to her son and names him Samuel. Filled with gratitude, Hannah keeps her promise and brings Samuel back to the temple to grow up under guidance of the priest. God gave Samuel as a gift to Hannah, and so Hannah gave him back to God in return, entrusting him and his life to God in the same way that she had entrusted her own longings to His loving care.

When she brings Samuel to the temple, Hannah breaks into a song of joy, proclaiming, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy like the Lord, there is none besides thee; there is no rock like our God" (1 Sam 2:1-2).

Samuel grows up in God's presence and becomes a pivotal figure in Israel. He serves as the last judge of Israel and ushers God's people into the period of the kings. Samuel would anoint Saul as the first King of Israel, and eventually anoints king David as well, through whose family line Jesus Christ would enter the world. If Hannah didn't cling to hope in her hour of greatest darkness, there

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might never have been a Samuel, and his impact on God's plan of salvation would have been lost.

Hannah's example of the virtue of hope shows us how to handle life's unavoidable tragedies and disappointments. Her assurance was not in herself, or the goods of this world, but in God. The virtue of hope enabled Hannah to endure her sufferings with an eternal perspective and, in the end, her hope did not disappoint. Let's dive into the virtue of hope and learn how we can not only follow Hannah's example, but also discover how we, as disciples of Christ, can build upon the natural hope that Hannah possessed and embrace the supernatural virtue of hope that comes to us in baptism.

Hope

Hope is "the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit" (CCC 1817).

As human beings, we have many desires—bodily desire for food and rest, a drive to create and accomplish, eagerness for fun and adventure, and a longing for certain relationships to work out. At a natural level, it is appropriate for us to hope for these desires to be fulfilled—to pass the test, to find our spouse, to have a happy marriage, to stay healthy, or to succeed in our career.

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But in this fallen world, we often experience the opposite—failure, sadness, pain, unmet wants and needs, and broken relationships—and it is understandable that we may feel overwhelmed sometimes by our unfulfilled desires and start to think we will never be truly happy because some aspect of life remains a source of constant hurt or frustration. We can also be tempted to make natural goods our primary pursuit, thinking that only getting married, being successful, starting a family, fitting in with the right crowd or having a certain amount of money will lead to the happiness we desire.

While the things of this world can bring a certain amount of happiness into our lives, they cannot satisfy the deepest desires of our hearts. As St. Augustine famously said, "restless are our hearts until they rest in you." And the more we cling to earthly goods as the sole source of our happiness, the more devastated we are when we don't get what we want. Such pain and sadness can lead to giving up, chronic discouragement, and even despair.

The man of hope, however, is buoyed up and able to face the hardships of life, knowing that, in the end, Christ will satisfy his deepest longings. He presses forward to overcome pain and sadness, because of his confidence that, if he remains faithful, he will arrive at his heavenly home where all desire will be fulfilled, and Christ "will wipe

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away every tear from [his] eyes” (Rev 21:4). Hope is a “sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” that prevents the hopeful man from being tossed about by the “waves” he faces in life—a difficult breakup, the loss of job, the suffering of a family member (CCC 1820). Like St. Paul, the hopeful man can say, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18).

Having hope guards against two vices:

Despair: Despair is the loss of hope, believing that God will not provide for our needs. This can happen in dramatic ways, like when someone uses drugs to numb the pain in their life, but it can also happen in moments of everyday life, like when we overeat or use pornography to suppress our loneliness, give in to busyness and workaholism to fill our time, scroll on our phone to distract us from a wound in our marriage, or give up on serving Christ and His Church because we think that the world is just too broken and will never change. When we despair, we can tell ourselves that things will never get better, that we are all alone, and that there is no use in trying. We may even give up on prayer or receiving the sacraments.

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Presumption: The second vice is presumption. Instead of placing our confidence in God and trusting that He will satisfy our hearts, presumption leads us to place our trust in ourselves and our own ability to achieve happiness. In its most extreme form, presumption can mean thinking and acting like we deserve God’s mercy and forgiveness, even without repentance. But it can also come in simpler forms, such as increasing our dedication to our career, confident that if we just try harder, we will get what we want out of life. Presumption can make us appear hopeful insofar as it drives us forward to overcome life’s obstacles, but such progress rests on our own abilities and steals from our only true source of hope: God Himself. When we presume, we choose self-reliance over dependence on God, which can lead to overconfidence, entitlement, and spiritual laziness.

