Moral Theology and the Christian Vocation to Fruitfulness

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The Second Vatican Council offered precise, if somewhat terse, guidelines for the renewal of Moral Theology. "Its scientific exposition," we read, "nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world."[1] Regarding the *foundations* of moral theology, the Council fathers called for a greater attention to Sacred Scripture, reiterating that the Gospel is the source of Christian moral teaching.[2] Concerning the *content* of this discipline, the Council asked moral theologians both to illuminate the exalted vocation of believers in Christ and to highlight the obligation of Christians to bear fruit in charity. In the intervening forty years since the Council moral theologians have devoted much attention to Sacred Scripture as the normative source of Christian ethics, and more specifically to the Christological foundations of moral theology.[3] Similar efforts have been made to illuminate the high call-

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[1] Second Vatican Council, *Optatam totius* (October 28, 1965), n. 16.

[2] Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), n. 7.

[3] The references here are too numerous to mention. As a small sampling of some of the more successful attempts, the following could be cited. Benedict Ashley, *Living the Truth in Love: A Biblical Introduction to Moral Theology* (New York: Alba House, 1996); Carlo Caffarra, *Viventi in Cristo: Breve esposizione della dottrina cattolica* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1981); Servais Pinckaers, *L'Évangile et la morale* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf et Fribourg (Suisse): Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1990); Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die sittliche Botschaft des Neuen Testaments*, 2 vols (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder 1986/1988); Giuseppe Segalla, *Introduzione all'etica biblica del Nuovo*

ing of the faithful in Christ, and to show how the moral life constitutes a free, loving response to this vocation. Significantly less attention has been paid to the obligation of Christians to "bear fruit in charity for the life of the world."

With these considerations as a starting point, this present essay intends to explore the Christian vocation to fruitfulness especially as expressed in a series of key passages from the Gospel. On reading through the canonical texts one notes a remarkable emphasis in Christ's teaching on the call to bear fruit, rather than merely avoid the sinful attitudes or actions that offend God. Jesus proposes the Christian life as a constructive project rather than a series of restrictions. Throughout the Gospel accounts Jesus repeatedly refers to the positive responsibility of his followers to manifest their love for God through concrete action, and the divine displeasure and even eternal condemnation reserved to those who fail to accomplish the good expected of them. Nevertheless, despite the centrality of the Christian call to fruitfulness in the Gospels, this theme is all but absent in traditional manuals of moral theology, and, surprisingly, even in more recent texts which purport to carry forward the renewal called for by the Council.

This deficiency is certainly understandable, since the moral category of bearing fruit presents formidable difficulties to the science of moral theology. All moral theologians recognize that the avoidance of evil acts, expressed in negative moral absolutes ("Thou shalt not..."), does not exhaust moral obligation. In point of fact, the general obligation to do good (summed up in Christ's command to love God and neighbor) is no less central than the obligation to shun evil, and embraces and surpasses the negative precepts. It is, of course, easier to pinpoint certain actions as evil in themselves—and hence always to be avoided—than it is to identify which good actions must necessarily be carried out, since the latter depend on a constellation of other factors. In itself, however, the positive command to do good, to actively love God and neighbor, is as absolute as any negative moral precept.

Christ's commandment to love not only requires actions to be benevolent ("When dealing with another person, do so in such-and-such a way"), but also *mandates action* itself. Stated in another way, love often dictates positive action, and the *failure* to act may sometimes constitute sinful behavior. Culpable inaction, according to the tradi-

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Testamento. Problemi e storia (Brescia: Queriniana, 1989); Ceslas Spicq, *Theologie morale du Nouveau Testament* (Paris: Gabalda et C., 1970); Réal Tremblay, *Chiamati a riprodurre l'immagine del Figlio: Gesù il Cristo come fondamento ultimo della morale cristiana* (Rome: Accademia Alfonsiana, 1983).

tional moral lexicon, goes by the name of the sin of omission. The characteristic that distinguishes *culpable* inaction from inaction generally, lies in the obligation attached to certain good acts. Thus Aquinas states that "omission signifies the non-fulfillment of a good, not indeed of any good, but of a good that is *due*."[4] The human person is not responsible for doing the greatest possible good in every moment, which would demand an impossible running calculus of options and consequences, but the good required of each.[5] Nonetheless, it is not always easy to distinguish between a good action that is due and a good action that is merely elective or recommendable, and a narrow reading of obligation (the performance of actions explicitly enjoined on the moral agent) severely stunts the moral life. Moreover, framing the moral obligation to fruitfulness exclusively in terms of sins of omission significantly diminishes the moral responsibility of persons to do good generally, summed up in the great commandment to love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself.[6] "Acts of charity" and other positive moral acts encompass a far broader gamut of human actions than those that can strictly be considered obligatory. In other words, a Christian's general moral obligation to "do good" may considerably exceed the sum of those specific positive actions to which he is morally obliged.

On considering the causes of moral theology's failure to address the question of fruitfulness a more fundamental problem emerges. Moral theology has traditionally focused on the human *act* as its primary locus of study.[7] The possibility, conditions and qualities of truly

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[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter S. Th.), II-II, 79, 3, emphasis added.

[5] "Criminal negligence is the omission of something which ought to have been done. If we were responsible every moment for everything that we were not doing at that moment, and if we had to examine every single alternative course of action and choose the best one every single time we acted at all, the demands on us would be impossible" (Robert Spaemann, *Basic Moral Concepts*, tr. T. J. Armstrong, [London/New York: Routledge, 1991], 55).

