




5-2016

Christian-Stoicism: Exploring the Relationship between Christianity and Stoicism and Constructing a Manual of Christian-Stoic Wisdom

Trevor Kelly

Sacred Heart University, kellyt122@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/rel_theses

 Part of the [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Trevor, "Christian-Stoicism: Exploring the Relationship between Christianity and Stoicism and Constructing a Manual of Christian-Stoic Wisdom" (2016). *Master of Arts in Religious Studies (M.A.R.S. Theses)*. Paper 28.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Religious Studies (M.A.R.S. Theses) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

**CHRISTIAN-STOICISM:
EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND STOICISM
AND CONSTRUCTING A MANUAL OF CHRISTIAN-STOIC WISDOM**

Master's Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at
Sacred Heart University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Religious Studies

Trevor Kelly

May, 2015

This thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Religious Studies.

Brian Stiltner, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies

6/13/16

Permission for photocopying or electronic cataloging of “State the title of your study here” for the purpose of individual scholarly consultation or reference is hereby granted by the author. This permission is not to be interpreted as affecting publication of this work or otherwise placing it in the public domain, and the author reserves all right of ownership guaranteed under common law protection of unpublished manuscripts.

Trevor Kelly

6/13/16

Abstract

CHRISTIAN STOICISM

While the theological assumptions of Christianity and Stoicism may seem disparate, their philosophies are highly compatible. This compatibility is one of the reasons that early Christian authors looked to pagan Stoic authors for support and inspiration. Many Stoic and Christian authors compiled manuals for right living. The historical connections and conceptual similarities between the two schools of thought suggest the viability and value of constructing a combined Christian-Stoic manual of wisdom. Such is the constructive task of this thesis. Passages from Christian and Stoic sources are brought together to illustrate major common themes. The passages are followed by original commentaries that suggest the relevant insights that can be drawn from them. The goal is to show the ongoing relevance of these ancient writings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION WHY CHRISTIAN STOICISM?	06
Chapter 1. BACKGROUND ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY AND STOICISM	
From Socrates to Cynics to Stoics	10
Early Christianity's Encounters with Stoicism	18
The Case for a Christian-Stoic Manual	30
Chapter 2. A MANUAL OF CHRISTIAN-STOIC TEACHINGS AND COMMENTARIES	
Seek Happiness	33
Cultivate Virtue	35
Avoid Vice	37
Care for Others	40
Resist Caring Too Much	42
Care Little for Material Possessions	44
Never Lose Sight of the Goal	46
BIBLIOGRAPHY	48

INTRODUCTION

WHY CHRISTIAN STOICISM?

Why, indeed? After all, according to theologian Paul Tillich, stoicism is opposed to Christianity. Stoicism, Tillich writes, “is the only real alternative to Christianity in the Western world.”¹ For the Stoic, reason is both the means to an end and the end itself, as philosophical virtue is the perfection of reason. For the Christian, reason is merely the means to an end, namely, *the* end: that is to say, God, the perfection of theological virtue. For the Stoic, the Christian overextends; for the Christian, the Stoic is too shortsighted. Therefore, Tillich claims that Stoicism and Christianity are necessarily incompatible. Their incompatibility, it seems, ultimately lies in their theology. The Christian is a sworn monotheist (Trinitarian conceptions of the one, true God aside). The Stoic professes pantheism: the spark of divinity that resides in all things moves them toward the end previously mentioned.

Yet while their theology may be incompatible, their philosophy is more than compatible. Several instances of compatibility will be examined in this thesis. By way of introduction, consider the example of ethics. Like all schools of ancient ethics, Stoic ethics is eudemonistic: the goal of moral living is to achieve ultimate happiness for oneself and, to the extent possible, for others.² Christian ethics can also be considered eudemonistic, at least in the Catholic patristic-medieval tradition of Christianity that will be the primary point of comparison with Stoicism in this thesis. The question is how far the similarity may be pressed, because in defining the

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 9.

² See Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

content of human happiness, Christian and Stoic philosophies seem to differ. The Stoic philosopher Seneca supposed that happiness is moving-with, not moving-against, nature: One should not swim upstream, as it were, or else suffer distress, be it from slower progress or greater effort exerted. St. Thomas Aquinas instead supposed that happiness is being-with, not being-without, God: One should not sin and, in so doing, distance herself from God, or else further alienate herself and make of herself an island. Does it follow, however, that these two ways of thinking about happiness are as opposed as they appear? The argument presented in this thesis is that they need not be opposed. The Stoic and Christian visions of happiness are, in fact, complementary.

While the Stoic is always looking resolutely at the grim realities of life, the Christian tends to look away from present travails toward the future enjoyment of God in a beatific vision. While Stoic happiness might be less concerned with these future things, and Christian happiness might be concerned less with these present things, it seems the former happiness can, and ought to, follow the latter, especially for the virtuous. For both the Christian and the Stoic, virtue perfects reason, and being reasonable ultimately leads to happiness. The system of morality that concerns appropriate living in the natural world during the scope of human life has been called natural law; it is a system of ethics that Stoicism and Catholic Christianity make central. Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theorist of Christian natural law, adds the forward-looking, Christian component, which is Divine law. Human reason attuned to the natural law concerns itself with good and evil, as Seneca describes, while human reason guided by Divine law looks to the One who

set the natural order in motion.

Though this is but one example of the potential compatibility of Stoic and Christian thought, it makes some sense to investigate more thoroughly the shared history of the two traditions. In doing so, this thesis will illustrate the ways in which Tillich and much of modern theology may have overlooked a historically founded lifestyle choice for Christians in the past, as well as demonstrating that such a lifestyle—a Christian-Stoic lifestyle—is still a viable one for Christians today. The approach to this demonstration will be in two main parts.

Chapter 1 provides historical background on Stoicism and Christianity, demonstrating not only the similarities in their worldviews but the many historical encounters and overlaps between them. For the purposes of this project, it is fair to call Stoicism and Christianity “schools” of thought, because, over the first several centuries of Christianity, thinkers from the two traditions interacted in ways akin to the interaction of the ancient schools of philosophy: commenting on each other, criticizing each other, and sometimes incorporating each other’s ideas. This chapter illustrates that both Stoic and Christian writers often presented their moral teachings in the form of manuals of guidance. Some writings are clearly in a manual form—most famously, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus’s *Enchiridion*. Perhaps less well known is the fact that much of the moral teaching in the New Testament takes a manual form. In fact, Paul and other New Testament epistle writers at times modeled their moral instruction on commonplace moral codes that were Stoic in nature.

Chapter 1 is divided into three parts. The first explains the development from

Stoicism from its Socratic and Cynic roots. The second surveys the encounters of early Christianity with Stoicism. The third makes the case that—for reasons historical, conceptual, and ethical—it is a viable project to compile a Christian-Stoic manual of living.

