

## Becoming a Person of Love

### Fr. Eric Mah

It's really important to know that the primary way that you become a person of love is in the context of the hidden life, and in particular in the context of the simple, and the humble, and the ordinary. And so this is something which happens a lot. Guys will go, for example, to Discernment Weekends, or to discernment events, or Come-And-See Weekends or like whatever. And what they're.. I think, what they're expecting is some sort of flash of lightning. You know, the Lord reveals my vocation, and then okay, my life really kind of gets going. Based on everything we've said before, perhaps you realize that's probably the wrong way to kind of approach it. And so short of the Lord revealing in great clarity what your vocation is, a lot of people come away from these Discernment Weekends kind of deflated, maybe even crushed in their soul.

### Living in the Context of a Hidden Life

But to realize, again, there's great value in terms of living in the context of a hidden life, and, again, in the midst of the simple and the humble and the ordinary. So even when you look at the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New, think about the great figures like Moses, Joseph, St. Paul, Christ Himself. Long period of the hidden life preceding the life of mission or the public life, if you will.

So Christ, perfect example, like thirty years. Thirty years of the hidden life, which proceeds the public life. And here's the Lord who can preach, He can do miracles, He's loaded with talent. He's like the perfect man. And yet it's the will of the Father that He kind of makes tables and chairs and that kind of thing in Nazareth. And what's implied in that is that has tremendous value. It has tremendous value.

Another way to put it.. Brett Powell talks about this and he quotes, he cites that "Gladiator" movie with Russell Crowe. And so I don't know if this is exactly right, but basically there's a scene where Russell Crowe, the gladiator character, he's talking to another centurion in the army or like a Roman general. And his friend basically says, "Okay, look, when you're discharged, and you go home, what are you going to do?" And the Russell Crowe character, Maximus, he says, I think he says, "Well to my horses I will say this, and to my son I will say this, and to my wife, it's none of your business."

And Brett Powell, he kind of expounds about all that. He says, you know, in terms of different levels of intimacy, or different levels of communication, or who I am, in relationship to other people. There's the public life, like who I am in terms of who I portray to the world. There's my private life, who I am with my family, for example. And beneath that, there's another level, which is the hidden life. Who I am before the Lord. All my strengths and my weaknesses, my frailties, and all different things. And he says a lot of times when it comes to how we spend our time and energy, we spend tons of time in the context of the public life, a minimal amount of time on the private life, and next to no time on the hidden life.

He says actually it should be the reverse. So the promise of being as opposed to doing. So I spend an inordinate amount of time on the hidden life, prayer, my relationship with God, intimacy with Christ. And then that informs how I relate to people in the private life and the public life.

## God's Transformative Events

And so it's really important for us to kind of grasp that. Like that's how salvation works. That's how growth happens. And so it's very much in the context of the simple, and the humble, and the ordinary. When we start to grasp for extraordinary manifestations of God's grace, and we look at those as being transformative events, it's not to discount those events. But the way that real growth and transformation happens, it's in the correspondence to the duty of the moment, in the context of the simple, and the humble, and the ordinary. So you don't want to look at that as wasted time. That's really, really important time.

The example that comes to mind, another one. It's kind of a secular example, again, but the "Karate Kid" movie. Not the one with Jackie Chan, but the older one from the '80s and stuff. I guess both apply, but you know what I'm talking about. Basically, you know the "Karate Kid". So he wants to learn karate. He's being beaten up by local bullies and stuff, and he runs into this Japanese karate master, Mr. Miyagi, who promises to teach him Kung Fu. And so he invites Daniel, the main character, to come to his place all the time. And what does he do? Like, menial tasks, right? Sand the floor and paint the fence and wax all my cars. So like the famous "Wax on, wax off," right? The whole time Daniel's like, "When am I going to start learning karate?" And then he realizes at a certain key point in the movie, and it's really beautiful, obviously, he realizes the whole time, the whole time he's been learning karate. But it didn't come to him in the way that he expected. It was through the ordinary trials and circumstances and duties of life. And so it goes with us.