The longer Hannah went without a child, the more painful her life became. Yet she didn’t despair, losing all hope in a fulfilling future, or presumption, ignoring God to try to get what she wanted. Instead, she brought her grief to God, trusting in Him alone as the source of her peace. When Hannah conceives Samuel, she even became an icon of hope:

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An image of ... hope is the pregnant woman. She often feels sick, the slender shape that she has spent so much energy preserving has become thick and puffy; her emotions are playing tricks on her; her legs and back are sore, she gets tired easily, she feels the pain of the baby kicking.... Yet a pregnant woman is typically not dejected and despairing; quite the reverse. She is filled with plans, she is often happy, she speaks of her suffering with a certain wry humor.... She is thinking of a new life and what that new life will mean.... And the very hardships of pregnancy, the growing burden of the child, are signs that feed her hope.¹

What about you? Perhaps you hope to get into a specific graduate school or enter a competitive career. You might have an idea of the kind of lifestyle, income, or home you want to have. Perhaps you long to become a husband or a wife, a father or mother. Maybe you want to excel in a certain sport or art form. What will you do if things don't turn out as you expect? How will you handle the inevitable interruptions and curveballs that derail your dreams? If you

¹ Habinger Institute, *True Leadership*, pp. 47-48.

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allow the Holy Spirit to increase your hope, you will not be overcome by life's disappointments. Hope will anchor you in Christ and allow you to face life's challenges, confident that, in the end, God will provide for your every need.

Application: Indomitability

Most of us have noble intentions. We want to live well, know God, obey Him, serve others, and live a life of virtue. But this life, while filled with beauty and goodness, remains a "valley of tears." We want to get married, but we can't seem to find our spouse. We struggle with an addiction that seems impossible to break. Out of nowhere, someone we love dies. In these situations, we can be tempted to believe that life is too hard, that we will never be fulfilled, and that maybe we should just give up.

Indomitability is the virtue by which we are not deterred or dominated by the challenges we face in life. Hope enables us to become indomitable because it allows us to view life's difficulties in the light of eternity. This earthly life includes real sorrow, fear, grief, and suffering, and being virtuous does not mean suppressing these feelings. Rather, indomitability enables us to continue doing the good, even in the face of life's challenges and sorrows—when we may not see how doing so will make any difference, failure seems inevitable,

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or we do not think we have what it takes. Think of a parent with a special needs child, who takes care of them every day, knowing that that child may never be able to say thank you and the hardships of caretaking are exhausting. Or think about someone who struggles with a broken relationship that may never be repaired. It can be right and good to lament in these situations. Yet indomitability strengthens us to continue striving for what is good amidst our difficulties and not allow resistance, sadness, grief, or setbacks deter us from pursuing what is right.

Indomitability looks like doing our best work and treating our co-workers well, even when our work environment is difficult and we feel pressure to perform. Or like preserving in prayer for a loved one who has left the Church, refusing to give up hope that they might one day turn back to Christ. It might look like playing very hard in a sport, continuing to battle and giving our best, even when we are playing against a great team that is well in the lead. Or it may mean loving and serving our family, even when our own hearts are burdened by the difficulties we are enduring in those relationships.

Consider your own life. How do you react when life seems impossible, tedious, or doesn't seem to fulfill your desires? Indomitability frees us to bring our sadness, anger, frustration, grief,

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and pain to the Lord and not be overcome by these feelings, so that we can do what is good, remaining constant in loving God and others.

We can grow in indomitability through small daily actions. We can choose to stay faithful to prayer, even when we know we have seriously sinned or God feels distant. We can decide to keep giving generously to others, even when it seems like the least satisfying thing in the world. We can choose to pursue virtue, even after we've fallen for what seems like the thousandth time. And we can share the truth of the Gospel, even when others resist us, ridicule us, and when remaining faithful and zealous leaves us feeling empty.