Chapter 2 does just that. The approach is to take several important themes from each school and to identify a classic Stoic passage and a classic Christian passage (a biblical text or passage from a Church Doctor, such as Aquinas) on the theme. The commentaries that follow each pair of passages will argue for the overall compatibility of the teachings and suggest the relevant insights that can be drawn from them. The goal is to show the ongoing relevance of these ancient writings to any reader who wants to better understand and achieve true happiness.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY AND STOICISM

I. FROM SOCRATICS TO CYNICS TO STOICS

Just as Christianity came as a child out of Judaism, Stoicism rose out of Cynicism and, in the same way, existed alongside its parent, even if sometimes contentiously. In a likewise similar fashion, the early Stoics understood themselves as Cynics, though later Stoics such as Epictetus believed that the ideal Cynic was really a Stoic, as disciples of both schools modeled themselves on Socrates. As Epictetus writes:

A Cynic... must, then, if it should so happen, be able to lift up his voice, to come upon the stage, and say, like Socrates: "O mortals, whither are you hurrying? What are you about? Why do you tumble up and down, O miserable wretches... like blind men? You seek prosperity and happiness in a wrong place, where they are not; nor do you give credit to another, who shows you where they are. Why do you seek this possession without?"³

It is therefore appropriate that, before we undergo a brief overview of the Cynics, we first undergo a brief overview of the Socratics. Once the basic views of the Sage of sages is established and better understood, a selection of his students—Cynic and Stoic alike—will likewise be established, accompanied by comparisons to Christian ideas and historical responses.

The first Socratic, if he can even be named as such, was none other than Socrates himself. According to Diogenes Laertius—who catalogued the lives of many ancient philosophers, some of whose ideas would otherwise be lost to us—Socrates

³ Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus: His Discourses, in Four Books, the Enchiridion, and Fragments*, trans. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1890), 3.22.

was the son of an Athenian sculptor and a midwife. This should hardly surprise us, however, as Plato, in the *Theaetetus*, repeatedly characterizes Socrates as a sort-of midwife himself, bringing to birth seemingly new ideas. The intellectual midwife likely aided his peer Euripides in playwriting and was most certainly teased by Aristophanes for it. Furthermore, as Laertius writes,

According to some authors he was a pupil of Anaxagoras, and also of Damon.... When Anaxagoras was condemned, he became a pupil of Archelaus the physicist.... Duris makes him out to have been a slave and to have been employed on stonework, and the draped figures of the Graces on the Acropolis have by some been attributed to him.... From these diverged the sculptor, a prater about laws, the enchanter of Greece, inventor of subtle arguments, the sneerer who mocked at fine speeches, half-Attic in his mock humility.⁴

This sculptor, prater, enchanter inventor and sneerer was a wordsmith of unequalled measure, infamously said to be able to make the weaker argument the stronger and, as a result, banned by the leading citizens of Athens from teaching. He was nonetheless credited for teaching rhetoric and a sort-of philosophy of life before being put to death for those very reasons by envious accusers.

Socrates rarely left his home state of Athens, except when he served in the military. He was ever a moral exemplar, living very plainly, with great dignity, and without ornament. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, Socrates claims that there is "only one good, that is, knowledge, and only one evil, that is, ignorance; wealth and good birth bring their possessor no dignity, but on the contrary evil."⁵ He was known throughout Athens as the wisest of all men living and was greatly envied as such.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 2.5.19.

⁵ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2.5.31.

After Socrates's death, the wise man was honored as a hero: his accusers were brought to justice and banished, and his supporters erected a bronze statue of his likeness in the hall of processions. His students were many, and his influence on Greek and later Roman thought staggering. While we will not speak further of the Socratics proper here, focusing instead on the life and times of Antisthenes, Plato and Xenophon, especially, are two of Socrates' most famous students. It is for that reason that a few of their contributions even to Laertius's account are mentioned.

Antisthenes is quite another character altogether: On the one hand, he is every bit the Socratic as Plato and Xenophon, though on the other he is a Cynic throughout. The son of an Athenian and a Thracian, Antisthenes was a student of the rhetorician Gorgias before meeting—and encouraging others to meet—the sculptor/midwife extraordinaire Socrates. As Laertius remarks, “He lived in the Peiraeus, and every day would tramp the five miles to Athens in order to hear Socrates. From Socrates he learned his hardihood, emulating his disregard of feeling, and thus he inaugurated the Cynic way of life. He demonstrated that pain is a good thing by instancing the great Heracles and Cyrus, drawing the one example from the Greek world and the other from the barbarians.”⁶ This hardihood, as Laertius writes, is the very foundation of the Cynic school. Antisthenes' favorite themes—and those of the Cynic school, perhaps named for their many conversations in the gymnasium called Cynosarges (“White Hound”)—are as follows:

⁶ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.1.2.

He would prove that virtue can be taught; that nobility belongs to none other than the virtuous. And he held virtue to be sufficient in itself to ensure happiness, since it needed nothing else except the strength of a Socrates. And he maintained that virtue is an affair of deeds and does not need a store of words or learning; that the wise man is self-sufficing, for all the goods of others are his; that ill repute is a good thing and much the same as pain; that the wise man will be guided in his public acts not by the established laws but by the law of virtue; that he will also marry in order to have children from union with the handsomest women; furthermore that he will not disdain to love, for only the wise man knows who are worthy to be loved.

To the wise man nothing is foreign or impracticable. A good man deserves to be loved. Men of worth are friends. Make allies of men who are at once brave and just. Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away. It is better to be with a handful of good men fighting against all the bad, than with hosts of bad men against a handful of good men. Pay attention to your enemies, for they are the first to discover your mistakes. Esteem an honest man above a kinsman. Virtue is the same for women as for men. Good actions are fair and evil actions foul. Count all wickedness foreign and alien.

Wisdom is a most sure stronghold, which never crumbles away nor is betrayed. Walls of defense must be constructed in our own impregnable reasoning.”⁷

Men that practiced what Antisthenes preached conversed with him at Cynosarges, forming what would become a new academy there. These men of the White Hound gymnasium were often called hounds themselves, and Antisthenes was chief among them. These hounds grew fond of the nickname, and of the other, more historically significant moniker: Cynic.

Laertius notes also that Antisthenes “gave impulse to the indifference of Diogenes, the continence of Crates, and the hardihood of Zeno, himself laying the foundations of their state.”⁸ Antisthenes’ most famous student was Diogenes of Sinope, the son of a banker and an exile living in Athens. It was there that he met

⁷ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.1.10-13.

⁸ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.1.15.

Antisthenes and eventually became his pupil. Like Antisthenes before him, he folded his cloak over on itself as a coat, carrying what little he owned in an oversized wallet and walking with a staff. Diogenes intentionally lived in poverty and engaged in unusual practices meant to discipline his desires, such as living in a tub (not altogether different from the later Christian ascetic from Syrian, Saint Simeon Stylites, who lived on top of a narrow pillar) and rolling in the sand in the summer and the snow in the winter. Throughout his life, Diogenes sought to do what Antisthenes did, and what Antisthenes's teacher before him, Socrates, did: In living simply, Diogenes called others to a simpler life of simple virtue.

