

Love, the Very Name of God

The promises and limitations in approaching the divine virtue

And the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Among the seven holy virtues, love reigns supreme. Throughout the Christian theological tradition, love is consistently named as the pinnacle of the virtues, for it alone endures even after death. It is fitting then, that we conclude our series on the seven holy virtues and deadly sins with this virtue that surpasses justice, that endures after all hope has been achieved, that remains once faith takes its final rest when we stand in the presence of God. Indeed, love's highest honor is that it is the very name of God himself.

And yet, herein lies the difficulty. How could something as divine as love be adequately described through the neat, refined grammar of excellence that the virtues give us? Is love too divine for even the virtues themselves? In examining the virtue of love, we discover both the promise and limitations of the virtues as a framework to understand the Christian life.

Keeping these questions in mind, let us return to the story with which we began our series last year, Vic-

tor Hugo's classic novel *Les Misérables*. The story recounts the fall and redemption of a convicted thief, Jean Valjean. Originally a morally good person of little financial means, Valjean is sentenced to five years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family. Over nineteen years of incarceration, however, Valjean's moral character changes from virtue to vice, from one inclined to seek goodness to one habituated to do evil. Upon being released from prison, he is friendless, without money or food, and carries within himself an acute awareness of his own desperate and contemptible state.

Valjean is directed to a bishop in town who is known for his exceptional and long-standing humility, kindness, and good works for the poor and friendless in society. Seemingly without hesitation, Bishop Myriel receives the convict and bestows dignity upon him by looking Valjean in the eye, sharing a meal at the house table using their finest silver, and inviting him to sleep the night in a bed with clean sheets. Despite being returned to this long forgotten state of goodness, Valjean's nineteen-year

habituation into a life of desperation, deception, and criminality remains potent. The newborn remembrance of his virtuous pre-prison life is no match for his now more hardened self-serving vices, and so in the middle of the night he steals the bishop's silver and flees.

But he is apprehended by the police and returned to the bishop's house with his fate all but sealed as a convict returning to prison. The bishop's virtue, however, does not allow that to happen. In keeping with his own character, the bishop forgives the convict. In the act of forgiveness, the virtuous priest gives to the vicious convict Jean Valjean's own virtue, his own good soul that was lost in memory over those nineteen years but now given back. Upon granting forgiveness, Bishop Myriel says to Valjean, "Now, go in peace.... Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become a better man.... Jean Valjean, my brother, you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdrew it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition and I give it to God."

LOVE



Love is no mere emotion, or even act of the will, but a flourishing of the human desire for God in the most fitting manner to our nature, whereby we love God for God's sake, and we love everything else through that love of God.

First, we consider love's promise as a virtue. Broadly speaking, a moral virtue is a settled disposition of a person to act in excellent and praiseworthy ways, cultivated over time through habit. The constellation of virtues a person may embody provides for a stable organization of one's moral desires, and hence, state of moral character. Thus, for example, courage is a particular ordering of

desire in the face of threat, which enables a person to overcome the paralysis of fear and the rashness of fearlessness to pursue a just cause courageously. Temperance orders the vital desires for nourishment and sexual intimacy, so that the soul may be freed to enjoyment in these desires and not become enslaved to them.

When we turn to love as a virtue, however, our task becomes difficult.

For love is the whole of the Christian story, centered on the person of Christ, who is the only perfect revelation of love we encounter. As such, we are here reminded that love is no mere emotion, or even act of the will, but a flourishing of the human desire for God in the most fitting manner

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to our nature, whereby we love God for God's sake, and everything else through that love of God. If every virtue is an ordering of some particular desire, love orders and gives purpose to all human desires.

How does the bishop exhibit the virtue of love? On the one hand, he displays love toward Jean Valjean because he has been habituated to a life devoted to God by serving the least of God's children. A loving response to the ex-con comes natu-

because it is the right thing to do, not because it earns them respect in the eyes of their peers.

There is, however, something higher than duty. André Comte-Sponville insightfully points out that "moral duty does not prescribe love; instead, it asks us to perform out of duty the very same action that, if we loved, we would have accomplished for love alone. Hence duty's maxim: Act as though you loved."

Christ reminds us of this higher

we have paired individual vices with virtues to reveal their characteristics in new and significant ways. Love, however, cannot be paired so easily with any single vice.

