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Wealth and Poverty/Simplicity as a Means of Grace:
Lessons from the Christian Spiritual Tradition

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Throughout Christian history many theologians and spiritual writers have addressed the spiritual disciplines of poverty and simplicity. Some have also been quite vocal about the evil or vice of wealth. On occasion, though much less frequently the tradition has thought of poverty/simplicity in terms of a means of grace. It is true that in the Christian monastic tradition there has always been a focus on poverty, so much so that it is one of the standard monastic vows but even the monastic tradition did not consistently think of the virtue of poverty as a means of grace. This paper will examine 1) a theology of the means of grace; so that 2) the virtues of poverty and simplicity can be situated theologically. I will also briefly examine the ways in which wealth has been understood to also be a means a grace in as much as it was used for the benefit of others and for the spread of the kingdom of God on earth.

Proverbs 19:1 reminds the reader that "Better is a poor person who walks in his integrity than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool." Jesus himself declared the "poor in spirit" blessed (Matt. 5:3) and the earliest followers of Jesus "had everything in common… There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:32, 34). This emphasis on poverty was not always focused on wealth for the greatest example of poverty came from God himself when he "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). It is the incarnation of the Son of God that sets the standard for absolute poverty. Thus, poverty is not always about material or financial divestment but about Jesus' poverty of spirit too. John Chrysostom (d. 407) understood this well when he wrote that "the rich man is not the one who has collected many

possession but the one needs few possessions; and the poor man is not the one who has no possessions but the one who has many desires" for "those who are satisfied with what they have, and pleased with their own possessions, and do not have their eyes on the substance of others, even if they are the poorest of all, should be considered the richest of all."[1]

The monastic tradition is quite clear about the virtuousness of poverty. For example, one desert father said that "The monk ought to wear the sort of clothing that if he threw it out of the cell, nobody would want it."[2] Another claimed that "It is impossible for you to live a godly life If you love… money."[3] But perhaps my favorite is from the well-known Anthony of Egypt:

> A brother who had renounced the world and distributed his goods to the poor but kept back a little for himself visited Abba Anthony. When the elder learned this he said to him, 'If you want to become a monk, go to such and such a village, buy some meat, and put it on your naked body; then come here like that.' When the brother did that, the dogs and the birds tore his flesh. When he came back to the elder, he inquired whether it had happened as he had counseled. The other showed his lacerated body, and Abba Anthony said, 'They who have renounced the world and want to have money are cut up like this by the demons who are making war on them.'[4]

By the High Middle Ages many monks, upon entering the monastery, made vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, thereby ensuring that poverty remained a public virtue. We should also note that "Until the end of the tenth century, pride was unreservedly dominant as the most important vice; writers who dealt with avarice tended to reduce it to a sub-category of pride. But in the eleventh century, Peter Damian heralded a significant change when stating unequivocally: 'Avarice is the root of all evil.'"[5] With avarice serving as the chief vice, poverty became the

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[1] John Chrysostom, "Second Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man"; Catharine P. Roth, trans., *St John Chrysostom: On Wealth and Poverty* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 40.
[2] Isaac of the Cells 12; John Wortley, trans., *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Systematic Collection* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012), 92.
[3] Isidore 3; Wortley, trans., *The Book of the Elders*, 92.
[4] Antony 20; Wortley, trans., *The Book of the Elders*, 89; slightly edited.
[5] Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 36. See also Richard Newhauser, *The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

chief virtue, evidenced by the rise of the mendicant orders, especially the Franciscans and their devotion to Lady Poverty.[6]

Related to poverty is the virtue of simplicity, which goes back to ancient Greek and Latin philosophical practices. For example, Plato says that temperance (or moderation) is a cardinal virtue, entailing a "mastery of certain kinds of pleasures and desires"; in other words, voluntary self-restraint.[7] Philosophers Joshua Gambrel and Philip Cafaro write that

> Simplicity is a conscientious and restrained attitude toward material goods that typically includes (1) decreased consumption and (2) a more conscious consumption; hence (3) greater deliberation regarding our consumer decisions; (4) a more focused life in general; and (5) a greater and more nuanced appreciation for other things besides material goods, and also for (6) material goods themselves.[8]