As we grow in this virtue, we will begin to embody St. Paul's words: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:8-10).

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DISCUSSION

1 Samuel 1:1-18
 1 Samuel 1:19-28
 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. Launching Question: Have you ever wanted something so deeply that it consumed you? If you ended up getting it, did it give you the happiness that you thought it would? If you didn't get it, how did that affect you?

Please read aloud:

It is natural to want good things—finding our vocation, getting a promotion, having a child, overcoming an addiction. But when those things don't happen, or are delayed, it can be tempting to allow ourselves to be overcome by sadness and think that our plight is the end of our story. Yet God does not abandon us in these circumstances. Instead, He offers us hope.

Share a brief introduction to the theological virtue of hope (“the virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness,” it “responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man”). Refer to CCC 1817-1818.

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In the Book of First Samuel, we find a woman who is familiar with the struggle against despair. She has many good things, but she also has a great desire that goes unmet—day after day, year after year. She sees others get what she wants, and it only makes her feel worse. Yet, she responds with hope.¹ Let's explore her story to learn more about this great virtue.

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-18

02. What is Hannah's great desire that has, thus far, gone unmet? What do you think this must have been like for her?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Hannah has been unable to conceive a child, though her husband's other wife, Peninnah, has conceived several and mocks Hannah's infertility. This would have been a long, humiliating and degrading experience intensified by the fact that women without children were often seen as punished by God or inferior in the culture of that time.

03. What does Hannah do with her unmet desire?

¹ Note that while Hannah possesses hope in God, her hope is still of a lower order than the theological virtue of hope that Christ pours into our hearts in baptism.

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Answer: She runs to the temple, falls on her knees, and turns over her desire to God.

04. How do you respond when God doesn't seem to fulfill your desires, especially those closest to your heart?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

At a natural level, it is appropriate for us to hope for good things—to pass the test, to find our spouse, to stay healthy, to succeed in our career. It can be tempting, however, to make these good but passing things our sole pursuit in life, imagining “if I only had fill-in-the-blank, I would finally be happy.”

05. In a similar way, Hannah would have been tempted to make a potential child the sole condition of her happiness and fulfillment. But let's look closely. Does her happiness seem to depend on attaining her desire? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Hannah's happiness does not seem to depend on attaining her desire because she attains peace, and this is crucial, before receiving it. Her desire to have a son doesn't disappear, but by entrusting her desire to God,

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she finds peace. Whether or not she ever has a child, she seems to have confidence that God will ultimately bring about what is best for her.

Please read aloud:

Having hope requires that we guard against two vices.

The first vice is despair. The despairing man loses all hope, believing that God will not provide for his needs. He tells himself that things will never get better, that he is alone, and that there is no use in trying.

The second vice is presumption. The presumptuous man, on the other hand, has a kind of hope, but it isn't hope in God. It's hope in himself and his own ability to achieve happiness. In short, he avoids despair by doing things “his way.” In its most extreme form, the presumptuous man can think and act like he deserves God's mercy and forgiveness, even without repentance.

06. How do we know that Hannah isn't despairing or being presumptuous in this situation?

Answer: Because Hannah finds peace before “things get better,” it's obvious that she doesn't despair. We know that Hannah is not

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presumptuous because she turns to the Lord in her need instead of relying on her own power.

07. What about you? Are you more prone to despair, thinking your happiness depends upon some worldly outcome? Or are you more prone to presumption, assuming you “have what it takes” to be happy without God’s help or grace?

Allow the group to discuss.

08. Hannah certainly hopes in God, but she does not possess the theological virtue of hope, which comes to us in baptism. How is Christian hope superior to the hope that Hannah has?

Answer: Hannah’s hope is aimed at good worldly things, while theological hope, because of the Resurrection of Christ, hopes for eternal life and salvation. The theological virtue of hope is infused into our souls at baptism. It “does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

(Optional) Please read aloud:

Hannah, being a pregnant woman, is actually an image of hope. A pregnant woman often feels sick,

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the slender shape that she has spent so much energy preserving has become thick and puffy; her emotions are playing tricks on her; her legs and back are sore, she gets tired easily, she feels the pain of the baby kicking.... Yet “A pregnant woman is typically not dejected and despairing; quite the reverse. She is filled with plans, she is often happy, she speaks of her suffering with a certain wry humor.... She is thinking of a new life and what that new life will mean.... And the very hardships of pregnancy, the growing burden of the child, are signs that feed her hope.”¹

Please read aloud:

Let’s continue the story and see what becomes of Hannah’s hope.