[6] The great commandment of love clearly includes the avoidance of evil as well, since it is the sum of the entire moral law, but it also urges to positive action.

[7] "The manualistic tradition focused on the regulation of discrete external acts (through their systematic organization into 'cases'), examined in the light of disparate precepts and norms. This resulted in a fragmentation of moral content, never considered from the unitary perspective of the acting subject, but rather from the multiform perspective of the exterior object, circumstances, and particular motives" (Livio Melina, "Cristo e il dinamismo dell'agire: Bilancio e prospettive del cristocentrismo in morale," in *Cristocentrismo: Riflessione teologica*, ed. Paolo Scarafoni, [Rome: Città Nuova, 2002]: 183-84, translation mine).

human acts, as well as the sources of the morality of concrete acts (object, intention, circumstances) continue to occupy center stage in fundamental moral theology textbooks and treatises.

The evaluation of specific acts, and the corresponding concentration on one's moral obligation in the present moment or situation to act in a given way, while essential to the moral life, must be seen in the light of the larger picture of who one is called to be and what one is called to accomplish in life.[8] A moral life is not merely a disconnected string of morally good or indifferent acts, but the building up of a life of love according to one's specific vocation. Even the morality of a given action must not be seen in isolation, or evaluated solely in terms of whether or not a specific moral injunction of avoidance or performance is attached to it, but must be placed in the context of one's other actions as well. Where a given action may be morally permissible in itself, a series of morally "indifferent" actions when one is called bear positive fruit over time, may effectively "crowd out" the good one is expected to do, and thereby constitute moral neglect. One may choose to place these considerations in the category of "circumstances," but if so they are circumstances of a wholly different order from those which merely aggravate or attenuate the moral weight of an act,[9] since they refer to the moral framework of one's whole life and the positive obligation to bear fruit.

The following considerations represent a heuristic attempt to identify recurring elements in Christ's teaching that can furnish Moral Theology with material to further develop its understanding of the Christian obligation to fruitfulness. Though I have adopted the so-called "canonical approach" to the Gospel texts, I have also endeavored to include the findings of Scripture scholars and exegetes regarding the form and meaning of the texts. A collaborative effort between biblical scholarship and moral theology lends a precious service to both disciplines, and enriches theology generally.

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[8] Among others, Domenico Capone warns against a fragmentary approach to moral theology whereby objectified single acts would be divorced from the deeper being of the person. See D. Capone, "Cristocentrismo in teologia morale," in *Morale e redenzione*, eds. Lorenzo Álvarez Verdes and Sabatino Majorano (Rome: Editiones Accademiae Alfonsianae, 1983): 65-94.

[9] Morally relevant circumstances refer to the conditions surrounding an act apart from the substance of the act being performed. They include such diverse elements as the presence of intense emotion (passion) in the moral agent, the way one carries out an act, whether other people are involved, the foreseeable consequences of one's action, etc. They often clarify the gravity of actions which fall in the same moral species, such as the *amount* one has stolen or the *extent* of one's assault on another.

Christ's Teaching on the Obligation to Fruitfulness

In a literal sense, fruitfulness refers to the capability of plants, especially trees, to yield their proper produce, which contains the seed that can give rise to other such plants. The Bible, along with other classical literature, makes ample use of this agricultural image both in its proper sense and in its figurative meaning as a synonym for productivity. In this broader sense, "fruit" represents the consequences of one's life and actions, which transcend the actions themselves. In his teaching Jesus employs the image of fruitfulness on a number of occasions, and incorporates it into his instruction both to his disciples and to his listeners generally. In the following paragraphs we will first explore Jesus' use of the term as described by the Synoptic Gospels and then proceed to examine the Johannine text.

The Synoptic Gospels

The word "fruit" (καρπός) appears 36 times in the Synoptic Gospels, along with 4 appearances of the verb καρποφορέω (to bear fruit). In the Synoptic context "fruit" has a generic as well as a specific meaning.[10] In its more general sense, fruit refers to the visible manifestation in one's life of what one bears within. In Matthew and Luke's accounts, for example, Jesus speaks of a tree being known by its fruits, in that a good tree bears good fruit (visible actions, words, attitudes, etc.) whereas a bad tree bears bad fruit.[11] The actions of a person necessarily betray his interiority and the sincerity of his conversion.[12] Here Jesus rhetorically asks whether figs and grapes are found amidst thorns and brambles, implying that such good fruit is

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[10] In these texts the plural form of fruit (καρπούς ποιεῖν) and the singular (καρπόν ποιεῖν) are used interchangeably.

[11] Matthew 7:15-20; Luke 6:43-45. See also Matthew 12:33. The use of this familiar figure from the Old Testament parallels Isaiah's parable of the vineyard, where in his invective against Israel, Isaiah draws a distinction between the "grapes" expected in the vineyard of the Lord and the "wild grapes" which the vineyard actually yielded. Here "wild grapes" expressly signify injustice generally, of which Isaiah offers a series of examples. See Isaiah 5:1-30.