Like poverty, simplicity has not always been viewed in relationship to money. Francis de Sales wrote to the Sisters of the Visitation in the early seventeenth century that "simplicity is nothing else than an act of pure and simple charity, having one only aim and end, which is to acquire the love of God, and our soul is simple when in all that we do or desire we have no other aim."[9] Kevin Schemenauer believes that de Sales does not focus "on an acquired virtue attained through the repetition of action but an infused virtue that requires God's grace and thereby has God as its source and end." He notes that "In his spiritual conference on simplicity, de Sales clarifies that the simplicity he contemplates is 'inseparable from charity… This virtue is Christian only.'"[10] In other words, because love is an infused virtue then simplicity must be too and simplicity only comes by grace, making it a Christian, theological virtue, not an acquired virtue à la Plato. Thus,

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[6] See Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
[7] Plato, *Republic* 430e; John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis/Cambridge, UK: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 1062.
[8] Joshua Colt Gambrel and Philip Cafaro, "The Virtue of Simplicity," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23.1 (2009), 85.
[9] Francis de Sales, "On Simplicity and Religious Prudence," in *The Spiritual Conferences*, trans. by Abbot Gasquet and Canon Mackey, OSB (Westminster, MD: The Newman Bookshop, 1943), 212.
[10] Kevin Schemenauer, "The Infused Virtue of Simplicity: Saint Francis de Sales and Dietrich von Hildebrand," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 20.3 (2017), 99.

from these all too brief comments we can conclude that poverty and simplicity are virtues, perhaps acquired but certainly given by God. But are they a means of grace?

A typical account of the so-called "means of grace" is found in the work of Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof (d. 1957) who wrote that

> Fallen man receives all the blessings of salvation out of the eternal fountain of the grace of God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ and through the operation of the Holy Spirit. While the Spirit can and does in some respects operate immediately on the soul of the sinner, He has seen fit to bind Himself largely to the use of certain means in the communication of divine grace. The term 'means of grace' is not found in the Bible, but is nevertheless a proper designation of the means that are indicated in the Bible.[11]

He goes on to name four distinctive characteristics of means of grace: 1) "They are instruments, not of *common* but of, *special* grace, the grace that removes sin and renews the sinner in conformity with the image of God"; 2) "They are *in themselves*, and not in virtue of their connection with things not included in them, means of grace"; 3) "They are *continuous* instruments of God's grace, and not in any sense of the word exceptional"; and 4) "They are the *official* means of the Church of Jesus Christ."[12] We can also add to this the general observation that the "grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it," and that the "preparation of [humankind] for the reception of grace is already a work of grace."[13] Within the larger Christian tradition the means of grace tradition evolved over time. The early and medieval Church singled out Scripture and the sacraments but also saw other things as means of grace, such as pilgrimages and the use of relics and images. By the late Middle Ages, however, the sacraments were the privileged means of grace that functioned *ex opere operato* ("by the work worked"). Many of the Protestant Reformers shifted the emphasis from the sacraments as the

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[11] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 604.
[12] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 605.
[13] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1999 and 2001.

primary means of grace back to the Scriptures, so much so that the Scriptures are always efficacious and will effect a spiritual change in humans, with some authors even concluding that the sacraments have no significance apart from the Word (i.e., sacraments are the visible Word). The Reformed tradition, à la Berkhof, deny that the means of grace can of themselves confer grace because God is not bound to the sacraments or Scriptures to convey grace (i.e., rejection of *ex opere operato*) but this does not mean that they should be treated with indifference or neglected for "God has appointed them as the ordinary means through which He works His grace in the hearts of sinners, and their wilful neglect can only result in spiritual loss."[14]