Read 1 Samuel 1:19–28

09. What does Hannah receive in the end? What does Hannah do after receiving what she’s always desired?

Answer: She is finally blessed with a son, Samuel. She offers him to the Lord in fulfillment of her promise and gives God her thanks and worship.

Please read aloud:

Hannah’s gift of Samuel marks a hard-won moment for her, one that was years of patient suffering in

¹ Habinger Institute, *True Leadership*, pp. 47-48.

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the making. Most of us have similar aspirations. We want to live well, know God, obey Him, serve others, and live a life of virtue. This is easier said than done. While our earthly lives are filled with beauty and goodness, they remain a “valley of tears.”

The virtue that allows us to continue striving for what is good is called indomitability. The indomitable man refuses to be deterred or dominated by life’s challenges. He presses on, hoping in God and viewing difficulty and setbacks in light of eternity.

10. Consider your own life. How do you react when choosing the good seems unpleasant, tedious, or even impossible? Does it crush your spirit and throw you off the path? How hard are you to “dominate,” so to speak, to deter from a virtuous decision?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

We can grow in indomitability through small daily actions. Examples include staying faithful to prayer despite having sinned, giving generously despite feeling nothing as we do it, fighting an addiction even after we’ve fallen for what seems like the thousandth time, or persisting in mission despite it seeming fruitless. Through these small, daily acts, we can become people who persevere, in hope, to the end.

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11. How can hope help us be more indomitable, more able to persevere in doing good despite life’s challenges?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Hope enables us to become indomitable because it allows us to view life’s difficulties in the light of eternity. We know Christ will be victorious, so we can place our total confidence in His plan for our lives, even if that plan involves hardship and suffering.

Please read aloud:

Because of Hannah’s indomitable spirit, she perseveres to the end. Her desire for a child is also satisfied, and she fulfills her vow to God in return. When Hannah brings Samuel to the temple, she also breaks into a song of victory and praise, which we’ll read now.

Read 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Please read aloud:

The Song of Hannah, which prefigures Mary’s Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke, is an elegant testimony to the virtue of hope.

12. Think about some of the themes we’ve touched on in this study: Not placing our ultimate hope in worldly goods;

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resisting despair and presumption; and living as indomitable disciples of the Lord. How are these themes captured in the Song of Hannah?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answers may include:

Not placing our hope in worldly goods:

- “My heart exalts in the Lord”
- “There is no rock like our God”
- “Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread”

Against presumption:

- “For not by might shall a man prevail”
- “The bows of the mighty are broken”

Against despair:

- “He raises the poor up from the dust...”
- “He will guard the feet of his faithful ones”

Indomitability:

- “The feeble gird on strength”
- “The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces”

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Please read aloud:

As is a theme in this study, Hannah’s virtue will end up blessing not only her own life, but the world. Samuel grows up in God’s presence and becomes a pivotal figure in Israel. He serves as the last judge of Israel and ushers God’s people into the golden age of the kings. Samuel would anoint Saul as the first King of Israel, and eventually anoints king David as well, through whose family line Jesus Christ would enter the world.

13. Write a final application question about how to apply the virtue of hope to one’s own life.



Chapter 08

Mary & Charity

Understanding / For your preparation as a leader / Page 196 - 207
Discussion / To use with your group / Page 210- 217

UNDERSTANDING

What do I need to know about this passage?

Few would expect a young woman without wealth, status or power to become the most influential human person the world has ever known. Her visible accomplishments amounted to becoming the wife of a humble tradesman and the mother of a son. How did a life so small by worldly standards become so universally venerated? How could she say, “[A]ll generations will call me blessed”? (Lk 1:48). Yet, two-thousand years later, we can see that she was right: Mary of Nazareth is the most revered and beloved woman ever to live.