[12] Thus Hauck writes: "The pious actions of a man are proof of the sincerity of his μετάνοια (Mt. 3:8). As his fruit, the acts of man are moreover the sign of recognition (ἐπιγνσώεσθε) of his hidden interiority (Mt 7:16ff)" (Friedrich Hauck, "καρπός" in *Grande lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, vol. v, tr. from the German *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, [Brescia: Paideia, 1969], 220, English translation mine).

only found only on good plants. Thus Wrege writes: "The correspondence between the plant and its *fruit* allows for a retrospective conclusion that deduces from the *fruits* (as actions of the disciple) the quality of his discipleship (as a plant or tree)."[13] Commented on the same text, Hensel further specifies that those who follow Christ with authenticity "witness to their life of faith through their love,"[14] a theme elaborated on by St. James in his epistle. In Matthew's text, Jesus proposes the analogy as a way of unmasking false prophets, who appear in sheep's clothing but inside are ravenous wolves, suggesting that even while attempting to appear righteous, their external "fruit" will betray what they bear within. In Luke's account, Jesus makes a similar point, adding a reference to the spontaneous overflow of words from what fills one's heart. A similar usage of the word is found in the mouth of John the Baptist, who exhorts his hearers to "bear fruit worthy of repentance"[15] and warns that "every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."[16]

Along with this generic sense of fruit—good or bad—as an exterior manifestation of the internal quality of a person, "fruit" in the Synoptics also has an exclusively *positive* sense where the idea of "bearing fruit" refers to the salutary effects of Christian discipleship.[17] Here the distinction is made not between good fruit and bad, but between fruitfulness and barrenness, underscored by the Greek opposites of καρπός and ἄκαρπος (sterile). For instance, in the parable of the sower,[18] Jesus contrasts the seed that falls on infertile ground (footpath, rocky ground, thorns) and remains fruitless (ἄκαρπος) with the seed that falls on good soil and bears fruit (καρποφορεῖ) in abun-

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[13] H.-Th. Wrege, "καρπός" in *Diccionario exegético del Nuevo Testamento*, vol. I, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, tr. from the German *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (1992) by Constantino Ruiz-Garrido, (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 2001), 2202, translation mine.

[14] R. Hensel, "Fruto" in *Diccionario teológico del Nuevo Testamento*, vol. I, eds. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther and Hans Bietenhard, translated from the German *Theologisches Begriffslexicon zum Neuen Testament* (1971), (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1998), 601, translation mine.

[15] Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8.

[16] Matthew 3:10; Luke 3:9.

[17] According to Lesêtre, to "bear fruit" in the New Testament refers primarily to "producing good actions with God's grace" (H. Lesêtre, "Fruit" in *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, ed. F. Vigouroux, vol. II-II, [Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1912], 2411, translation mine).

[18] Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:4-15.

dance. Here the measure of the sower's success is gauged by the fruit borne in the lives of the recipients.[19]

The emphasis in this parable falls on the personal response of those to whom the word is directed, and this response is shown to be the determining factor of the yield. The seed remains the same in each case but the harvest varies according to the reception of the soil. Whereas elsewhere Jesus underscores the internal dynamism of the seed itself,[20] here he focuses on the importance of a worthy response in order for the seed to come to fruition. Though Jesus explains that the seed represents the "word,"[21] a parallel can easily be drawn between the workings of grace and free will. Just as grace (the seed) is the efficient cause of spiritual fruit, the cooperation of free will (the good soil) is an indispensable condition for the eventual outcome. Moreover, mere passive permission does not suffice; active collaboration is required. The good soil represents those who, when they hear the word, "hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance."[22] The word should not merely be heard or received initially with enthusiasm, but bring about deeper, more lasting change through perseverance.

Jesus' expectation to find fruit and his displeasure at its absence is further exemplified by Matthew and Mark's account of his cursing of the fig tree, on which he found nothing but leaves.[23] As a result, the fig tree withers, and Jesus takes the opportunity to speak of the power of faith. Luke, while omitting this passage, includes the parable of a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard and looking for fruit on it

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[19] According to Benedict T. Viviano, the seed refers to either divine revelation or the kingdom of God, the different soils represent different human receptions, and the "sign of success is the fruit bearing of the recipients" ("The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993], 655).

[20] See, for instance, the parable of the seed that grows by itself in Mark 4:26-19, where the seed is shown to bear its yield night and day, even when the gardener sleeps, "He does not know how."

[21] Matthew refers to the seed as "the word of the kingdom" (ὁ λόγος τῆς βασιλείας). Mark speaks only of "the word" (ὁ λόγος). Luke refers to the "word of God" (ὁ λόγος τοῦθεοῦ). See Matthew 13:19, Mark 4:14, and Luke 8:11, respectively.

[22] Luke 8:15.

[23] Matthew 21:18-19; Mark 11:12-21. Viviano asserts that the image of the barren fig tree is a symbol of failure and blighted promise, perhaps representing the failure of the Pharisees and Sadducees to renew the life of the people. See "The Gospel According to Matthew," 664.

for three consecutive years, finds none.[24] He orders the gardener to cut it down since in its barrenness it is "wasting the soil." The gardener intercedes on behalf of the fig tree, asking for one more year[25] to "dig around it and put manure on it," after which time, if it still fails to bear fruit, he will cut it down. While these texts clearly refer on the one hand to the people of Israel and their lack of fruitfulness, specifically the fruit of repentance according to the preceding passage, they also carry a tropologic sense regarding Jesus' expectations that his disciples bear fruit.[26]

The Gospel of John

In the Johannine text, "fruit" has an exclusively positive meaning, and is tied to discipleship and union with Christ. Jesus invites his disciples to look around at the fields ready for harvest, and to reap the fruit (καρπόν) for which they did not labor, suggesting the external fruit of *missionary activity* and not merely the fruit of a good life.[27] He insists that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit (καρπόν), thereby further linking his call to a daily taking up of the cross to apostolic fecundity.[28] Yet the most characteristic explanation of apostolic fruitfulness in John's Gospel is the analogy[29] of the vine and the branches, an appropriation of a familiar Old Testament image.[30]

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[24] Luke 13:6-9.