As Laertius writes,

One day, observing a child drinking out of his hands, he cast away the cup from his wallet [his bag] with the words, "A child has beaten me in plainness of living." He also threw away his bowl when in like manner he saw a child who had broken his plate taking up his lentils with the hollow part of a morsel of bread. He used also to reason thus: "All things belong to the gods. The wise are friends of the gods, and friends hold things in common. Therefore all things belong to the wise."⁹

For as many tales of Diogenes' commonality of spirit and friendship, Laertius lists twice as many antagonistic encounters. His retorts and quips rival on the comical, often pushing Cynicism to extremes Antisthenes wouldn't have dreamed of (but giving later generations a convenient term for this biting sarcasm: cynicism). Cynicism aside, the Athenians loved Diogenes, even if his philosophical peers, Plato in particular, cared little for him. Laertius recounts an encounter between Diogenes and the emperor Alexander, illustrating why the philosopher alienated people:

⁹ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.2.37.

“...Alexander, once came and stood opposite him and said, “I am Alexander the great king.” “And I,” said he, “am Diogenes the Cynic.” Being asked what he had done to be called a hound, he said, “I fawn on those who give me anything, I yelp at those who refuse, and I set my teeth in rascals.”¹⁰

Diogenes trained both his mind and his body, asserting that the one was nothing without the other. Craftsmen and gymnasts are skilled in the sort of practice he preached, and nothing in life was possible without practice. According Laertius, Diogenes taught as follows:

Strenuous practice... is capable of overcoming anything. Accordingly, instead of useless toils men should choose such as nature recommends, whereby they might have lived happily. Yet such is their madness that they choose to be miserable. For even the despising of pleasure is itself most pleasurable, when we are habituated to it; and just as those accustomed to a life of pleasure feel disgust when they pass over to the opposite experience, so those whose training has been of the opposite kind derive more pleasure from despising pleasure than from the pleasures themselves...the manner of life he lived was the same as that of Heracles when he preferred liberty to everything.¹¹

Diogenes' most famous pupil was a Theban called Crates, a farmer of some wealth. According to Diocles, Diogenes persuaded Crates to give up his farm and throw his riches into the sea. He was often the subject of much abuse: He was ugly to look at, and was physically assaulted often and openly mocked even more. Even his own kinsman, furious that the Cynic had disposed of his wealth and ever-bent on diverting him from his cause, would confront him, though Crates was unshakable and could, as it is said, “Give ‘em as good as he could take ‘em.” His most famous student, Zeno of Citium, related in his *Anecdotes* that, when Crates was being

¹⁰ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.2.60.

¹¹ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.2.71.

laughed at in the gymnasium, Zeno would say, “Take heart, Crates, for it is for the good of your eyes and of the rest of your body. You will see these men, who are laughing at you, tortured before long by disease, counting you happy, and reproaching themselves for their sluggishness.”¹² Crates was nonetheless a student of strenuous practice, understanding that scorn and ridicule are but an additional grounds to train in virtue.

Zeno was, in every sense, Crates’ most famous student, though a poor Cynic in many cases. Zeno’s tangos with Cynicism for the better part of twenty years, though he finds that the shameless way of the hound is ultimately too shameful: As Laertius writes, “Crates... gave him a potful of lentil-soup to carry through the Ceramicus [The potter’s quarter, from which the English word “Ceramics” comes]; and when he saw that he was ashamed and tried to keep it out of sight, with a blow of his staff he broke the pot. As Zeno took to flight with the lentil-soup flowing down his legs, ‘Why run away, my little Phoenician?’ quoted Crates, ‘nothing terrible has befallen you.’”¹³ Gone is the shamelessness of Diogenes here, though the desire for virtue through strenuous practice still remained, as did much of the ethical statutes of Cynicism. What remained was the foundation of Zenoian thought.

After leaving Crates’ tutelage, Zeno would discourse while pacing up and down the painted Stoa, or colonnade. His followers would do the same, earning them the name *Stoics*, literally, “the men of the Stoa.” Like Diogenes, Zeno was greatly loved by the Athenians, though he was not nearly as antagonistic to them as

¹² Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.5.91-92.

¹³ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.1.2.

his predecessor. He was honored by King Antigonus (Gonatas) for his great virtue at the ripe old age of eighty. The king begged the old man to teach him—and, through him, the whole of Macedonia—in the ways of ethics and *eudaimonia*. Unlike earlier Cynics, Zeno was known to keep some money, for the shamelessness of begging, he decided, was unbecoming of a philosopher, especially one who espoused self-sufficiency. In order to better share with his friends and neighbors, Zeno lent them money with great generosity throughout his life.

Whereas the earlier Cynics saw ignorance as humans' greatest enemy, Zeno despised arrogance and conceit even more. He was well known for chastising youth for their pride and vanity, reminding them that they are no greater than the homeless and the beggars whose shoulders they rub. He never stopped learning and never asserted that he was more learned than another, as there was always something he could learn from him. His dress and eating were simple, as was common of the Cynics, though he perhaps imbibed more than Crates. Temperance was his greatest virtue, and it became the central virtue of the Stoic school. Laertius remarks, "And in very truth in this species of virtue and in dignity he surpassed all mankind, ay, and in happiness; for he was ninety-eight when he died and had enjoyed good health without an ailment to the last."¹⁴

¹⁴ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.1.28.

II. EARLY CHRISTIANITY'S ENCOUNTERS WITH STOICISM

With the rise of Stoicism came the decline of Cynicism, in part because Stoicism's departure from Cynic antagonism made it more appealing to a wider audience. However, the transition was gradual, as early Christians gravitated toward Cynic asceticism and poverty. Maximus of Alexandria, for example, was called both a Cynic and a Christian for his asceticism. Jesus Seminar member Burton L. Mack supposed that Jesus himself was something akin to a sagacious Cynic, even going as far as to assert that Jesus' peers would recognize him as such.¹⁵ Despite some similarities between Jesus and, say, Diogenes, neither of whom minced words when speaking to men in authority, it seems quite unlikely that Jesus would be identified as a Cynic. While both Jesus and the Cynics were brazenly anti-elitist and non-materialistic, the Cynics lived this way to show status-quo sensibilities, while Jesus, in his Jewish context, maintained a given amount of ritual cleanliness. The Cynics lived purposely "unclean," while Jesus challenged the Jewish leaders' concepts of true cleanliness. Commenting on the dietary purity laws, he said, "It is not what enters one's mouth that defiles that person; but what comes out of the mouth is what defiles one."¹⁶ With that being said, Jesus still observed these purity laws and was not himself unclean, even if he routinely surrounded himself with those who were: tax collectors and prostitutes, for example.

¹⁵ B. L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 245.