When you have your mind and your heart kind of set on future-based things, any of those future-based things are kind of grounded in holy desires. If it takes you away from the present moment, and the hidden life, and the simple, and the humble, and the ordinary, that's not a good move. You really want to cherish this time that you have. There's an abundance of grace very much contained in the hidden life, in the simple, in the humble, in the ordinary. Now in the course of this period of discernment, though, something else I want you to keep in mind. It's meant to be a time of purification. It's meant to be a time of purification. I remember my Spiritual Director in the seminary, he would talk with us. He would say, look, even when guys enter the seminary, and maybe, legit, they're called to the holy priesthood. Even the time in seminary, be it five years, six years or whatever the case may be. Even that time is a time of purification. Where I purify my heart, I purify my desires, and I grow in freedom to love in the way that God calls me to love and the way that I actually want to love.

## Sources of Morality

So I'll give you kind of an example in this regard. So in the catechism of the Catholic Church, it talks about what it calls Sources of Morality. Sources of Morality, some of you may have heard this before. Intention, object, circumstance. So what's the thing I'm trying to achieve? Why am I

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doing it? And what are the correlated circumstances? And the idea is that certain things are just wicked and evil by virtue of the object chosen. So intrinsically evil acts, anything like euthanasia, abortion, whatever. But other things, they might be good in and of themselves. But if they're done for the wrong reasons, or even slightly less than noble reasons, it takes away from the overall goodness of that act. And so it goes to this notion of purification.

So I might have this desire to pursue the Lord, but maybe my motivations or my freedom to do so are kind of slightly tainted. And so this time of discernment, whether we're in the seminary or not in the seminary, it's precious time. Because it helps us to purify our desires, and again, to purify our sense of freedom to love in the way that we're called to love.

So I'll give an example. Michelle Benzinger. She's one of the co-hosts for this really famous Catholic podcast, "Abiding Together." And Michelle Benzinger, she talks about how one time she went on this retreat. She went on this retreat, and you know, Michelle Benzinger's a fantastic speaker, and she does a lot of speaking engagements, and participates in conferences and whatnot. So she went to this personal retreat, this private retreat, kind of expecting it to be a certain way. Like maybe she expected the Lord would kind of console her and say, "Hey, well done, good and faithful servant," or some variation of that. But instead, what she found was that the Lord kept on bringing up to her memory or her consciousness a painful memory from her past. Just imagine the situation. I'm trying to be recollected before the Lord, maybe I'm before the Lord in the blessed sacrament, and I'm just annoyed by this recurring, painful memory from my past. And after a while she realized that the Lord was bringing this thing to her attention as an opportunity for growth.

So despite what she might have preferred to pray about, or pray with, she decided to pray with that particular painful memory. And how that memory kind of played out. Basically when she was, I don't know, in high school or even before that, elementary school, she liked this young boy. So you know the story's going to end in disaster. So she liked this young boy, and she wanted to impress this young boy by auditioning for a play or musical or something. And she did it, and she just like totally messed it up. So imagine, especially when you're a young girl, her little girl heart was crushed and stuff. And so she came out of the audition just totally deflated, and she ran into this young boy that she liked. But rather than receive her wounded heart with love and compassion and care and all that stuff, he just looked at her and was really flippant and insensitive, and was just like, "Wow, you really blew that one, didn't you?"

And she realized, in the context of the retreat, in a way that she didn't realize when she was young, that that was a really formative moment for her and it really kind of crushed her soul. Because at that point, she had made this vow. The vow was, look, from now on, I will always be strong, and I will always to the best of my ability, perfect. I will never be weak and I will never be frail and I will never be vulnerable, because I don't want to be hurt like I was hurt in the aftermath of that rehearsal. I don't ever want to be hurt like that ever again.

And so imagine a situation where you go through life and you have this steel will and this guardedness, self-protection where you want to be strong and productive and perfect all the time. The world in the bad sort of sense, will always encourage you in that direction, because you're producing that which the world finds to be important and valuable. And the world wants you to

be strong and perfect and all these things. But it comes at the price of your humanity. Because the only way you can learn to be transformed by love is to be vulnerable.