[25] Thus Nolland writes: "The parable sets a limit on the time available for the required repentance" (John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B [Luke 9:21-18:34], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 719).

[26] Thus Robert Karris states that "this is a parable of compassion, which produces comfort in the disciple who stumbles along the Christian Way. On the other hand, it is a parable of crisis, which should light a fire under procrastinators and other unproductive disciples" ("The Gospel According to Luke," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993], 705).

[27] John 4:35-38. In his commentary on John's Gospel, P. Perkins writes: "John 4:36 and 12:24 suggest that 'bearing fruit' implies missionary activity, though within the context of the discourse it may be intended simply as a general characterization for Christian life" (Pheme Perkins, "John" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993], 976). According to Perkins, the addition of the clause "for eternal life" to the image of fruit in John 4:36 clearly indicates that the harvest refers specifically to conversion to belief in Jesus. See Ibid. 957.

[28] John 12:24.

[29] Raymond Brown, following Bultmann, claims that the description of the vine and the branches is not, strictly speaking, either a parable or an allegory, and notes the

> I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

In this passage, two key characteristics stand out. First is the Father's clear expectation that Jesus' followers bear fruit, emphasized by the severe "removal" of those branches that fail to do so, and their subsequent collection for burning. Just as salt which has lost its taste is "fit for neither the soil nor the manure pile"[31] and is good for nothing but "to be thrown out and trampled underfoot,"[32] so too a barren branch merely clutters the vine and is good for nothing but to be removed and burned. Fruitfulness is so characteristic of the disciple that in its absence the disciple's very *raison d'être* disappears. Noteworthy here is that the sentence of "burning" comes not as a judgment of positive wrongdoing, but for the passive fault of infertility, a theme we will return to in the next section. The "cleansing" or "pruning" performed by the vinedresser likewise aims expressly at making the branch more fruitful. Fruitfulness marks the maturity of Christ's fol-

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inherent difficulty involved in attempting to apply these categories of Greek rhetoric to varied Semitic imagery patterns. He asserts that the more precise term for the comparison is the Hebrew *mashal* (*mašal*) (*The Gospel According to John*, vol. 29A of *The Anchor Bible*, [New York: Doubleday, 1970], 668), but for simplicity's sake, I will follow the common practice of referring to the comparison as an allegory.

[30] The Old Testament image of Israel as "vine" furnishes the basis for the Johannine use of the symbol. See, inter alia, Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jeremiah 2:21; 5:10; Hosea 10:1; Ezekial 15:1-6; 17:5-10; 19:10-14; Psalm 80:8-15. Nonetheless, as Raymond Brown observes, "it is clear that John's *mashal* of the vine and the branches has a unique orientation, consonant with Johannine Christology. This orientation is not found in the OT or in Jewish thought, but many of the images and ideas that have been blended together under this orientation are found here" (672).

[31] Luke 14:35.

[32] Matthew 5:13.

lowers, when they truly "become" his disciples (v. 8).[33] Jesus explicitly ties the mission of bearing fruit to the reason behind his election of the disciples: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And *I appointed you to go and bear fruit*, fruit that will last" (v. 16, emphasis added).

Second, union with Christ (remaining in his love) directly determines one's ability to bear fruit, such that an exact correspondence exists between abiding in Christ and fruitfulness. Only in Christ can the disciple bear any fruit whatsoever, since "apart from me you can do nothing." Yet all those who do abide in him bear fruit in abundance (v. 5), such that fruitfulness is a mark of the true disciple. On the other hand, Jesus also speaks of "every branch in me that bears no fruit," which suggests that there are branches on the vine ("in me") that remain sterile.[34] As in other cases, Jesus draws a parallel between his relationship with the Father and his disciples' relationship with him. Just as "those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit," so too Jesus adduces his own fruit, the "works" (ἔργα) he accomplished,[35] as testimony "that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."[36] Fruitfulness does not result from independent effort but from communion with God in Christ.

The foregoing reflections on fruitfulness in the Gospel accounts present two fundamental problems for moral theology. The first relates to the *content* of the Christian obligation to bear fruit. While the couplets fruitful/sterile, good fruit/bad fruit give clear indications regarding the general responsibility of Christians to bear good fruit, and

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[33] In his commentary on John's Gospel Raymond Brown notes that "'bearing much fruit' and 'becoming my disciples' are not really two different actions, one consequent upon the other. The sense is not that when the hearers bear fruit, they will become his disciples, but that in bearing fruit they show they are disciples" (*The Gospel According to John*, vol. 29A of *The Anchor Bible*, [New York: Doubleday, 1970], 662-3).

[34] Thus Brown observes: "This verse, then, introduces a somber note; for it recognizes both that there are branches on the vine (literally 'in me') that do not bear fruit and that even the fruit-bearing branches need pruning" (675).

[35] Aquinas explicitly links fruit with works: "It is written (Mt. 12:33): 'By the fruit the tree is known'; that is to say, man is known by his works, as holy men explain the passage" (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 70, 1, *sed contra*).

