

The Path to True Greatness

The readings for the 25th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B, bring to light the tension between righteousness and wickedness, humility and ambition, and service and self-interest. By turning to the Fathers of the Church, we gain deeper insight into these themes, and modern psychology reveals the necessity and benefits of living a life rooted in service.

1. Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 – The Persecution of the Just

The first reading from Wisdom highlights the unjust persecution of the righteous by the wicked. The wicked are angered by the righteous man's way of life because it condemns their own actions. This theme of the righteous being tested is a common motif throughout Scripture, reflecting the trials endured by those who live according to God's will.

St. Augustine speaks of this in his *Confessions*, where he discusses the tension between the city of God and the city of man. The righteous, he says, will always face opposition in a world that prioritizes self-interest and power. For Augustine, the trials and persecutions of the just are a form of purification. Through suffering, the righteous are brought closer to God, and their faith is refined.

The psychological insight here is profound: being in the right, while difficult, can create internal strength and peace, even when external circumstances are hostile. Perseverance in righteousness, despite persecution, aligns one's inner life with their values, fostering integrity and a sense of purpose.

2. Psalm 54:3-6, 8 – Trust in God Amidst Adversity

In this psalm, the psalmist cries out for God's deliverance from enemies who are seeking his life. Despite the overwhelming threat, the psalmist expresses unwavering trust in God's protection and justice. It's a plea for help, coupled with faith that God will eventually vindicate the righteous.

St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies on the psalms, emphasized that trust in God during moments of trial is the true test of faith. Chrysostom teaches that it is in the most challenging times that we learn to fully rely on God's providence. This surrender to God's will, far from being passive, is an active trust in His goodness, which transforms anxiety into peace.

From a psychological perspective, this trust is essential. Modern research supports the idea that faith and trust can reduce stress and anxiety. Trust in a higher power—or simply the act of placing trust in something greater than oneself—promotes mental resilience. It allows us to cope better with adversity by fostering a sense of meaning and control over situations that seem chaotic.

3. Mark 9:30-37 – True Greatness in Service

The Gospel reading from Mark presents Jesus teaching his disciples about his impending death, followed by an argument among them about who is the greatest. Jesus responds by redefining greatness: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He uses a child as an example of the "least" in society, showing that true greatness is found in humility and service.

St. Gregory the Great reflects on this passage by reminding us that the ambition for power and status is contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. For Gregory, true leadership in the Church and the Christian life comes from humility and the willingness to serve others. He writes, "The less a man loves the glory of the world, the more perfect he will be in love before God."

St. Benedict, in his *Rule*, similarly teaches that humility is the foundation of the spiritual life. The higher a person ascends in spiritual maturity, the more deeply they must serve others. For Benedict, service is not a burden but a joyful expression of love for God and neighbor.

Psychological Necessity of Service-Mindedness

Service to others is not only a theological mandate but also a psychological necessity for human flourishing. Here are some key insights into why service-mindedness is essential for mental health and well-being:

- 1. Reduces Self-Centeredness:** When we focus too much on our own desires, ambitions, and problems, it can lead to anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation. Serving others takes our attention away from ourselves and opens us up to empathy and connection. It cultivates gratitude, shifting our mindset from "what I don't have" to "what I can give."
- 2. Increases Meaning and Purpose:** Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, spoke of the deep human need for meaning. Service to others provides this meaning. When we serve, we contribute to something greater than ourselves. The Fathers of the Church, like **St. Augustine**, often emphasized that the highest form of happiness comes not from self-gratification but from aligning oneself with God's will, which invariably involves serving others.
- 3. Builds Community and Connection:** Service fosters deep social bonds, which are crucial for emotional health. Modern psychology tells us that strong social connections are a major factor in reducing stress, increasing longevity, and improving mental health. **St. John Chrysostom** frequently taught that the Church is a community of believers who are called to serve one another, building a network of support and love.
- 4. Enhances Psychological Resilience:** When we serve others, we build resilience. Facing the struggles and challenges of others gives us perspective and helps us cope better with our own difficulties. The Fathers of the Church understood that service was a path to

spiritual resilience. In serving others, we imitate Christ, who suffered and served, and in doing so, we find strength to endure our own trials.

The Path to True Greatness

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus makes it clear that greatness is not found in power or status but in humble service. The Fathers of the Church remind us that this is the heart of the Christian life. Psychologically, service-mindedness is vital for our emotional well-being, fostering connection, purpose, and resilience.

As we reflect on today's readings, let us ask for the grace to embrace a life of service. Like the righteous man in Wisdom, let us persevere in doing good, even in the face of opposition. Like the psalmist, let us trust that God will deliver us from our trials. And like Christ, let us seek true greatness not in being served, but in serving others.

Amen.