## Shared Vulnerability

Like Father John Ricardo talks about this. What's intimacy? We often reduce intimacy to a strictly physical thing and certainly that's part of it. But intimacy in its essence is shared vulnerability. I take a chance and show to you my wounded heart and my wounded self and hopefully you're doing the same thing. And we kind of meet in between and an intimate relationship's attained. Whether we're talking about marriage or friendship or whatever. So here's this young woman, even in adulthood, where she thought to herself, "I can never be weak. I can never be vulnerable." And it was really costing her in terms of her relationships with other people, and even in her relationship with God. And she realized that God was calling her to a greater freedom. Like this may have served you for a short period of time, in terms of a modus of protection, but you don't need that any more. You can let this thing go to kind of come to a greater stage and holiness and freedom to love.

I think it was Henri Nouwen who talked about this. He referenced the story of "The Prodigal Son". He said that it's kind of funny, if you don't have clarity about the fact that you are unconditionally loved by your Father in Heaven, shades of the "Boyhood Stage" by John Eldredge. If you don't have clarity that you're unconditionally loved by your Father in Heaven, you will either become like the younger son or the older son in the story of "The Prodigal Son". So if you're the younger son and given to a sense of despair, basically like, "I'm no good". And I distract myself in the fact that I'm not really beloved unconditionally by indulging in self-destructive or self-indulgent behavior. And we've all been there. Or again, the alternative is you become the elder son, or I believe in love, but I believe in love in a conditional sort of way. So people love me or want to be with me because I'm strong, I'm perfect, I'm productive. So Michelle Benzinger in terms of her kind of high school experience or whatever. And the idea is that you want to have clarity about, again, God's unconditional love for you. And what that does, it allows you to be at peace, but it also gives you the freedom to just be and love in the way that God calls you to love.

So I think it was Dr. Bob Schuchts who talked about this, where he's like, think about Christ the Lord. So one of the great amazing things about the person of Christ, is that obviously he has enormous clarity about the fact that He is the beloved Son of the Father. Like, "Who am I? I'm the beloved Son of my Father in Heaven". And so that gives Him certain freedom. Not self-protection, but just being able to kind of go through life with an open heart. Because you think about it. Like in terms of the gospel, was Jesus ever sad? Was He ever angry? Was he ever disappointed? Was He ever hurt? Was He ever like not loved by people who should have loved Him? Who had a duty to love Him? And, yeah, because everyone had a duty to love Him. But also you look at the gospel even in a superficial way. There's a lot of times where Jesus Christ is massively hurt. Not just physically, but just in terms of his spirit. There's a reason why Jesus weeps. And yet He never makes the logical conclusion in His mind, "Because I've been unloved in this situation, therefore I'm unlovable". So regardless of what happens to Him, like I'm hurt and maybe that person shouldn't have done it, and that person maybe was intentional in terms of hurting me in that way, it doesn't impinge my sense of identity. I remained the beloved Son of

my Father in Heaven. And that allows Him the freedom to live with an open heart and love in the way his Father calls Him to love. So really important thing. So this idea of purification.

## **God's Will Corresponds to Your Deepest Desires**

We touched on this notion of deep desires as well. And that's really important to know as well. So this is really good to know. Oftentimes when it comes to the sermon, we think of it in terms of, "Here's God's will for me on the one hand, and here's my will for myself on the other hand." And certainly there's something to be said about confusion and desire, the inclination towards sin, our fallen nature. So yeah, there's a reason why we reach for the chips. At the same time something that's really important to know, this is like a foundational principle when it comes to Christian anthropology. Your deepest desires correspond with God's desires for you. So your deepest desires correspond with God's desires for you. Which, again, ties to this notion of purification.

So when I peel back the layers of the onion in terms of my desires, my superficial desires, my lesser desires, what I will discover is that, again, my deepest desires correspond with God's desires for me. You don't need to be afraid of that. You don't need to be worried that that's not the case. That's just a truth of Christian anthropology. And the Lord knows that. And the whole thing about journeying through the hidden life, the simple, and the humble, and the ordinary. With the ups and the downs and the crucible of life, and even your struggle with sin, the Lord is purifying your sense of what your deep desires actually are.