¹⁶ Matthew 15:11 NAB

While the early Christians appreciated the Cynic ideal in much the same way that Epictetus and later Stoics did, these Christians were, like Zeno, repulsed by the Cynics “shameless” lifestyle. As Saint Augustine writes:

It is this which those canine or cynic philosophers have overlooked, when they have, in violation of the modest instincts of men, boastfully proclaimed their unclean and shameless opinion, worthy indeed of dogs... that as the matrimonial act is legitimate, no one should be ashamed to perform it openly, in the street or any public place. Instinctive shame has overborne this wild fancy. For though it is related that Diogenes once dared to put his opinion in practice, under the impression that his sect would be all the more famous if his egregious shamelessness were deeply graven in the memory of mankind, yet this example was not afterwards followed. Shame had more influence with them, to make them blush before men, than error to make them affect a resemblance to dogs. And possibly, even in the case of Diogenes, and those who did imitate him, there was but an appearance and pretense of copulation, and not the reality.¹⁷

While the same could not be said of Zeno and his “shameful, blushing” Stoic followers, their linked heritage was nonetheless known throughout the ancient world. Laertius’s overview of the Cynics and Stoics ends with Zeno and his students, known colloquially as the “Early Stoa.” These early Stoa preached physical, ethical and logical doctrines, much of which were thought by Cynics, such as Diogenes, to be highly impractical and, as such, a waste of time and effort. The three doctrines are necessarily connected, and include rhetoric and dialectic.

Reason reigns supreme for the Stoic: As Laertius writes, “All things, they say, are discerned by means of logical study, including whatever falls within the province

¹⁷ Aurelius Augustine, *The Works, Volume 1: The City of God*, trans. Rev. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), XIV.20.

of Physics, and again whatever belongs to that of Ethics.”¹⁸ The ethical life—that is, the virtuous life—is lived in accordance with nature. This nature is none other than the law common to all things, also called reason. While Thomas might be inclined to call this common law God, the early Stoa were content identifying it as the ruler and lord of all, Zeus. It is for this reason that even Epictetus, himself a late Stoa, identified the ideal Cynics—and Stoics—as divine messengers of Zeus. Happiness, for these messengers, resulted from virtue alone, bringing harmony to the individual and the universe.

As opposed to Cynic shamelessness, Stoics practiced a sort of indifference characterized by preference and rejection. For example, some Stoics possessed material wealth but, as we will later see, did not necessarily prescribe to any sort of materialism: The Stoic owns his possessions and is, as a result, not owned by them and owes nothing to them. It is this sort of indifference that carries well past the early Stoa, including Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Diogenes of Babylon and Antipater; middle Stoa such as Panaetius and Posidonius, and well into the period of the late Stoa. By the Roman era, Stoic philosophy had flourished both in and beyond Athens, and the works of the late Stoa are the only ones that survive intact. The period is typically thought to have begun with Lucius Annaeus Seneca, born around the time of Christ and ended with Emperor Marcus Aurelius in the third century. Epictetus and his teacher, Musonius Rufus, fall between the two. In his *Discourses*, Epictetus speaks briefly about one of Rufus’s most challenging lessons: being

¹⁸ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.1.83.

consistently critical. Epictetus writes of one of his conversations with his teacher

Rufus:

“Suppose, after all, I should make a mistake... it is not as if I had killed my father.” ... This very thing I myself said to Rufus when he reproved me for not finding the weak point in some syllogism. “Why,” said I, “have I burnt the capitol then?” “Slave!” answered he, “was the thing here involved the capitol? Or are there no other faults but burning the capitol, or killing a father?”¹⁹

It is not enough for the Stoic to, as common sense would have it, refrain from killing his father or burning the capitol: For the Stoic, logical and argumentative structures are no less important than familial or governmental establishments.

While little more can be said of Rufus and Epictetus—the former, a famous teacher and the latter, his even more famous student—their writings speak much for themselves. Only fragments of Rufus’s *Discourses* remain, while Epictetus’s student Arrian wrote down Epictetus’s discourses drawing from his teacher’s lectures. Arrian then went on to compile a companion piece to his master’s discourses, constructed from sayings, fragments and integral portions of the *Discourses*; it is titled *The Enchiridion*. It is at this time that the early Christians begin composing and compiling their New Testament, specifically St. Paul’s epistles; the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke; and the companion history to Luke, known as the Acts of the Apostles. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul makes his way through Thessalonica and Beroea, spreading the gospel like wildfire before making his way to Athens.²⁰ While Athens may have been less politically significant than Rome at

¹⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.7.

²⁰ Acts 17.

this point in history, it remained an important cultural center for Greek thought. It is there, on the Royal Porch, that Paul encounters Stoicism head-on.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he grew exasperated at the sight of the city full of idols. So he debated in the synagogue with the Jews and with the worshipers, and daily in the public square with whoever happened to be there. Even some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers engaged him in discussion. Some asked, "What is this scavenger trying to say?" Others said, "He sounds like a promoter of foreign deities," because he was preaching about "Jesus" and "resurrection."

They took him and led him to Areopagus and said, "May we learn what this new teaching is that you speak of? For you bring some strange notions to our ears; we should like to know what these things mean." Now all the Athenians as well as the foreigners residing there used their time for nothing else but telling or hearing something new.²¹

After preaching the Good News to the Athenians, Paul wins a few new followers and leaves them.²² However, he does not leave the Athenians unaffected by them. The Stoics, especially, greatly influenced his theology, as evidenced by the plurality of strong parallels between Pauline and Stoic thought. Paul's thoughts on sin and death in his letter to the Romans, especially, strongly echo those of his contemporary, Epictetus in the *Enchiridion*. By looking more closely at these passages, one can discover connections between Paul and Epictetus. First, this is Paul's reflection on sin and death:

Did the good, then, become death for me? Of course not! Sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin, worked death in me through the good, so that sin might become sinful beyond measure through the commandment.

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold into slavery to sin. What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.

²¹ Acts 17:16-21.

²² Acts 17:33-34.

Now if I do what I do not want, I concur that the law is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want.

Now if [I] do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand.

For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, I myself, with my mind, serve the law of God but, with my flesh, the law of sin.²³

And this is Epictetus:

Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things. Death, for instance, is not terrible, or else it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our notion of death that it is terrible. When therefore we are hindered, or disturbed, or let us never attribute it to others, but to ourselves; that is, to our own principles. An uninstructed person will lay the fault of his own bad condition upon others. Someone just starting instruction will lay the fault on himself. Some who is perfectly instructed will place blame neither on others nor on himself.²⁴

Both passages revolve around an understanding of principle as guiding action.

While this is clear enough in Epictetus's passage, the word "principle" doesn't even appear until the end of Paul's. The subtlety lies in the language here: The Greek *νόμος* ("law") can also be translated as "custom," "system," or—most importantly—"principle,"²⁵ more clearly in line with what Epictetus writes. That law and principle

²³ Romans 7:13-25.

²⁴ Epictetus, *Enchiridion* (New York: Classic Books America, 2009), V.

