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PURSUING CHRIST-LIKE CHARACTER



Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read Matthew 19:16–20.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

"What do I still lack?"

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That was the amazing question a young person once asked Jesus some 2,000 years ago. The young man had already been a very strong believer, fulfilling all the basics of what God required of him according to the Jewish law. But deep in his heart, he didn't want to do the bare minimum. He wanted to give God more of his life. When Jesus reminded him to follow the Ten Commandments, the man remarkably replied, "All these I have observed; what do I still lack?" (Mt 19:20).

What a seemingly exceptional young man! Think about it: How many of us could say we are already following all of God's commandments? But that's not all. This man wasn't content with merely obeying all the rules — doing the right thing, saying the right thing, believing the right thing. He claimed he wanted to do even more for God. He wanted to give God his whole heart. So he asked Jesus, "What do I still lack?"

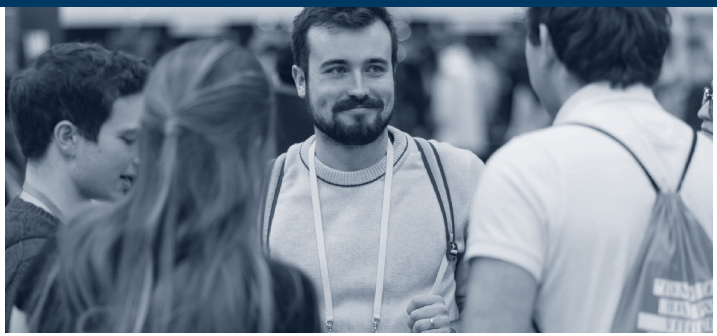
That's the same crucial question every true disciple should always ask: "What do I still lack?" How can I love more, serve more, trust more? How can I give more of my life to God? How can I live more like Jesus lived?

Being a disciple of Jesus is not about merely checking off boxes ("I prayed, I went to Mass, I led a Bible study, I didn't fall into mortal sin today"). It's not simply a matter of "doing the right things." Jesus invites us to give our entire lives to him. Being a disciple is ultimately about our total transformation in Christ — a lifelong process, but one that will never take off if we don't have the generous heart exhibited by this young man in Matthew 19.

DISCUSS

In what areas of your life are you currently striving for greater virtue, prayer, or friendship? In what ways are you trying to surrender more fully to God?

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MORE THAN GOOD INTENTIONS

This young man in the Bible had noble aspirations. But sincere intentions are not enough. We have to put those intentions into action. Unfortunately, the story of this young man takes a downward turn after Jesus offers him this invitation: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mt 19:21). Instead of following where his generous heart has led him so far, the young man suddenly hesitates. He holds back. He has come a long way with his faith, and a part of him wants to go further — but this is one step he is unwilling to take. Instead of striving to give his entire life to Jesus, he went backwards in his faith journey and settled for mediocrity: "he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions" (Mt 19:22).

Living as a disciple is a tall order. Jesus wants our whole hearts. He calls the rich young man and all of us to be holy as God is holy and to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48). Indeed, the goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to the image of Christ.

DISCUSS

Why do you think the rich young man refused to give up everything? Is there a part of your life that you are hesitant to give to Jesus?

AMAZING GRACE

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But all this talk of perfection and holiness can be overwhelming. We might say to ourselves, "I have so many shortcomings, so many areas where I'm lacking! Is this really possible? Can I become holy as Christ is holy? Can I really become perfect?"

The answer is yes — but not in the way we might think. We are called to grow in virtue and holiness. But perfection is not achieved through a self-willed perfectionism. It's a transformation that can only take place through the power of God's grace.

We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son.

— Pope St. John Paul II

"Grace" is a popular Christian word, but few understand what it truly means and what difference it makes in our daily lives. In essence, grace is Christ's divine life in us. It is the very life of the divine Son of God abiding in our souls!

We grow in grace through prayer, faithfulness, and most especially through the sacraments. By being filled with Christ's life, we are gradually changed and begin to think more like Christ. We begin to value what he values, serve more like him, bear sufferings more like him, love more like him — for it is Christ himself helping us to do things that we could not do on our own. Jesus wants to relive his life in us through grace.

To illustrate the power of grace in our souls, Catholics throughout the centuries have often used the image of a cold iron rod being placed in fire. As the fire heats the iron, the iron begins to take on the properties of the fire; it gets hot and glows red. The iron rod is still iron, but it becomes like the fire, even capable of igniting other fires. Through grace, something similar begins to happen in our lives. We are like the iron, placed in the fire of God's grace, becoming changed, taking on the characteristics of God — his love, patience, mercy, and kindness (Gal 5:22–23). The more we allow Christ's grace to transform us, the more we can say with St. Paul, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

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Are you praying and striving for this type of transformation in your life? Do you call on God's grace to help you live more like Christ? Are you becoming more and more like God?

Imagine for a moment that you are meeting with someone who knows very little about Christianity. They want to understand Jesus and the Christian life, and so they decide to observe you. They notice how often you pray, how you treat your friends and family, the way you talk about other people, how hard you work, the shows you watch, the music you listen to, what you do on the weekends, how generous you are with your time, how well you care for those in need, how well you guard your purity — everything. After watching you for a month, would that person have a good idea of what it means to be a Christian? Or would they get a skewed, distorted image?

Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

— Matthew 5:48

There's a story of a peasant who traveled to Ars, France to see a famous priest named St. John Vianney. When the peasant returned home, his faith was renewed. Surprised, his friends and relatives asked him, "But who did you see in Ars?" He responded, "I saw God, in a man." People should be able to say the same about us.

DISCUSS

Like iron in the fire, how have you taken on some of the "properties" of God's love? Do you view your life as a disciple as being all about this process of transformation in Christ, or are you tempted to see being a disciple as an activity?

THREE ENEMIES: SELF-JUSTIFICATION, SELF-RELIANCE, SELF-CONDEMNATION

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There are three things that keep us from taking on the character of Christ and growing in holiness.

- ***Self-justification:*** Like the rich young man in Matthew's Gospel, we convince ourselves that we don't need to make a lot of changes in our lives. We settle for where we are right now. We don't strive to give God more.

  Perhaps a part of us has sensed that we need to forgive someone, serve more, be more generous with our time, make a change, give up something, or stop doing something. But we're afraid — too attached, too set in our ways, too proud to reveal our weaknesses, too stubborn to admit we're wrong or too reluctant to give something up. What might we be tempted to do in these moments? We might rationalize our weaknesses and justify our lack of generous love. We tell ourselves we're doing better than most people — we pray, believe the Church's teachings, go to adoration, lead a Bible study. We're good enough. We don't really need to do more.

  In the end, this kind of self-justification is a way to cover up our spiritual laziness. It tries to hide the fact that we, like the rich young man, simply don't want to make the effort, sacrifices, and changes that deep friendship with Christ requires. Like the rich young man, we might practice our religion. But are we willing to offer ourselves completely as a gift to God?

- ***Self-reliance:*** Maybe you have tried to put your sins behind you before and follow Jesus completely. Or maybe you decided that you would never commit a certain sin again and have found yourself struggling and continuing to fall. Why does this happen?

  Sometimes God allows us to continue experiencing a certain weakness so that we grow in humility and become deeply

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convinced of how incapable we are of conquering our sins on our own. As Fr. Jacques Philippe writes,

> We often have to experience failures, trials and humiliations, permitted by God, before this truth imposes itself on us, not only on an intellectual level, but as an experience of our entire being. God would spare us, if He could, all these trials, but they are necessary in order that we should be convinced of our complete powerlessness to do good by ourselves.[2]

We can easily forget how completely dependent we are on God for everything — most especially for rooting out sins and growing in holiness. Our transformation in Christ is impossible without the help of God's grace. If we try to rely on our own strength and follow our own timetables and plans for how we will achieve holiness, we are doomed to failure. Reflecting on her sinful past, St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "Self-reliance is what destroyed me."

Self-condemnation: When we face our sins and weaknesses, we might be tempted to get frustrated with ourselves or easily discouraged to see that we are not progressing in the spiritual life as we had hoped. We may say to ourselves, "I hate it when I do that! Why do I keep struggling with this? How come I'm not improving in this area?" Discouraging, self-condemning thoughts might enter our heads: "I'm so terrible. I'm never

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going to change! Why do I even bother trying?" Such thoughts, however, are not from God. They come from the enemy, the devil. He's the one whom the Bible calls "the accuser" (Rv 12:10).

Self-condemnation keeps us focused on ourselves and beaten down. It hinders us from turning to God with humble and contrite hearts. It keeps us from seeing our faults the way God sees them — not as the accuser, but as a loving Father who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6).

DISCUSS

Which of these enemies do you struggle with the most? How can you seek to overcome them?

TAKE ACTION

Make a commitment to becoming more like Christ in one area of your life. Perhaps choose the area where you seem to struggle the most. Then, make a plan for the next few weeks detailing how you will grow to change this habit or strive to improve in this area of struggle. Consider:

- How will you encounter God's grace more deeply to help you conquer this struggle? What will you pray with? How will you let the sacraments build you up in this grace?
- What will need to change in your schedule? How will you spend your time differently?
- What kinds of accountability might you need to persevere in overcoming this struggle? To whom will you turn when you feel discouraged?

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How will you know that you have succeeded in becoming more like Christ? How will changing this habit or attaining this virtue allow you to love more freely and live more as a witness to Christ?

KEY CONCEPTS

"What do I still lack?": Unlike the rich young man in Matthew 19, disciples of Jesus should be willing to give up whatever stands in the way of a deeper friendship with Christ.

Grace: Christ's divine life in us

Iron in Fire Analogy: Just as iron takes on the properties of fire, so Christians through sanctifying grace take on the character of Christ.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

I Believe in Love: A Personal Retreat Based on the Teaching of St. Thérèse of Lisieux by Fr. Jean C. B. d'Elbee

Searching for and Maintaining Peace by Jacques Philippe

Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion by Peter Kreeft

The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis

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[1] Jean-Baptiste Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1946), 122.

[2] Jacques Philippe, *Searching for and Maintaining Peace: A Small Treatise on Peace of Heart* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2002), 4.