Mary’s greatness, however, is not found in talent, status, or achievement, but in a life animated by something supernatural—the theological virtue of charity. Closeness with God, knowing Him and living in union with Him, was her deepest desire. When God invited Mary to participate in the greatest event in human history by becoming the mother of His Son, she offered her total and complete yes, choosing and loving God above all else. Her decision did not bring her status, security,

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or ease. Instead, it ultimately led into sharing in the suffering of her Son as a woman of sorrows. And yet, through her self-giving love, God raised her up to become the model of perfect charity.

Pope Benedict XVI said,

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” Many of us recognize that life’s ultimate purpose is to love and be loved. When we fall in love with others, our lives become brighter. We long to spend time with them, get to know them, and sacrifice ourselves for their well-being. In turn, we hope that others will do the same for us. But even more excellent, is becoming enamored with God—encountering Him, knowing Him, and giving everything to unite ourselves to Him.

The virtue of charity elevates our human love with divine love. And Mary is the perfect model of charity, because she loved God—the fulfillment of all her desires—so deeply that His love penetrated every aspect of her life. As we enter

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Mary's story, we learn not only what charity is, but also how to follow her example and live it well.

Mary

The Church teaches that, to fulfill her role as mother of the savior, Mary was “wholly borne by God’s grace” (CCC 490). Redeemed from the moment of her conception, Mary led a sinless life. Therefore, she offers us a comprehensive vision of what it looks to live in union with God, animated by the fullness of charity. Let’s explore two key moments in Mary’s life, the Annunciation and the Crucifixion, to understand Mary’s charity, and learn how we too can reach the heights of divine love through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Annunciation

Mary is, likely, about fourteen years old. On an ordinary day, the angel Gabriel appears to her proclaiming, “Hail, full of grace. The Lord is with you” (Lk 1:28). Mary is shocked and frightened at the angel’s greeting, but Gabriel explains, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (Lk 1:30–31).

Imagine being in Mary’s position. God is inviting her to become the preeminent woman in His plan of salvation. She does not completely understand how it will work, or how her life will be affected.

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But Mary put God first in her life. She wanted to pursue Him and His plan for her life, rather than her own. She was so in tune with her desire for God, and so desired His will to be accomplished, that a resounding “yes” flows out of her. With total trust and surrender, she consents, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38 NABRE).

At the moment of Mary’s yes, the Holy Spirit fills her, and the word of God literally takes shape in her womb. Her life instantly takes on new meaning. Filled with charity, she willingly endures the complications that arise from her unique vocation. We can think of her “yes” at the Annunciation as an image of the “yes” that permeated her entire existence. Mary’s “fiat,” with all its joy and suffering, reveals the nature of charity. Each step of her obedience was made not for reward or personal benefit, but for love of God Himself. Closeness with God was her heart’s desire. Everything else was secondary.

What about you? Is each choice you make a loving “Yes” to God? Do you desire God above all else? Are you interested in His plan for your life, even more than your own? Does your eagerness to draw close to God, to be with Him, permeate the way you live your life? Loving God with total surrender is never easy in this broken

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world, but Mary shows us that with the help of God's grace, we can truly love, even when it seems impossible by mere human standards, for "with God nothing will be impossible" (Lk 1:37).

The Crucifixion

As Mary watches her son grow, the virtue of charity—her union with God and desire for Him—grows also. She sees Jesus begin His public ministry, preach, and perform miracles. She also sees the Jewish authorities begin to plot against Him. And in His final hours, Mary faithfully fulfills the demands of true love. Though almost everyone abandoned Him, Mary never did. Just as divine love compelled her to say "yes," when she received Jesus into her womb, her charity kept her united to Jesus throughout His suffering and death.

As Jesus progresses through His passion, Mary stays with Him, firmly united to Him in His suffering. She watches as He is scourged and crowned with thorns, unable to wipe His blood away or treat His wounds. She sorrowfully beholds Jesus fall repeatedly and struggle to get up. As the guards nail her innocent Son to a criminal's cross, a sword pierces her own heart just as Simeon said it would (Lk 2:35). Finally, Mary watches the blood flow from Jesus' body as He hangs on the cross until he finally expires.