## **The Parable of the Two Sons**

So I'll give you an example in this regard. think about "The Parable of the Two Sons". So really famous parable. Basically, here's this guy, he's rich, he has two sons. And basically he goes to them personally to invite them to work in the vineyard. So you remember this story. So goes to one guy, he says, "Will you work in my vineyard?" The guy says "No". And then eventually he comes back. Goes to the second son, "Will you work in my vineyard?" Guy says, "Yeah, for sure". But then he doesn't come. And that's the end of the story. And so you break it down like "What's the point of that story?" So first of all, just to kind of like think about what the things represent. So the father represents obviously God, the Father. The sons represent us. The vineyard represents the world. And the work is, this is kind of interesting, the work of salvation. Now you got to ask yourself, "How's the work of salvation brought about primarily, otherwise known as the redemption of the world?" Through obedience to the world, the Father.

But in particular through the narrow path of Christ's suffering and death. And so it speaks to the reason why the Father goes to the sons one at a time to invite them to work in the vineyard. Because ordinarily if you're rich, you wouldn't go by yourself, you would send a delegate like a servant or a slave. Like come do this thing. But the reason why the father goes to them personally and intimately is because it's a really intimate thing that he's asking them to do, which requires total buy-in. I can't just do this at an arm's length. I need to be committed mind, heart, and spirit, not just my physicality. So basically what he's asking them to do one at a time is, okay, son, basically you've come of age and are you willing to suffer with me for the salvation of the world. To suffer and die with me for the salvation of the world, again being. The mission is

the extension of simply being and abiding with the Lord. So now here we come of age, you come of age, and I invite you now to participate in this work, which is really important to me. Namely the salvation of the world, again, through the narrow gates or the narrow way of the cross. Now, the guy who says yes, he gives a superficial answer. It comes through more in the Greek as opposed to the English. But it's almost.. I always imagined the father barely gets the words out in terms of the invitation. And the guy who says yes is like, "Yeah, sure. Like whatever, yeah, we'll do it." You know, my captain, my captain." And it's like, "Were you even paying attention?" And the fact that he gives like a quick, superficial response isn't it any wonder in retrospect that he doesn't actually come through.

Whereas the other guy, the reason why he says no is because he's paying attention. And so, yeah, he's human. And so just like all of us, the human part of us naturally doesn't want to suffer and die for anything. Even though it's with my Father in Heaven, and even though it's for a really good cause, namely the salvation of the world. But what's interesting is that if you look at the original Greek, the reason why the son who says no initially comes back.. The way it's translated, it's like aftercare. Aftercare, you know, which is kind of interesting. And so the idea is that it's like everything combined. So like he has the intimacy and familiarity with his father. The freedom in his relationship with his father, that he can process with his father. He could tell his father what he actually thinks. So there's that conversation. So he has the freedom to have that conversation. And then he goes away. And he's aftercaring, he's kind of weighing the things in his heart. So, yes, I have a fear of suffering. Yes I have a fear of death. But yet I feel this pain of saying no to my father. And when I examine my own heart, I realize despite my fear of suffering, despite my fear of death. My deeper desire, my deepest desire is to share in my father's blessed life which involves a sharing in his mission. And so he comes back and joyfully shares in the mission of the father.

## Share your Yes with the Lord

Now that story is meant to be really consoling for the people of God, including us. Because the idea is that God gets it, right? And so in terms of our journey of faith, it's not all going to be a straight progression up. It's ups and downs, one step back, two steps forward type thing. Whenever the Lord permits evil, even our own sin, it's for a greater good. And so the whole point of that story is that the Lord, He recognizes that in order for us to get to that point where we make the firm, unflinching "yes" in terms of acting out our deepest desires which correspond with God's desires for us, there's not necessarily there's going to be this kind of like going back and forth in terms of like "I'm afraid, but now I feel courageous. And I fall and I struggle with the sin, but then I learn my deepest desires through that." A long complicated involved process. But that's simply how it goes. And the Lord is not surprised by that. He's not scandalized by that. Like that's just the way it goes. And so, I say that as an important framework for yourselves. So the hidden life is important. The simple, humble, ordinary life is important. But also this process of purification in terms of growing in freedom's love, purifying, and acknowledging my deepest desires. It takes time and there's ups and downs. But if that's okay, and the Lord sees and he understands and He's with you every step of the way.