²⁵ Romans 7:13-25.

are related insofar as both of these, by design, guide actions may not be immediately apparent: The former concerns itself chiefly with the cardinal virtue of justice and the latter with wisdom, but the latter is of greater import to the sage and, as a result, also to this project. While the just, law-abiding man knows what is right and wrong, the wise man knows what is best: That is to say, what will improve him and his, which can only be – for Paul at least – the grace of God. He elaborates upon this difference as follows:

Far from improving the sinner, law encourages sin to expose itself in transgressions or violations of specific commandments.... Thus persons who do not experience the justifying grace of God, and Christians who revert to dependence on law as the criterion for their relationship with God, will recognize a rift between their reasoned desire for the goodness of the law and their actual performance that is contrary to the law. Unable to free themselves from the slavery of sin and the power of death, they can only be rescued from defeat in the conflict by the power of God's grace working through Jesus Christ.²⁶

Prior to this passage in Romans, Paul suggests that man necessarily finds himself in a slave-master relationship either with God or with sin.²⁷ Through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, a person of faith finds that the bonds of sin are broken and bonds himself or herself to God. While sin bound humanity to death, Paul explains, God binds humanity to life everlasting. The only thing that stands in the way of attaining righteousness and purity is the impure body, which must be sanctified or otherwise made holy. Before the Holy Spirit and the Son were sent, the Father provided his chosen people with the Law, traditionally understood as the 613 *mitzvot* ("Commandments") of the Torah, the first third of the Hebrew Bible. In

²⁶ Romans 7:23.

²⁷ Romans 6.

keeping these commandments, Jews believed they would be made holy. Christians—Paul included—therefore turned or returned to the law, but found that, in light of Jesus’ teachings, the law was more or less antiquated: “But now we are released from the law, dead to what held us captive, so that we may serve in the newness of the spirit and not under the obsolete letter.”²⁸ It is the letter of the law, after all, that taught man what sin was, as Paul says: “I did not know sin except through the law, and I did not know what it is to covet except that the law said, ‘You shall not covet’.”²⁹

Now, Paul is not suggesting that laws and principles are evil. After all, God is good, and God’s law must therefore also be good. The *letter* of the law—the fine print, if you will—can obscure the *spirit* of the law, even going so far as to seemingly inspire the very act the law forbids. Though the law is spiritual by design, one trying to abide by the law can do no better than to respond carnally, bringing to birth the internal struggle that Paul continually highlights: Time and time again, Paul finds that he does what he hates (Sin) and not what he loves (God’s will). Without Jesus to save and deliver him from the bondage of sin, Paul asserts that he would be powerless to do otherwise, and his struggle is every human being’s struggle.

While it might initially appear that Epictetus disagrees on this point, this need not be the case. Indeed, Epictetus makes no mention of salvation in this passage, and appears to need no saving. Rationalist philosophers would say that reason alone is sufficient deliverance from death’s terrors. Thus, Epictetus instead

²⁸ Romans 7:6.

²⁹Romans 7:7

speaks of instruction, and could be argued that that Paul is, as he writes, “just starting”: a novice, on the path to sagacity. The utterly uninstructed blames others for his plight (Adam and Eve, for example, or Cain³⁰), while the novice blames himself (as Paul does here). The sage—one perfectly instructed, as Epictetus writes—blames neither others nor himself. Perhaps in entering into a spirited diatribe, as Paul does and in his style, we may be able to reveal the subtleties at work here.

Are Adam and Eve responsible for humans’ morality because of their disobedience of God’s rules? Not necessarily: or, as Paul would write, of course not! It can be argued that they were simply curious, and were misled. Is the serpent, he who misled the two, responsible? Of course not! He was cunning, as he was created.³¹ Is God, He who created the three, responsible? Of course not! If God is good, his creatures are likewise created good. However, his creatures are not created immortal, though God is. As it is written:

Then the LORD God said: See! The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil! Now, what if he also reaches out his hand to take fruit from the tree of life, and eats of it and lives forever? The LORD God therefore banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he had been taken.³²

Unless man had partaken from the fruit from the tree of life, as such, he could not have immortality. In other words, though life is, indeed, the end goal of the divine economy, death is not the cost of expulsion.

³⁰ In Genesis 3-4.

³¹ Genesis 3:1.

³² Genesis 3:22-23.

If not they, then who is to be held responsible? Are we? Of course not! We cannot, after all, partake of the tree of life now: immortality, here and now, is simply beyond us. It is for this reason that death did not appear horrible Socrates, as Epictetus points out, or to Paul, as he himself writes: Paul can, in more ways than this one, be understood as a sort of Christian Socrates, speaking to the Athenians on the Royal Porch as Socrates had been known to do. It was there that Socrates once spoke of piety to Euthyphro and was later accused of promoting foreign deities by Meletus.³³ The Athenians misunderstand Paul from the outset of his speech, as it is written, in the same way that Socrates was misunderstood.³⁴ It is with this in mind that we might not take Paul's message to the Romans as instruction so much as invitation into dialogue and diatribe, much as we have here.

This is, indeed, what Jesus did. In inviting his disciples into conversation, he inevitably brings about a conversion, turning them ever away from themselves and toward the Father. Jesus said:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where I am going you know the way.”

Thomas said to him, “Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”

Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”³⁵

³³ In Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Apology*, respectively

³⁴ Acts 17:18.

³⁵ John 14:1-6.

Just as Jesus challenges his disciples to reevaluate his message—his *way*, as it were—Paul challenges Rome to do the same. Epictetus simply remarks what Paul implies: Death has no sting.³⁶

Both Paul and Epictetus—students-of-sorts of Jesus and Socrates, respectively—go on to serve as excellent teachers for early Christians, despite theological and philosophical differences. The union of the two brings about an even greater understanding of the texts, one yielding insight into the other: Paul contextualizes Epictetus within the Christian tradition, while Epictetus offers practical guidance through the Pauline text. It is for this reason, it seems, that early Christians carried this handbook and used it, though not without some adjustment: Saint Nilus of Sinai, as John Lancaster Spalding remarks in the critical and biographical introduction to George Long’s translation of Epictetus’ *Discourses*.³⁷ Nilus, he writes, paraphrased and ultimately Christianized the manual, establishing it as a sort of rule of monastic living for himself and his brothers.

That these discourses and writings followed Paul’s epistles and the Gospels is no accident, and it seems possible that Epictetus was aware of, and read, the Christian New Testament, especially Paul’s epistles. Though not himself a Christian, Epictetus’s quasi-theology was, at best, intentionally vague, neither clearly Stoic pantheism nor Christian monotheism. As Spalding notes:

While the world view of the Stoic differs radically from the Christian, the moral teaching of the pagan philosopher and of the follower of Christ is often much the same. Both attach the highest importance to religious faith and

³⁶ As in 1 Corinthians 15:55.

³⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses of Epictetus*, trans. George Long (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), xiv.

sentiment; both hold that virtue is the chief good; both emphasize the principle of liberty, and draw from it that of free personality; both declare that man holds his earthly possessions as a steward of the divine owner, to whom he is responsible for the use he makes of them.³⁸

Given the historical connections, conceptual similarities, and ethical common cause, it is possible to forge a new *Enchiridion*, a new handbook, for modern Christians—not paraphrasing the Stoic one, as Nilus did, but contextualizing it within the Christian tradition as above. In the section that follows, I will argue for the creation of this manual as opposed to a paraphrase in the style of Nilus.

