



Teaching the Great Books with Josh Gibbs

Lesson 8: Who Do We Teach?

Outline:

The People We Teach: Teenagers

- Teenagers are not adults - they are a unique group of humans.
- There are distinct temptations for teenagers and that ought to matter to teachers.
- The differences between the teacher and the student matters because the differences between the speaker and the audience always matters.
 - You need to be able to “speak across the chasm” between teens and adults’ ideas.
- Classical education is about teaching virtue so the temptations to which teens are vulnerable matter most.
- A teacher should be a student of teenagers like someone should be a student of their spouse.
 - If teenage psychology does not fascinate you, you should not be teaching them. (This does not mean academic studies of learning styles.)
 - You must know teenagers because the virtue you hold out to students must be presented meaningfully and attractively.
 - Example: God related to man as a man because man wants to worship man. (St. Athanasius “On the Incarnation”)
 - The shepherds hear about Jesus as a human in a manger.



“Christ is Born as Man’s Redeemer” (16th century Netherlandish Tapestry)



- Follow what St. Paul wrote: “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” (I Corinthians 9:22)
 - This does not mean you must listen to their music or wear their clothes.
 - Care about the soul of teenagers in order to preach to them in sympathetic language.

The Temptation for Teenagers

- Teenagers are loathe to believe that cultivating a virtuous soul is necessary or possible.
 - They describe virtue as a thing man possesses unintentionally, haphazardly, or arbitrarily.
- Classical educators are largely teaching students who do not think what they are being taught is necessary.
- We are not selling something that students want and we sweeten.
 - When we hold out the possibility of becoming virtuous to students, they are thinking it is unnecessary.
- Test it out: Ask students, “What is virtue?”
- When teaching Dante’s “Purgatorio” (where the saved souls must achieve the virtue opposite the vice to move beyond the vice), students see the striving for virtue as either works based salvation or selfish attempts to gain treasure in heaven.
- Classical education is rested by the very people to which you are giving it.
- “The Abolition of Man” by C.S. Lewis (p. 13-14): “[T]hey have learned from tradition that youth is sentimental—and they conclude that the best thing they can do is to fortify the minds of young people against emotion. My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.”
- The “slumber of cold vulgarity” is classically what is referred to as the sin of “acedia.”

The Noonday Devil: Acedia

- Before reading R.R. Reno’s essay in First Things “Fighting the Noonday Devil,” assumed powerlessness before certain temptation as merely the human condition.
 - Reno says that acedia is “a belief that moral responsibility, spiritual effort, and religious discipline are empty burdens, ineffective and archaic demands that cannot lead us forward, inaccessible ideals that, even if we believe in them, are beyond our capacity... It describes a lassitude and despair that overwhelms spiritual striving.” He goes on to say that it is “a dullness of the soul that can stem from restlessness



just as easily as from indolence... [It is] a slow love that cannot motivate and uplift, leaving the soul stagnant, unable to move under the heavy burden of sin.”

- The sin of acedia from the outside is not a normal condition. This makes sense of the prayer: “Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this day without sin.”
- Dorothy Sayers on acedia in her speech “The Other Six Deadly Sins”: “It is the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive only because there is nothing it would die for.” (published in the collection *Letter to a Diminished Church*, p. 97)
- Acedia is NOT nihilism or an inclination for evil, but rather a lack of desire for good.
- “Acedia is the stagnate, warm water that breeds disease. It is the gray matter between virtue and vice.”
- It is not mere sloth, acedia is not merely saying “I’ll do it later.”
- Evagrius Ponticus said of acedia: The demon of acedia—also called the noonday demon—is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about [10 a.m.] and besieges the soul until [2 p.m.]. [Roughly speaking, the hours of a school-day.] First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from [dinner-time or dismissal time], to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren might appear from his cell]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement... This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life’s necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself.”
- John Cassian: “Our struggle is what the Greeks called ἀκηδία [acedia], which we can refer to as a wearied or anxious heart. It is [akin] to sadness and is the peculiar lot of solitaries and a particularly dangerous and frequent foe of those dwelling in the desert... Once [acedia] has seized possession of a wrecked mind it makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell... He groans quite frequently that spending such time [in his cell] is of no profit to him...”
- Dorothy Sayers’ commentary on (her translation of) Dante’s “Purgatorio”: “The sin which in English is commonly called Sloth, and in Latin, [acedia], is insidious, and assumes such Protean shapes that it is rather difficult to define. It is not merely idleness of mind and laziness of body: it is the whole poisoning of the will which, beginning with indifference and an attitude of “I

- couldn't care less," extends to deliberate refusal of joy culminates in morbid introspection and despair."
- "This despair is despair that virtue cannot be sought after, that temptation cannot be beaten, and that stirring up treasure in heaven is an arbitrary and chaotic venture as unknowable as the day of death."
— The condition that most students find themselves in.
 - If students are not impacted in whole, they are typically impacted in part.
 - When you tell of the need to become virtuous and overcome vice, students respond with indifference.
 - Leads to the question: "How do you teach through acedia?"



"Acedia" by Hieronymus (Jerome) Wierix