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The baby she had once held in swaddling clothes is now the man she is holding in a burial cloth. Yet even amid overwhelming sorrow—the most difficult moment of her life—supernatural love fills her. Divine love had been the foundation of Mary's entire life. Therefore, staying, enduring, and fulfilling love's demand was her natural response. It's who she had become. Love enables her—under unthinkable circumstances—to "remain in me" by following Jesus all the way to the cross (Jn 15:4). She "faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross...and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth."

Are we willing to love Christ so deeply that we will remain united with Him, even to the point of remaining with Him while enduring our heaviest crosses? Mary's example is a challenge and an inspiration for us to continue loving, even when it is difficult and demands great sacrifice. And while none of us are perfect like Mary, through God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we have the virtue of charity infused into our hearts, making loving like Mary a real possibility in our lives too. To better understand how to live like this, let's explore the virtue of charity more deeply.

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Charity

Charity “is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (CCC 1822). (1 Cor 13:7). St. Thomas Aquinas defines natural human love as, “to will the good of the other” (CCC 1766). The theological virtue of charity, however, goes beyond our natural human loves.

Christ tells us, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn 14:34). This commandment is new because it invites us not only to love, but to love as Jesus did. That means giving like Him, serving like Him, being humble, just, and patient like Him. It means living with Jesus’s kindness, compassion, and purity, completely radiating His love to the world.

Does this sound impossible? The virtue of Charity is not something we achieve on our own. It is infused into us through the power of the Holy Spirit because, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). This divine love “upholds and purifies our human ability to love, and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love” (CCC 1827). Amazingly, as simple human beings, we can become capable of loving with divine love.

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Charity is the pinnacle of all virtues. St. Paul tells us, “If I...have not love...I am nothing. If I give away all I have...but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:1-3). As Christians, we may have many virtues, but if these virtues are not animated by love, then something is missing. Charity “binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:14). It inspires and perfects the other virtues, ordering them toward God. The charitable man follows Christ’s commandments out of love, not as a slave doing their master’s bidding but as a child responding to Him who “first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). He treats others justly because he loves God. He makes prudent decisions because he love God. He remains faithful because he loves God. His life proves that “Love is itself the fulfillment of all our works” (CCC 108).

Mary models this love for us, because she shows how to live charity in our humanity. 1 Corinthians 3:4-7 says, “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Mary’s life—even amid confusion, suffering, and darkness—revealed these aspects of charity. Imagine, as His mother, watching Jesus be misunderstood, and even called the devil himself. What kind of patience and forgiveness did she have to exercise?

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Consider her own ideas of what it would be like to raise the Son of God, the sweetness and peace she possibly imagined. How did she let go of her own preferences so He could sacrifice Himself for all of us? How would she have had to shower the Apostles with kindness and hope, even when she also did not understand God's plan? Mary's life was not so different from ours. It was mixed with joy and happiness as well as intense suffering and confusion. But Mary fully united herself to God, and He enabled her to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things: "by her complete adherence to the Father's will, to his Son's redemptive work, and to every prompting of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary is the Church's model of faith and charity" (CCC 967).

What could charity look like in our lives? Unlike Mary, we were born with the wound of original sin. And yet, as baptized Christ, we too possess the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, making us capable of Christ-like charity. There are infinite ways that we can love. It may look like listening with patience when we would rather interrupt, resisting gossip, or extending grace to difficult coworkers or family members. It may look like choosing to go about our daily, mundane tasks with the intention of offering them to God as acts of love. Or it may look like surrendering all that we are and all that we have for the sake of Christ.

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As Christians, love is our chief aim, the virtue with which we want our entire lives to be permeated. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux said, "Miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here by a smiling look, there by a kindly word; always doing the smallest right and doing it all for love."

Application: Heroic Generosity

In our culture, generosity is held up as a virtue—but sometimes only after we have achieved all our personal hopes and dreams. We receive the message that we should first take care of ourselves, build our future, and achieve a certain amount of wealth or self-actualization. Only after doing these things, out of our abundance, should we "give back," sharing our leftovers instead of our "first fruits." But charity demands that we become extravagantly generous—whether we have great wealth and have achieved all our dreams or not. St. Mother Teresa echoed this idea when she said, "Love to be real, it must cost — it must hurt — it must empty us of self."