³⁸ Epictetus, *Discourses*, xiii.

III. The Case for a Christian-Stoic Manual

Why, if members of the early Church used the first manual, compose a second? Though the answer has, perhaps, already been hinted at, the question deserves to be explored in a bit more detail. After all, it could be argued that Stoicism might somehow twist the Christian message, or that Christianity might somehow distort the Stoic vision. The fact that Nilus used Epictetus's manual at all is significant: Christians, at least at the time of Nilus, were already making use of that Stoic vision to better see the Christian way. Just as the *Enchiridion* served as a launching point for Nilus, it makes some sense that Christians preceding Nilus carried and used the manual, as did Epictetus's students.

Furthermore, Nilus may not have been the first Christian to Christianize the handbook. After all, Epictetus's *Enchiridion* was compiled nearly three centuries before Nilus's rule was completed. While it is possible that the *Enchiridion* did not reach Nilus's home state of modern day Turkey until that time, this seems unlikely: after Alexander Hellenized Asia Minor—including Turkey—much of Greek literature, art and philosophy made its way through the empire.

If these early, Hellenized Christians were already using Epictetus's manual, it could be argued that the creation of a second manual is largely unnecessary. I argue that a more-modern manual is, indeed, necessary to satisfy the needs of the modern Church. The Church has, especially in the years following the Second Vatican Council, sought to keep up with the times and, as Bob Dylan once sang, "The times they are a-changin.'" Even the early Church did not receive the *Enchiridion* with open arms. The very fact that Nilus needed to Christianize and paraphrase the first

manual tells us that, even to the early Church, Epictetus' message was not exactly compatible with Jesus' and, perhaps even more importantly, with Paul's. While Paul would hold that we keep our eyes set on Jesus, our teacher, Epictetus suggests that this is akin to childishness. As he writes:

Whatever moral rules you have deliberately proposed to yourself, abide by them as they were laws, and as if you would be guilty of impiety by violating any of them. Don't regard what anyone says of you, for this, after all, is no concern of yours. How long, then, will you put off thinking yourself worthy of the highest improvements and follow the distinctions of reason? You have received the philosophical theorems, with which you ought to be familiar, and you have been familiar with them. What other master, then, do you wait for, to throw upon the delay of reforming yourself? You are no longer a boy, but a grown man.

If, therefore, you will be negligent and slothful, and always add procrastination to procrastination, purpose to purpose, and fix day after day in which you will attend to yourself, you will insensibly continue without proficiency, and, living and dying, persevere in being one of the vulgar. This instant, then, think yourself worthy of living as a man grown up, and a proficient. Let whatever appears to be the best be to you an inviolable law. And if any instance of pain or pleasure, or glory or disgrace, is set before you, remember that now is the combat, now the Olympiad comes on, nor can it be put off. By once being defeated and giving way, proficiency is lost, or by the contrary preserved.

Thus Socrates became perfect, improving himself by everything, attending to nothing but reason. And though you are not yet a Socrates, you ought, however, to live as one desirous of becoming a Socrates.³⁹

While this advice seems both at once wise and blasphemous to the Christian, it begs thoughtful—and prayerful—contemplation in order to better follow it. Is it not best to do both what Jesus says and also what he does? Is this much not at the very heart of Christianity, to be as Christ? This manual will serve to do just that: a valuable tool for modern Christians seeking to be as Christ to the a-changin' world.

³⁹ Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, 50.

This second manual will complement the first in much the same way that Stoicism compliments Christianity. It will be composed of a collection of essential Christian-Stoic teaching, representative of the practical intersection of Christian and Stoic thought. This manual will serve both as a practical guide to living, in much the same way that Epictetus's manual did, and also as a weapon of sorts (the word *Enchiridion* can be translated as both "handbook" and "dagger") with which Christians today can better "fight the good fight," as it were.

The teachings themselves will consist of seven short statements, each supported by two texts—one Stoic, one Christian. The Stoic text will be of the later Stoic period for largely practical reasons: Only complete manuscripts of the late Stoa (Gaius Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius) have survived intact. Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* was written last of these late Stoa, sometime between 170 and 180 CE. The Christian text will be a biblical passage whenever possible, in order to best highlight the philosophy of the Apostles. The Christian New Testament was supposed to have been written before 150 CE, which places these writings—those of the Apostles and of the early Church—around the same time as the late Stoa.

The texts will then be compared and contrasted, especially with regards to the teaching, in a reflection. The reflection will be one part scholarly investigation and one part prayerful meditation. The goal of this project, ultimately, is to distill these Christian-Stoic teachings, making them as accessible as humanly possible in order to make them as *livable* as humanly possible, without watering them down.

CHAPTER 2

A MANUAL OF CHRISTIAN-STOIC TEACHINGS AND COMMENTARIES

I. Seek Happiness

Teachings

The life that is happy is in harmony with its own nature. This can only come about when the mind is in a healthy state and in permanent possession of its own sanity, robust and vigorous, capable of the noblest endurance, responsive to circumstances, concerned for the body and all that affects it but not to the point of anxiety, conscientious about the other accouterments of life without being too enamored of any one thing, ready to make use of the gifts of fortune without being enslaved to them.

– Seneca ⁴⁰

Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence. To make this clear, two points must be observed. First, that man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek: secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object. If therefore the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than “that He is”; the perfection of that intellect does not yet reach simply the First Cause, but there remains in it the natural desire to seek the cause. Consequently, for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God as with that object, in which alone man’s happiness consists.

– Thomas Aquinas⁴¹

Commentary

While it might at first seem that Seneca and St. Thomas Aquinas disagree about the nature of happiness, this could not be further from the truth. For both Seneca and

⁴⁰ Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, III, in *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics*, ed. Jennifer Welchman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (2nd ed, 1920, www.newadvent.org), II.1.3.8.

Thomas, one cannot be ultimately happy until she is first satisfied. Unless she wants for nothing and her physical needs met, her focus and attention will be on those physical needs. With her attention on those physical needs, her entire person begins to go flat, as it were, as the mind, body and spirit become unharmonious. This harmony is the essence of happiness for both Seneca and Thomas.

Happiness is therefore like music, and these instruments of mind, body and spirit must be kept in tune in order to create beautiful pitches. Furthermore, one must look ahead to the next bar in order to succeed at playing. If her instrument is out of tune or she fails to look ahead, she will undoubtedly struggle to play the song well. These are but a few of the most basic markings of a true musician. A musician does not simply play music, but knows it intimately. Without an understanding of harmony and tuning, for example, her music is but a happy accident: little more than pleasant-sounding serendipity. One cannot be a musician accidentally. Similarly, one cannot accidentally be happy.

The happy person, Seneca and Thomas would argue, knows these things, does these things and, as a result, can play any song well. In both understanding and applying these things, the happy person emerges as a better and, ultimately, a more beautiful person, able to make for herself even better and more beautiful things. Happiness is not simply the ultimate goal, after all: Happiness can be sought and found in the everyday and the ordinary insofar as it is a reflection of the exceptional and extraordinary, that is to say, God. How to best do this will be investigated in the following teachings.