The most developed concept of the means of grace, however, emerged from the pen of John Wesley and the Wesleyan tradition. I will attempt to summarize it in five points[15]: 1) God's grace is present everywhere and available to every person yet God has also given special channels for receiving grace; 2) the means of grace are both a) channels by which God offers medicine to the sin-sick; and b) opportunities for humans to respond to the grace already given; 3) the means of grace were not just the sacraments but included prayer, worship, fasting, meditating, singing, listening to sermons, doing good for others, visiting the sick, reading devotional books, suffering, self-denial and Christian "conference," for example – in short, the means of grace were great because grace was not a substance (*res*) that was then tied to a material thing (e.g., bread and wine); 4) the means of grace are effectual (a kind of *ex opere operato*): "Never can you use these means but a blessing will ensue. And the more you use them, the more will you grow in grace" (John Wesley, "Minutes of Some Late Conversations," §2.4.9); and 5) "Wesley explained the relative place of these works of mercy and the other means of grace in the Christian life by describing a series of concentric circles. The center of the circle is

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[14] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 608.

[15] Cf. Rebekah Miles, "'The Arts of Holy Living': Holiness and the Means of Grace," *Quarterly Review* 25.2 (2005): 141-157.

love, 'the sum and the perfection of religion,' The other rings around the circle are good insofar as they relate to and drive toward the center of the circle. Although all the rings are necessary in the Christian life, the rings have greater 'comparative value' as one moves closer to the center of the circle."[16] Wesley himself divided the means of grace into three typologies: 1) General Means of Grace; 2) Instituted (or Particular) Means of Grace; and 3) Prudential Means of Grace.[17] One of Wesley's "General Means of Grace" is "Denying ourselves," which would include poverty and/or simplicity.

In the words of Mary Moore, "One indisputable reality in John and Charles Wesley's world was poverty."[18] Nonetheless, one of John Wesley's most famous dictums is, "Gain all you can; Save (or, steward) all you can; Give all you can."[19] It is the third part of this dictum that is particularly important: give all you can. Money, for Wesley, is "the mammon of unrighteousness," to quote Luke 16:9, which is Wesley's text for his sermon on the "Use of Money." He writes that "It is termed 'the mammon of unrighteousness,' because of the unrighteous manner wherein it is frequently procured, and wherein even that which was honestly procured is generally employed." Wesley believes that Christians have "not sufficiently considered" the right use of money, "Neither do [Christians] understand how to employ it to the greatest advantage." He notes that the love of money is the root of all evil "but not the thing itself. The fault does not lie in the money, but in them that use it." His aforementioned dictum, however, is a summation of his "three plain rules, by the exact observance whereof we may approve ourselves faithful stewards of 'the mammon of unrighteousness.'" Practically speaking,

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[16] Miles, "'The Arts of Holy Living': Holiness and the Means of Grace," 144.
[17] Henry H. Knight, III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Lanham, MD/London: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 5.
[18] Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, "Poverty, Human Depravity, and Prevenient Grace," *Quarterly Review* 16.4 (1996-1997), 346.
[19] John Wesley, Sermon 50: "The Use of Money"

Wesley writes that “People can give all to God by doing four things with money: (1) Providing for the necessities of life for themselves; (2) providing for the necessities of life for their households; (3) doing good to those within the household of faith; and (4) as much as possible, doing good to all.”[20] This is, of course, a fairly typical line of Christian thinking. There is not much here that is unique to Wesley for this thinking if characteristic of the Christian tradition as a whole. So, again, we ask, how can we construe poverty and/or simplicity as a means of grace?

At the root of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). In the Middle Ages theologians such as Peter Lombard (d. 1160), Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) and Dante Alighieri (d. 1321) wrote not only that God is love in line with 1 John 4:8 but, explicitly among the persons of the Trinity, that the Holy Spirit is love. That is, love is not merely an emotion or the desire we may have to possess what is beautiful (à la Plato) or merely wishing good things for someone for that person’s sake (à la Aristotle) but a person. And in this case, love is a divine person. In saying this they were not being novel but continuing a tradition that was quite old, going back at least to the fifth century with Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), who wrote that the “Holy Spirit is not just the Father’s alone nor the Son’s alone, but the Spirit of them both, and thus he suggests to us the common charity by which the Father and the Son love each other.”[21] Thus, to love is to do the very thing that God does and the very thing that holds the Trinity together. That is, the primary relationship of the divine persons in the Trinity is love; therefore, to love is “to God,” if you will. This being the case, this understanding of love opens up a perspective on loving God and others that removes love from the realm of choice and puts it into the realm of being. To love is to be like God ontologically

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[20] Gary L. Ball-Kilbourne, “The Christian as Steward in John Wesley’s Theological Ethics,” *Quarterly Review* 4 (1984), 45.