The generosity we are called to as Christians is heroic. The idea of heroic virtue comes from the process of canonizing saints, in which the Church proclaims that certain men and women "practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God's grace" (CCC 828). Yet heroic virtue isn't merely for the exceptional. Ordinary Christians,

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all followers of Christ, are called to the heights of holiness, to heroic virtue. Therefore, beyond merely the ordinary practice of generosity, Christian charity involves exercising generosity to a supreme degree, it involves heroic generosity.

This is exactly what we see in Mary. She held nothing back from God. Her whole life was a generous gift back to the Father. That kind of heroic generosity is what we need from Christians today as well. And here's the great news: the Church tells us that man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." It is precisely when we give ourselves away, when we are willing to dedicate our lives to Christ and His Kingdom that we find what we are looking for and become who we are meant to be.

We can call this the "law of self-gift." In giving everything to Christ, Mary became the woman God destined her to become. By participating in Christ's total self-offering, she found her ultimate fulfillment in being "Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church" (CCC 963). We too can become who we are meant to be and find the fulfillment we are longing for when we choose to give our lives to God in love. When we give of ourselves to Christ, to His mission, and to others, we lose nothing. Instead, our lives are deeply enriched, and we gain so much more. God reminds us that whatever we give, will be

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given back to us "pressed down, shaken together, running over" (Lk 6:38). And so, trusting and loving Him, He calls us to be heroically generous with our entire lives, laying everything at His disposal.

What does this look like? It resembles Mary's constant "yes." We echo her words, "Be it done to me, according to your word," every day, surrendering every part of our lives to Him. This might mean putting other people's needs before ours. It may mean giving away more money than what feels comfortable. It may require us to place our spouse's and loved one's needs above our own. It might mean having more children. It may mean changing the career we have, the vocation we pursue, or our daily schedule. And it may mean continuing to say "yes" to God in love, even when it seems like He is asking too much of us or when we feel weak, incompetent, too small, or too sinful.

Mary's example encourages us to reach for the heights of love. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can live with heroic generosity. In Mary, God has not only given us a model, but He has also given us a mother, advocate, and intercessor. At any moment we can ask for her intercession to aid us in our quest to become people of Christ-like charity.

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DISCUSSION

Luke 1:26–36
John 19:17–30

Discussion guide for your Bible study

01. Launching Question: Have you ever loved someone, even at the cost of your own reputation, ambition, preferences, or future?

Please read aloud:

Many of us recognize that life's ultimate purpose is to love and be loved. But how many of us would sacrifice everything—reputation, ambition, preferences, comfort—to truly love God and other people?

Give a brief introduction to the theological virtue of charity (also called love, “The virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God,” not a feeling but a decision). Refer to CCC 1822–1818.

02. Write an understanding question about the nature of true love, revealing how this virtue is different than how it is often explained in our culture.

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Please read aloud:

From an obscure town in the middle of nowhere, there is a woman neither wealthy, nor highly educated, nor well known. Her visible accomplishments amount to becoming the wife of a carpenter and the mother of a son. And yet, two thousand years after she lived, she is revered as one of the most beloved, influential, and powerful women who has ever lived. Her name is Mary of Nazareth.

How did a life so small by the world's standards become so universally venerated? How is she the one who can say, “[A]ll generations will call me blessed?” (Lk 1:48).

Mary's greatness is not found in talent, status, or achievement, but in perfect love or charity—the pinnacle of all virtues. As we enter Mary's story, we learn not only what charity is, but how to follow her example and live it well.

Read Luke 1:26–36

03. What does the angel propose to Mary? What is Mary's response?

Answer: The angel proposes that she become the mother of the Messiah. After asking a clarifying question, she responds with total trust and generosity,

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proclaiming herself the handmaid of the Lord.

Please read aloud:

Mary was so in tune with her desire for God, and so desired His will to be accomplished, that a resounding “yes” flows out of her, no matter the cost. Closeness with God was her heart’s desire. Everything else was secondary.