II. Cultivate Virtue

Teachings

True happiness...is founded upon virtue. Of what will this virtue persuade you? That you should consider nothing either good or evil other than what is characterized by virtue or vice. Secondly, that you become immovable from the good and against evil so that, insofar as it is right to do so, you exemplify the divine. What does virtue promise in return for this outlay? Huge advantages, equivalent even to those of the gods: you will be under no compulsion, you will not be in want of anything, you will be free, secure, unassailable; you will attempt nothing in vain, be excluded from nothing; everything will come out according to your judgment; no setbacks will occur, nothing contrary to your wishes or expectations.

– Seneca⁴²

Man's virtue perfects him in relation to good. Now since the notion of good consists in 'mode, species, and order,' as Augustine states (*De Nat. Boni. iii*) or in 'number, weight, and measure,' as expressed in *Wisdom 11:20*, man's good must needs be appraised with respect to some rule. Now this rule is twofold...human reason and Divine Law. And since Divine Law is the higher rule, it extends to more things, so that whatever is ruled by human reason, is ruled by the Divine Law too; but the converse does not hold."

– Thomas Aquinas⁴³

Commentary

Virtue, for both Seneca and Thomas, sets one's sight on the good and holds it fast. This good, Thomas asserts, is none other than God himself, the Divine Essence. By obeying nature's rules—what Thomas refers to as “natural law”—as well as human reason and Divine Law, one becomes like God: After all, God, does nothing other than that which is his divine nature. Humans can do the same insofar as they act in accordance with their human nature.

⁴² Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, XVI.

⁴³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.1.63.2

This Divine Law is none other than what God does and is, as such, godly activity insofar as God cannot act outside his nature. It is for this reason that Seneca promises likewise godly rewards: Virtue brings freedom from compulsion and want, secure and unassailable, the ability to do anything and be left out from nothing as anything you judge, wish and expect will be as you judge, wish and expect without setback.

While virtue is undoubtedly a discipline insofar as it is a good habit and, as such, must be put into practice, it is anything but restrictive. To be certain, the virtuous do only what is virtuous and never what is vicious. However, insofar as viciousness runs contrary to natural law, viciousness is, as a result, inherently unnatural. That one might hold fast to vice is ultimately more restrictive: If virtue frees the virtuous, as Seneca notes, it follows that vice enslaves the vicious to compulsion and want, for example. It is therefore against vice that the virtuous must rally.

III. Avoid Vice

Teachings

Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions...Aiming therefore at such great things, remember that you must not allow yourself to be carried, even with a slight tendency, towards the attainment of lesser things. Instead, you must entirely quit some things and for the present postpone the rest. But if you would have both these great things, along with power and riches, then you will not gain even the latter, because you aim for the former too: but you will absolutely fail of the former, by which alone happiness and freedom are achieved. Work, therefore to be able to say to every harsh appearance, 'You are but an appearance, and not absolutely the thing you appear to be.' And then examine it by those rules which you have, and first, and chiefly, by this: whether it concerns...anything not in our control, be prepared to say that it is nothing to you.

– Epictetus⁴⁴

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span? Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.

– Jesus⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, I.

Commentary

The “greater things,” as Epictetus writes—things in our control—are not necessarily virtuous, nor are the “lesser things”—things not in our control—necessarily vicious. Neither Epictetus nor the author of Matthew address, let alone argue, the inherent moral value of the things unto themselves. As Epictetus identifies, however, the things in our control are greater than the things not in our control. As such, we ought to set our sights on those greater things and not worry, as Matthew writes, about those lesser things. To do so is wise, as American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr noted in the famous prayer attributed to him, the Serenity Prayer.⁴⁶

Because wisdom is a virtue – one of the four Cardinal Virtues, for Thomas and others⁴⁷ – it follows that to do so is also virtuous. To be concerned with those things both greater and lesser, or to otherwise regard the lesser as greater and the greater as lesser, is vicious insofar as it is concerned with today’s evils, as Matthew writes. Virtue and vice have more to do with prioritization, therefore, making sure to set one’s sights on those greater things and not on those lesser things or else squander them both.

That wisdom is associated in this case with sight is no accident. Both Epictetus and Matthew concern themselves with appearances: For Epictetus, what he refers to as “harsh appearances,” the things that appear to be greater and may well be lesser, is of chief concern; for Matthew, clothing serves as little more than a

⁴⁵ Matthew 6: 25-34.

⁴⁶ Which reads, “God grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.1.61.2

distraction, though it is ultimately a necessity. Your Father in heaven, as Matthew writes, provides for these and all necessities. Therefore, they do not require your attention and only appear to do so. With this in mind, and any other harsh appearances seen in greater focus, what matters most also comes into focus.

IV. Care for Others

Teachings

Everything that you see, everything human and divine, is one. We are all limbs of one all-encompassing body. Nature brought us into existence as creatures related to one another, forming us from the same elements for the same ends. She instilled in us reciprocal affection and made us innately sociable. She also invested us with a sense of fairness and justice...our hands are ready to assist those who need assistance... “I am human and I count nothing human as disconnected from me.”

– Seneca⁴⁸

Now the body is not a single part, but many...as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body...Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary, and those parts of the body that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor, and our less presentable parts are treated with greater propriety, whereas our more presentable parts do not need this. But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if [one] part is honored, all the parts share its joy.

– St. Paul⁴⁹

Commentary

Here, both Paul and Seneca write at length about the interconnectedness of human beings, each singing the praises of communal living. Indeed, both the sage and the disciple are necessarily and naturally social, equipped, as Seneca writes, with reciprocal affection, a sense of fairness, justice and connection to others. All men—and women—are endowed with these faculties and, as such, belong to the global,

⁴⁸ Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, Letter 95, in *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics*, ed. Jennifer Welchman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006)

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:14, 18-20, 22-26.

human community.

That all are connected communally, however, is not all that Paul and Seneca seem to be suggesting. The connection, for both men, is more than social: As “limbs of one all-encompassing body,” and “many parts” of “one body,” the connection is physical and visceral. The many parts, as it were, are interdependent as well as interconnected, physically needing the others in order to operate as intended (as in, at all). No part goes unnoticed, and no part can be considered extraneous.

The vulnerable are given special attention with this in mind, as those who “need assistance,” our “less presentable parts,” are no less a part of the communities Seneca and Paul described. In fact, for Paul, caring for the less presentable is the responsibility of the more presentable. After all, these less presentable parts of the body are all the more vital it, just as the heart is more vital than the hand. It is with this in mind that we must care for one another.

V. Resist Caring Too Much

Teachings

In everything which pleases the soul, or supplies a want, or is loved, remember to add this to the (description, notion); what is the nature of each thing, beginning from the smallest? If you love an earthen vessel, say it is an earthen vessel [that] you love; for when it has been broken, you will not be disturbed. If you are kissing your child or wife, say that it is a human being whom you are kissing, for when the wife or child dies, you will not be disturbed.