[36] "The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me" (John 5:36). "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me" (John 10:25). "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" (John 10:32). "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:37-38).

that the presence of this fruit offers the surest measure of the authenticity of one's discipleship, still, the exact nature of the fruit remains obscure. Does the Christian obligation to fruitfulness consist in purity of life, personal repentance, adherence to Christ's example, obedience to the commandments, apostolic witness…? Some would interpret fruitfulness in terms of good works and a virtuous way of life.[37] Nonetheless, a clear reference to the communication of divine life to others permeates the entire passage, underscored by Jesus' appointment of the disciples to *go* and bear fruit (v. 16).[38] Christian fecundity should be externally ascertainable, even to the outside observer, yet its explicit indicators are undefined.

The second problem posed to moral theology concerns the nature of fruitfulness itself, as a concept. Especially in Jesus' account of the vine and the branches, "bearing fruit" seems to spontaneously result from abiding in Christ's love rather than constituting an activity in its own right. In other words, the Christian's moral obligation would consist in "remaining in Jesus' love"—from which one can necessarily expect fruit—rather that on the direct pursuit of fruit as a willed act. The imperceptible inherence in Christ's love would blossom in the visible fruitfulness of the true disciple.[39] Yet other statements would suggest that while the visible fruit would be indicative of union with Christ, not for that reason does it cease to constitute free human action. For example in v. 10 Jesus states: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" whereas a few lines earlier (14:15) the expression is reversed "If you love me, you will keep my commandments"; here free obedience to Jesus' commandments seems

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[37] See, for instance, M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Jean* (Paris: Gabalda, 1948), 401.

[38] Thus Brown writes: "The explanation of the *mashal* emphasizes strongly love for others (xv 12-13) and seems to relate bearing fruit to the apostolic ministry (16). In xii 24 it is implied that Jesus himself 'bears fruit' only when through his death and resurrection he can communicate life to others. In the agricultural *mashal* involving harvest and fruit (iv 35-38) the focus was very much on missionary enterprise. Seemingly, then, the imagery of trimming clean the branches so that they bear more fruit involves a growth in love which binds the Christian to Jesus and spreads life to others" (676).

[39] Brown suggests as much in his commentary on John's Gospel: "The Christians to whom this *mashal* was addressed would have become branches in Jesus through baptism. This would make them fruit-bearing because it would give them life begotten from above and would make them clean according to the symbolism of xiii 10. But to make them bear more fruit it was necessary that Jesus' commandment of love gradually express itself more and more in their lives" (677). He adds that the following verses (9-17) with their discussion of love "are really an interpretation of the idea of bearing fruit in 8" (ibid., 680).

both to be a condition and a manifestation (fruit) of remaining in his love.[40] In his first epistle, John continues this same theme and writes: "By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked."[41] Yet even here it is unclear whether "walking as Jesus walked" constitutes the path to remaining in Jesus' love or the necessary fruit of this union.

Other Parables of Fruitfulness

Along with these explicit references to "fruit," numerous instances in the Gospel accounts attest to Jesus' emphasis on the obligation that Christian charity be manifested in positive action. In fact, the Council's reference to bearing fruit "in charity" underscores the evangelical relationship between fruitfulness and charity. Jesus places the sin of culpable inaction at the center of some of his more forceful parables and moral teachings. Five such instances illustrate the point especially well. The purpose of this exercise is not to draw out from any single passage a moral absolute, but rather to discern common threads running through Jesus' teaching that will help identify the content of the fruit that his disciples are called to bear.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37)

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) bears a special importance to the present study in that it constitutes Jesus' explanation of the commandment of love of neighbor, the heart of what it means to "bear fruit in charity." A lawyer approaches Jesus to ask what he must do in order to inherit eternal life.[42] When Christ asks him in turn what he reads in the law, the lawyer replies with the dual commandment of loving God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus approves of this answer and the lawyer follows up with

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[40] In Matthew's Gospel, Jesús expressly renounces a presumed affiliation with his person that does not manifest itself in adherence to the Father's will: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:24-26).

[41] 1 John 2:5-6.

[42] The kindness shown by the Samaritan to the half-dead victim "is an essential part of the way to 'eternal life'" (Fitzmyer, 884).

a question regarding the identity of his neighbor. Instead of responding with a simple definition of neighbor, Jesus recounts a parable of a man who falls in with robbers and is left half dead by the roadside. After a priest and a Levite pass by without stopping, a Samaritan happens by and has pity on him, dressing his wounds and taking him to an inn where he can be cared for at the expense of the Samaritan. The parable ends with the vigorous imperative: "Go and do the same."

Though many of the Church Fathers interpreted this parable in a Christological sense (i.e., taking the Samaritan as a figure of Jesus), the "more usual modern view is that the parable is an example story in which the Samaritan shows us a compassion unrestricted by national, racial, or religious barriers."[43] As an illustration of "neighbor," Jesus chooses the most unlikely of candidates, a man whom tradition has handed down under the title "the good Samaritan." He was in no way a brother, in the sense of a fellow Jew, nor a fellow countryman, but rather a reprobate and a pariah.[44] In selecting a Samaritan to exemplify "neighbor" in the second great commandment, Jesus underscores the universality of the precept of charity, as he does earlier when enjoining his followers to love even their enemies.[45]

At the same time, Jesus draws attention away from the identity of the man who had been beaten and robbed. While the lawyer's question aims at discovering who qualifies for membership in the covenant community and thus which set of human beings merit the "love of neighbor" described in Leviticus 19:18,[46] Jesus intentionally leaves him as a generic "certain man" [47] and chooses to focus instead on the

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[43] John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B (Luke 9:21-18:34), (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 597.