04. Do you have a similar desire to be close to God and do His will? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Charity is the virtue that “binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:14). Love inspires and perfects the other virtues, ordering them toward God. Through charity, we follow Christ’s commandments out of love, not as slaves doing their master’s bidding but as children responding to Him who “first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19).

05. How does Mary show us that charity binds together all the other virtues in harmony? How does love imbue all of Mary’s actions?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible Answer: Everything Mary did was motivated by love. Each step, each suffering,

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each little act of virtue was made not for any reward or personal benefit, but because of her love for God. Grounded in perfect love, the “yes” she made at the Annunciation echoes through her entire life as she bears every trial and suffering with loving acceptance.

Please read aloud:

Love is never easy in this broken world, but Mary shows us that with the help of God’s grace, we can love, even when it seems impossible by mere human standards, for “with God nothing will be impossible” (Lk 1:37).

06. Are your daily actions animated by a loving “Yes” to God? What about when you are tired, angry, or misunderstood? What about when the task you are supposed to perform seems impossible?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Charity may look like listening with patience when we would rather interrupt, resisting gossip, or extending grace to difficult coworkers or family members. It may look like choosing to go about our daily, mundane tasks with the intention of offering them to God as acts of love. Or it may look like surrendering all that we are and all that we have for the sake of Christ.

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Similarly, Mary's daily, often mundane, "yesses" to the Lord culminate in the dramatic passion of her son.

Read John 19:17-30

07. What is Mary doing while her son dies?
What do you think this experience was like for her?

Allow the group to discuss.

Answer: Mary stands beneath Jesus under the cross. Surely, she is engulfed in sorrow, and a sword pierces her own heart just as Simeon said it would (Lk 2:35).

(Optional) Write an additional observation or understanding question about Mary's presence at Jesus's crucifixion.

08. We know that charity consists in "[loving] God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God" (CCC 1822). What do we learn about Mary's love in these moments?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible Answer: Divine love was the foundation of Mary's entire life. Therefore,

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staying, enduring, and fulfilling love's demand was her natural response. It's who she had become. Love enables her—under unthinkable circumstances—to "remain in me" by following Jesus all the way to the cross (Jn 15:4). She "faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross...and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth."

09. Are you willing to love Christ so deeply that you will remain united with Him, even to the point of remaining with Him while enduring your heaviest crosses? What might this look like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Beyond merely the ordinary practice of generosity, Christian charity involves exercising generosity to a supreme degree, it involves heroic generosity. This is exactly what we see in Mary. She held nothing back from God. Her whole life was a generous gift back to the Father. That kind of heroic generosity is what we need from Christians today as well. And here's the great news: the Church tells us that man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." It is precisely when we give ourselves away, when we are willing to dedicate our lives to Christ and

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His Kingdom that we find what we are looking for and become who we are meant to be.

10. How would giving yourself more generously to Christ make your life better, fuller, and happier?

Allow the group to discuss.

11. What might heroic generosity look like practically in your life? Where are some places where you could love more generously?

Allow the group to discuss.

Possible Answers: It might mean putting other people's needs before ours, giving away more money than what feels comfortable, placing our spouse's and loved one's needs above our own. It might mean making sacrifices to have more children. It could change the career we have, the vocation we pursue, or affect how we set up our daily schedule. And it may mean continuing to say "yes" to God in love, even when it seems like He is asking too much of us or when we feel weak, incompetent, too small, or too sinful.

12. Christ tells us, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another;

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even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (Jn 14:34). This commandment is new because it invites us not only to love, but to love as Jesus did. Amazingly, through the power of God's grace, we can truly love in this supernatural way. Now that we have explored the meaning of true charity, what graces do you need to ask for to be able to love as He loved us?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud:

Mary's example encourages us to reach the heights of love. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, and God's grace we can live with heroic generosity. In Mary, God has not only given us a model, but He has also given us a mother, advocate, and intercessor. At any moment we can ask for her intercession to aid us in our quest to become people of Christlike charity.

13. This is the last chapter of the Bible study. Write an understanding or application question that brings together the various topics discussed throughout the entire study.

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Christlike Character