– Epictetus⁵⁰

God has made everything appropriate to its time, but has put the timeless into their hearts so they cannot find out, from beginning to end, the work which God has done. I recognized that there is nothing better than to rejoice and to do well during life. Moreover, that all can eat and drink and enjoy the good of all their toil—this is a gift of God. I recognized that whatever God does will endure forever; there is no adding to it, or taking from it. Thus has God done that he may be revered. What now is has already been; what is to be, already is: God retrieves what has gone by.

– The Book of Ecclesiastes⁵¹

Commentary

Everything of the earth is a gift from God, as it is written above. An earthen vessel—a clay pot, for example, or a favorite mug—is by nature of the earth, and things of the earth break. As the author of Ecclesiastes notes, this cannot be changed: This was the state of things yesterday, is the state of things today, and will be the state of things tomorrow. This is good just as the one who made it is good, and ought to be celebrated as such.

⁵⁰ Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, III.

⁵¹ Ecclesiastes 3:11-15.

However, it is not always easy to celebrate this, especially with regards to human beings—are we not, also, of the earth? Is it not disturbing when we break? After all, human beings are not mugs! If human beings are of greater import than the birds of the sky of the flowers of the earth, as we read in the book of Ecclesiastes,⁵² surely we are of greater import than mugs. Mugs neither think, nor feel...live, nor die. Mugs either work or do not, and their value resides almost solely in their ability to do just that: work.

We are, however, earthen vessels and, like all other earthen vessels—mugs included—we are breakable. In that way, we are no greater than any other earthen vessel, or flower, or bird. Though we do not know the appropriate time, we have faith that, when we have gone by, God will retrieve us, too, as it is written. That we—and all of creation with us—will not be forgotten and discarded, broken though we may be, is worth rejoicing.

⁵² Matthew 6: 25-34, or as discussed in III.

VI. Care Little for Material Possessions

Teachings

If my wealth should melt away it would deprive me of nothing but itself, but if yours were to depart you would be stunned and feel you were deprived of what makes you yourself. With me, wealth has a certain place; in your case it has the highest place. In short, I own my wealth, your wealth owns you.

– Seneca⁵³

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be...No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

– Jesus⁵⁴

Commentary

Neither writer denounces wealth outright, but each recognizes that putting wealth front and center is an error in judgment. One must own his property and not be owned by it, as Seneca writes, serving God and not *mammon*, Jesus' Aramaic word for "wealth" or "property". As such, one must "hate" his wealth in order to own it and serve God, lest he love it and, in doing so, be owned by it and serve it. As Seneca writes, wealth "has a certain place": not as a book has a place on a shelf, but as a line item on a list of priorities.

It is with this list in mind that the "hatred" previously mentioned gains some context: Hatred is comparative, akin to loving less, much as Kierkegaard explored in *Fear and Trembling*. In the book of Genesis,⁵⁵ God asks Abraham to sacrifice his

⁵³ *On the Happy Life*, XXI.

⁵⁴ Matthew 6:19-21, 24.

⁵⁵ Genesis 22:1-19.

beloved son, Isaac. Without so much as a second thought, he sets off to do just that. How *could* he? In comparison to the love Abraham had for God, his love for Isaac was infinitely less. In effect, Abraham comparatively “hated” Isaac.

It is with this in mind that we must hate our wealth. Unless we do, we will find it impossible to own our wealth, succumbing instead to the power of mammon. It is in this way that mammon can become for us an entity, as Milton imagined in *Paradise Lost*. As Seneca and Matthew seem to agree, however, mammon has no power to speak of. If we own our wealth and serve God, we will recognize that mammon is merely the name of a vice we already know all too well: greed.

VII. Never Lose Sight of the Goal

Teachings

Consider when, on a voyage, your ship is anchored; if you go on shore to get water you may along the way amuse yourself with picking up a shellfish, or an onion. However, your thoughts and continual attention ought to be bent towards the ship, waiting for the captain to call on board; you must then immediately leave all these things, otherwise you will be thrown into the ship, bound neck and feet like a sheep. So it is with life. If, instead of an onion or a shellfish, you are given a wife or child, that is fine. But if the captain calls, you must run to the ship, leaving them, and regarding none of them. But if you are old, never go far from the ship: lest, when you are called, you should be unable to come in time.

– Epictetus⁵⁶

Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law—though I am not outside God’s law but within the law of Christ—to win over those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it. Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

– St. Paul⁵⁷

Commentary

In many ways, this is the very heart of the project: training. If we do not train, we can never hope to finish the race, let alone win it. We will find, as Epictetus remarks,

⁵⁶ Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, VII.

⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 9: 19-27.

that the things that amuse us—be it shellfish, onion, wife or child—can distract enough so as to mask the discharge of the starting gun. Unless we are listening for it specifically, knowing the sound and even the scent of the gunpowder explosion, we might even forget that we are running a race, let alone *the* race.

Interestingly, both Epictetus and Paul suggest that this training is both spiritual and bodily: The mind must be ever bent toward the virtues of the mind, and the body toward the bodily. Unless our appetites are properly curbed, we will be powerless to resist the sweetness of the onion, experienced by the reflective mind, and the carnal pleasure of the flesh, experienced by the sensory body. The metaphor of running the race is, therefore, fitting: The combat and the Olympiad are not merely imagined, but experienced in the here and now.

It is fitting, then, that the manual ends in the here and now. As you begin your training—cultivating virtue and avoiding vice; caring for others, though, not too much, and; caring little for physical possessions—you must not lose sight of your goal, that is, the very goal of Christian-Stoicism: happiness. This manual, inspired by the manuals of Epictetus and Nilus, serves as a starting-off point for the novice on the path to sagacity.

This manual is not, and cannot be, the end-all, be-all of Christian-Stoicism. It is not, after all, the race itself, but the means to ultimately win the race: the race, that is, toward a good and happily lived life. With virtue as your guide and your priorities straight, only the matter of actually running the thing—putting your training into practice—lies ahead of you. The starting pistol has been raised. On your mark...get set...*live!*

Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Second revised edition, 1920. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. <http://home.newadvent.org/summa/>.
- Augustine, Aurelius. *The Works, Volume 1: The City of God*. Translated by Reverend Marcus Dods. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913.
- Epictetus. *Discourses of Epictetus*. Translated by George Long. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904.
- Epictetus. *Enchiridion*. New York: Classic Books America, 2009.
- Epictetus. *The Works of Epictetus: His Discourses, in Four Books, the Enchiridion, and Fragments*. Translated by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1890.
- Laertius, Diogenes. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by R.D. Hicks. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Mack, Burton L. *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Seneca. *On the Happy Life and Moral Letters*. In *The Practice of Virtue: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Virtue Ethics*, edited by Jennifer Welchman. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006.
- Tillich, Paul. *The Courage To Be*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Bible*. New American Edition. <http://www.usccb.org/bible/>.