[44] Samaritans were descended from Jews who had intermarried with pagan Assyrians and subsequently developed their own form of Judaism and built their own Temple. There was deep animosity between Samaritans and the Jews in Palestine at the time of Christ.

[45] Jesus proposes the Father's universal goodness toward men as the example to be followed: "I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous'" (Matt. 5:44-5). See also Luke 6:27-35.

[46] "The question assumes a restricted scope for neighbor love (cf. Sirach 12:1-4: 'If you do good, know to whom you do it… and do not help the sinner')" (John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B [Luke 9:21-18:34], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 592).

[47] Nolland observes that "while we may guess he is Jewish, for the dynamic of the story his status in the covenant is irrelevant: he is totally generically 'a certain man'"

attitude and actions of the Samaritan. The moral question becomes not "Who is this person in need?" but "Does this (generic) person need my assistance?" In the parable, the neighbor is not the man in need, but the man who helps.[48] Thus, in choosing whether to help someone in need, Christians are not called to distinguish among persons as if some were neighbors and others not; rather, they are to *become* neighbors to all. Jesus in a sense defines "neighbor" (i.e., the one who effectively loves and fulfills the commandment) as one who comes to the positive assistance of another in need.

In this parable, Jesus does not contrast doing evil on the one hand and avoiding it on the other—between, say, the robbers who assaulted the traveler and the passers-by who refrained from violence. The moral action to be emulated here ("go, and do the same") is not the avoidance of evil, and the hero is not the one who minds his own business and does no wrong to others.[49] Rather, Jesus contrasts those who *positively act* on behalf of others and those who neglect to act. The passage stresses that the Samaritan takes from what is his own (his own mount, oil and wine, his money for the inn) to aid the half-dead man. In representing love for neighbor, then, Jesus presents the fundamental difference as between action and inaction, doing or failing to do and emphasizes both the universality of Christian charity and on the positive nature of this virtue, expressed in acts of compassion.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus bears a striking resemblance to that of the Good Samaritan, and highlights Luke's attention

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(*Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B [Luke 9:21-18:34], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 589).

[48] "The scribe asks for a definition of what is meant by 'neighbour,' when it is said that a man must love his neighbour as himself. In the quotation from the law and in the scribe's question, the neighbour is mentioned as the proper *object* of benevolent action. The parable, it is true, gives by implication an answer to the question, viz. your neighbour is anyone in need with whom you are thrown into contact, but the word neighbour is now used in a quite different sense, viz. to denote the person who himself shews benevolence or 'neighbourliness' to others" (J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* [London: Macmillan, 1930], 151). See also the commentary on Luke's Gospel by Robert J. Karris in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 702.

[49] "The story's focus is on the priest's failure to help rather than on the reason that he failed to help" (John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B [Luke 9:21-18:34], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 593).

to Jesus' compassion. This passage is directed to the Pharisees, and thus one may read an implicit censure of the Jewish people who had received God's riches and refused to share them, though biblical scholars tend to see a moral message as well. The placement of the story at the conclusion of the section of Luke's Gospel dealing with the use and abuse of riches further underscores its moral message. Here the concept of "riches" is extended to include all means of doing good to others. Thus Fitzmyer, following T. W. Manson, asserts that the parable "calls indirectly for generous and gracious help for all the victims of poverty, sickness, or any other ill that may come upon human beings."[50]

Here the story takes place not on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho but rather at the house of a wealthy man. The narration is straightforward. There was a rich man who "dressed in purple and fine linen" and "feasted sumptuously every day." Meanwhile at his gate lay a poor fellow named Lazarus, "covered with sores," who "longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table." His misery extends to the point that "even the dogs would come and lick his sores." Both Lazarus and the rich man die, yet while Lazarus is carried off to the bosom of Abraham, the rich man finds himself tormented in Hades.[51] The remarkable reversal of the roles after death contains one of the chief messages of the parable. Even the naming of Lazarus (the only use of a personal name in a Gospel parable!) and the contrasting anonymity of the rich man,[52] highlights the absolute reversal of things in eternity, an exemplification of Jesus' teaching that the "last shall be first, and the first last."[53]

Why the drastic difference in their fates? The scant data offered in the Gospel account only reveal the rich man's financial state and a bit about his lifestyle. The reader cannot assume that his wealth was ill-gotten, that he oppressed his workers, or that he was unfaithful as a husband and family man—just that he was rich, and dressed and ate

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[50] Fitzmyer, 1129.

[51] "The luxurious way of life of the rich man and his (implied) lack of concern for the poor Lazarus at his door stand in obvious contrast with their destinies after death" (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, vol. 28A of *The Anchor Bible* [New York: Doubleday, 1985], 1128).

[52] Nolland notes that "the naming of the poor man while the rich man remains anonymous already anticipates the coming reversal by reversing the normal anonymity of poverty and the individuating significance of wealth" (*Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B [Luke 9:21-18:34], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 828).