Many would contrast love with lust, but such a comparison reduces love to simply a solution to our disordered sexual desire. In this view, love would not merit the suffering and death of God on a cross. Others might contrast love with anger or vengeance. Such a love, however, reduces love to

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rally to the bishop; to love well is part of the bishop's character. But what makes that an act of love, as opposed to duty? After all, the bishop does not cultivate an ongoing relationship with Jean Valjean. Could we just as easily explain this as the bishop's honoring his *obligation* to forgive?

To answer this question, consider the trajectory by which we move from immaturity to maturity as Christian disciples. How do we, who are not born virtuous, become so? We become virtuous by moving from being polite, to performing our moral duty, to loving. Let us start at the bottom: to act politely is to act as if one were moral. For example, I struggle to teach my seven-year-old son to demonstrate good manners at the table, which is a way of telling him to "act as if" he really did respect others at the table. Through politeness, otherwise immoral people display a semblance of morality.

Morally upright and dutiful people, however, know they are called to be more than merely polite, for they know what they *ought to do*. They do their duty, obey the prescriptions of the law, and make the right decisions out of that obligation. For example, dutiful people give alms to the poor

calling: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Why does Christ not say that others will know us by our obedience to the law? Because, in the end, we as children of God, are called to love our neighbors as children of God. If the bishop genuinely acts out of love, then he does not see Jean Valjean as a situation within which he can obey the commandment to love his neighbor; he *sees* Valjean, the neighbor, whom he loves through God.

The virtuous desire is to love God and neighbor, and through that love fulfill the commandment. We must note, however, that without duty and the law, love would often not know what to do. For example, I am to love my neighbor, but the law spells out manners in which I may love my neighbor well (e.g., do not lie, do not steal, give alms, forgive transgressions, etc.). Thus, while Christ's love is not the law itself, neither does Christ abolish the law. Christ *fulfills* the law, through love.

When we turn back to the seven deadly vices, we see another aspect of love's supremacy. In the course of our series,

merely a pacifying role amidst our emotional tumult. Such a love could not become the creative force that the Christian community has exhibited throughout history.

No, love stands alone as the greatest of the virtues, because it speaks restoration into the ears of all the vices. Love grounds the proud, invigorates the slothful, abates the gluttonous, edifies the lustful, emancipates the greedy, centers the envious, and redeems the angry. Love hides a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

Love not only commands the seven vices, it reorients how we think about the seven virtues as well. The language of the virtues, in their emphasis on the perfection of human excellences, always runs the risk of over-glorifying human capacities. Set within the Christian story of redemption through Christ, however, love humbles the refined excellences of the virtues and reminds us of our dependence on God.

Looking back at the six other virtues, we can see that in love, wisdom is not simply intellectual mastery, but humility before truth. Faith is not mere proclamation, but receptivity to God's grace. Temperance is not strict restraint, but the capacity to enjoy our

vitality. Through love, hope entails trembling, courage includes woundedness, and justice seeks restoration. But how does love accomplish this reorientation? Because love is not simply the greatest of the human virtues, but is *greater* than virtue itself. Love is divine.

In the story of the bishop and Jean Valjean, it was perhaps love as a virtue that enabled the bishop to forgive. But sometimes in our lives, we undergo offenses and suffering that damage our souls more deeply than some stolen silver and rejected hospitality did for the bishop. At times we experience sins we can barely endure, relationships so broken we can no longer hope, and abuses to our person that seem to condemn our very identity. In these moments, we stagger before the task of cultivating within ourselves a loving and forgiving soul over time through habit. Even if we have an otherwise virtuous soul, in some cases, our habituated capacity to forgive is not up to the task.

For the Christian, hope is not lost when we remember that *love is beyond human virtue*. Love is a gift—a grace from God—that transcends our habits, our history, and our limited capacity to move beyond sin.

Why is love a gift, not merely a virtue? A virtue is an excellence internal to the self, cultivated over time through habit. A gift transcends the self, and offers the individual something beyond one's own capacities. When such grace comes, it would not be accurate to say that the ability to forgive and the ability to receive forgiveness are the result of obligation or of virtue. Rather, it is only through a divine gift to the offender and offended alike that reconciliation and restoration are attained. Love intervenes, not always as love internal to either, but as a love outside of and higher than both.

Among the truly virtuous souls, it becomes difficult, perhaps, for us

to see the giftedness of love move through them. The saints possess the excellence of character to incorporate the divine gift into their natural movements with such elegance that none but they know how they tremble in their hearts before the task. For the rest of us, who face the terrifying commission of breaking free from sin and fallen relationships, it is a blessing that we need not rely on duty or virtue alone, but may find the strength to love from the source of love itself. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). ■