[21] Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity* XV.5.27; Edmund Hill, trans., *Saint Augustine: The Trinity* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 418.

and essentially. This divine loving, then, creates the most persuasive reason to reach out to others in love and fulfills Jesus' new commandment to love God and neighbor: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). To paraphrase Jesus: a new commandment I give to you, that you God one another; just as I have God-ed you, you also are to God one another.

The root, then, of all Christian ethical commitments must be found in Jesus' commandment that all persons love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with their entire mind for this is the great and first commandment. Furthermore, Jesus added the aforementioned second element to this commandment that is like the first: you shall love your neighbor as yourself (cf. Matt. 22:37-39). Our love for others grows out of our love for God and our love for God is the result of God's love for us, evidenced and made possible in the self-emptying of Jesus for the sake of crucifixion, which is made possible in turn by the Love of the Trinity between God the Father and his only-begotten Son. Though there may be other motivating factors in my desire to reach out in love to my neighbor ethically and justly, the most important one from a Christian perspective, supported by both the Scriptures and by Christian history, is love, specifically that God is love. Of course, we are not talking about a subjective love but we are talking about the objective, ontological love that is God himself.

With this line of reasoning, then, we can see that the most theologically robust reason for embracing poverty and simplicity is out of love for God and because of love for others. Just "as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph. 4:2), we too need to love others and give up money and wealth for their sake, or, in line with the thinking of John Wesley, we need to steward and give up our wealth (in all its forms) for the sake of others. Just as "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16) so we need to love others to the point of giving up all that

we hold, not just our money but power, prestige and privilege. Just as the incarnation of the Son of God was the greatest act of grace that brought “grace upon grace” (John 1:16), so too can our own poverty and simplicity be a means of grace for ourselves and for others.

It is unfortunate that for much of Christian history there was an underlying anti-materialistic spirit wherein Christian theologians and Christians in general viewed things of the world as stinking of foul matter whereas things of the spirit were seen as superior to materiality. This dualism goes back to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy where there were debates not only about the nature of the world and why it is the way it is, but also lively debates concerning both the material nature of creation and its non-material elements; or, to put it another way, the material versus the spiritual dimension of creation and human existence. For example, in his *Timaeus*, Plato thinks that the body was made out of matter (fire, water, air and earth) and the pre-existent soul was then put into this body so that it could govern the body. In this instance the soul (that is, the immaterial or spiritual part) is not only previous to but superior to the body. That which is immaterial trumps the material. By the time Christian theology came to discuss these matters there was a developing consensus that matter was bad and the root of all evil but the spiritual was of God and therefore good. Throughout the history of Christian spirituality there has often been a tension between the commands and demands of the Gospel and the distractions and obligations of living in the world. Unfortunately, money has been relegated to one of those things of matter that is eclipsed by the more spiritual thing of poverty and simplicity. One can even see a hint of this in Wesley’s sermon. But this is *not* what I am suggesting. First, because wealth does not always come in the form of money but it can also come in the form of power and other non-material forms. Second, as we saw from Wesley, the fault does not lie in money per se but in them that use it. And third, all the things of creation are good because “God saw

everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). In short, poverty and simplicity are an outgrowth of one's love of God and neighbor. In other words, the best theological justification for the virtue of poverty and simplicity is a positive one. It is not based in a rejection of something bad such as the evil materiality of money but an embrace of something good – the love of God and neighbor. And in as much as we embrace poverty and simplicity out of love and in as much as use our wealth responsibly, then we are acting like God, we are God-ing in such a way that our poverty and simplicity are a means of grace to ourselves and others, just like the God's greatest act of poverty – the incarnation of the Son of God – is also a means of grace to ourselves and others. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, "though [Christ] was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Our own poverty and simplicity too brings a spiritual richness to ourselves and others.