[53] See Matthew 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31.

well. Of Lazarus the parable shows only that he was poor, took up residence at the gate of the rich man, and suffered from sores and hunger. Again, there are no grounds to assume that he was a religious man, nor that he was particularly kind to his fellow beggars or patient in his suffering, nor that he possessed other virtues in any exceptional degree. The only explanation offered, in fact, comes from Abraham's words to the rich man: "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." It would seem that the reason for Lazarus's salvation and the rich man's condemnation stems purely from the fact that the rich man led a pleasant earthly existence and Lazarus a miserable one. Yet the essential focus of the story is on the rich man, and biblical scholars tend to reject the inference that all those who suffer in this life will be rewarded hereafter.[54]

There is, however, another piece of information in the Gospel passage that must be taken into account, and that is the juxtaposition of the two men.[55] Lazarus is not just a poor man scraping out a difficult existence in a mountain hamlet, and the rich man a successful businessman in a big city far away. The two men's lives touch; the rich man saw the poor beggar lying at his gate, and day after day *chose* not to come to his assistance.[56] The possibility, in fact *ease*, with which the rich man could have helped is captured in the statement that Lazarus longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table; i.e., it would have sufficed for him to give from his excess without touching his own needs. In this regard, the dogs' licking of Lazarus's wounds stands in contrast with the rich man's inaction: even the irrational beasts seem to possess more compassion than this man. From the parable's perspective, the rich man's wealth conferred on him a responsibility which he failed to assume, and his negligence in the face

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[54] "Because Lazarus is ultimately a secondary character in the story, there is no narrative need to account for this extraordinary good fortune: we should not understand that it is the automatic outcome of his poverty and suffering upon earth" (John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B [Luke 9:21-18:34], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 829).

[55] Nolland observes that "the rich man's social responsibility toward Lazarus is implied by the juxtaposition of the two chief characters and details of the telling" (*Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B [Luke 9:21-18:34], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 826).

[56] When the rich man dies, he recognizes Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, indicating that he had been aware of his presence at the gate. Moreover, he even knows his name ("Send *Lazarus* to dip his finger…"), which suggests a note of deliberateness in his earlier neglect of the poor man's needs.

of his neighbor's need brought about his condemnation.[57] Though the rich man seems to acknowledge the justice of his sentence after death, he likewise seems to have been oblivious to his wrongdoing during life.[58]

This detail also contains a clue for moral theology as regards the framing of the moral life. If, hypothetically, this rich man had been a pious sort who examined his conscience every evening, scrutinizing his conduct for positive wrongdoing and infractions against the commandments, he may well have found none. There is no sin in wearing purple and linen or in feasting and making merry, provided one avoids the excesses of vainglory and gluttony. Again, the *failure to act*, an enduring state of negligence, produces the moral sterility for which the rich man is presumably condemned. Moreover, the fact that his feasting was a daily affair (ἡμέραν), also suggests that what may be morally acceptable in itself, in that it contravenes no moral proscription, may become morally censurable when it becomes a habitual way of acting, to the preclusion of other activities for the benefit of others.

The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)[59]

The parable of the talents graphically illustrates the Christian obligation to bear fruit, here shown as yielding profit with what one has been given on trust. Both Matthew and Luke present versions of this parable, though where Matthew's inflated account speaks of "talents," each of which was worth about 6,000 denarii, Luke speaks of pounds (lit. "minas"), worth only about 100 denarii each. A man leaving on a journey calls his servants and entrusts his property to them during his absence, to one five talents, to another two, and to the third, one. (Luke speaks of ten servants, each entrusted with one pound, and adds the master's command to "do business" (πραγματεύσασθε) with these until his return). The first two servants trade with the talents received and double them, whereas the third buries the money. On the master's

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[57] Cardinal Ratzinger writes: "Power and possession are not evil as such, nor are they to be rejected as a matter of principle. However, they are not an end in themselves but a means that not only imposes on man an increased responsibility but also involves an increased risk for him.... [The rich man] will stand before God as a poor man, and he will be rich only to the extent that his possessions have become a means of service and love" (Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism*, 45).

[58] Nolland asserts that "the rich man of the parable finds out his folly only after death" (*Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35B [Luke 9:21-18:34], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 826).

[59] See also Luke 19:11-28.

return he demands an account of their stewardship and praises the first two servants for their trustworthiness, giving them further responsibilities and inviting them to "enter into the joy of your master" (vv. 21, 23). On seeing that the third servant made no return on the money entrusted to him, the master censures him for his laziness, with the added eschatological imagery of having him cast out "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 30).

Davies and Allison sum up the basic meaning of the parable in this way: "The master is Jesus. His slaves represent the church, whose members have received various responsibilities. The master's departure is the departure of the earthly Jesus. The long time of the master's absence is the age of the church. His return is the *parousia* of the Son of man."[60] Once again the contrast in conduct centers on positive fruitfulness versus barrenness, here represented by yielding a profit through industrious trading versus burying one's money and returning it without further yield.[61] The master admits to being a man who would "reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter" (v. 26), and informs the lazy servant that he should have at least invested the money with bankers so that on his return he could have had it back with interest.[62]

Though the parable was addressed, in the first place, to the scribes and Pharisees, to whom much had been entrusted, it seems clear that the story has a broader didactic significance for Christ's disciples.[63] Theories abound as to the actual "content" of the talents entrusted to the servants, yet this question is tangential to the meaning of

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[60] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. III of *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*, eds. J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 402.

[61] Thus Harrington observes that the parable: "recommends responsible activity" and emphasizes "positive action as opposed to fearful and/or lazy inactivity" (Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. I of the *Sacra Pagina Series*, ed. D. J. Harrington, [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991], 353).

[62] Nolland, commenting on Luke's version of the parable, notes that despite the apparent severity of the master, his willingness to have accepted bank interest suggests a certain indulgence where any effort has been made. Though "God's mandates to his servants open up a vast sphere of possibility, he is prepared to accept, when there has been any sort of effort to implement the mandate, what is actually a minimal return on his investment" (*Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35C [Luke 18:35-24:53], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 919).

[63] "We, however, suspect that Jesus spoke the parable not to outsiders but to insiders, to emphasize responsibility. His focus was the obligation incumbent upon those confronted by the presence of the Kingdom in his ministry" (Davies and Allison, 404-5).

the story.[64] The moral message stresses both the *fact of stewardship*, i.e. that Christians have been entrusted with what does not belong to them and for which, ultimately, they will have to render an accounting, and the *obligation to bear fruit* through industry and ingenuity. The parable clarifies that rendering an account for what one has received means more than restoring it safely to its rightful owner; it involves showing an increase. Although specific gifts vary both in quantity and kind, responsibility for productivity and multiplication is demanded of all. One is required to yield in proportion to the gifts one has received. The third servant is judged to be "wicked" or "worthless" (πονερός), ostensibly not for any positive wrongdoing, but because he is lazy (ὀκνηρός) and therefore fruitless.[65] His negligence earns him the master's displeasure and his own condemnation.[66]

The Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46)

Following on the heels of the parable of the talents comes Jesus' description of the Last Judgment, which once again highlights the importance of positive action, while adding significant content to the more general obligation to bear fruit. Here the Son of Man is presented in glory, seated on a throne and surrounded by angels. Before him are gathered "all the nations," and he divides them into two groups, assigning one a place at his right hand, the other at his left. He first invites those at his right hand to take possession of the kingdom prepared for them "from the foundation of the world" (v. 34). He associates their blessed destiny with their conduct while on earth, espe-

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[64] "Exegetical tradition has equated talents with faith (Ephrem the Syrian), the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Fenton), and Jesus himself (Bruner). But the parable implies that the gifts are various, so it makes little sense to be specific. We must rather think of God's gifts in general" (Davies and Allison, 405).

[65] Davies and Allison note that "the third slave shows himself to be lazy because he makes no profit with what he has been given" (407). Nolland, in his commentary on Luke's account of the parable, states that there is "a certain kind of nominalism involved here: readiness in a general way to be identified with Jesus, but unwillingness to be answerable in any committed sense to God's expectations that are made known to us in connection with Jesus; a preference for doing nothing rather than running the risk of doing too little" (John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 35C [Luke 18:35-24:53], [Dallas: Word Books, 1993], 918-19).

[66] "The punishment of the evil slave represents those within the church who, through their sins of omission, condemn themselves to eschatological darkness" (Davies and Allison, 402).

cially toward the least fortunate[67]: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (vv. 35-6). He conducts a similar procedure with those at his left, only this time he banishes them from his presence "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41). Once again, their fate directly responds to their earthly activities: "for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me" (vv. 42-3).

From a moral perspective, the striking feature of this judgment scene is the *kind* of behavior being evaluated. Here the damned are not taken to task for their fornications, murders, extortions and drunkenness, nor are the blessed praised for avoiding such misdeeds. The blessed are received into the kingdom because of their works of charity for their neighbors, which Jesus takes as done to himself. Despite this clear Christological component, at the intentional level such loving others "for Christ's sake" seems to be absent. The faithful appear to be unaware that they were loving Christ at all, and were conscious only of having come to their neighbors' aid. Hence their surprise when Jesus tells them of their service to him: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" (v. 37). The condemned, in turn, are charged only with having failed to love in this way, that is, for having omitted the positive actions inherent to love, and not for any explicit rejection of God or Christ.

The centrality of man's responsibility for his fellow man comes across with exceptional clarity, and indeed forms the sole basis for judgment as presented in this passage. This cannot be taken to mean that evil actions (sins of commission) do not have a direct bearing on judgment, and that their avoidance is somehow secondary in the moral life, but rather directs our attention beyond the mere avoidance of sin-

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[67] In their commentary on this passage, Albright and Mann note: "For the disciple, covenant-loyalty must far surpass that of the Pharisee lawyers (v 20), a covenant-loyalty which must be manifested in deeds (vii 20). The Man would pass judgment on such deeds (xvi 27), principally upon charity shown or withheld from the insignificant (xviii 5), with his own ministry as exemplar" (W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 26 of *The Anchor Bible*, [New York: Doubleday, 1971], 306).

ful actions to our positive responsibility to *do good*, and specifically to do good in charity.

A second salient feature of this passage for moral theology is the *universal* dimension of the judgment scene. Jesus' reference to "all the nations" (πάντα τὰ ἔσθη) gathered before the Son of Man in glory leads to the conclusion that the matter being judged here—acts of charity toward one's neighbor—does not oblige only Christians, but all men and women. Some, noting that Matthew elsewhere uses the expression πάντα τὰ ἔσθη to refer specifically to the gentiles, have advanced the hypothesis that the judgment described in this passage would concern only the gentiles and their treatment of Christians, and that Israel would be judged in a separate moment.[68] The idea of separate judgments for Jews and gentiles is, nonetheless, a distinctly minority opinion, with the more usual exegesis favoring a universal judgment of all.[69]

On Being Ready for the Master's Return (Luke 12:35-48)

Jesus' teaching on vigilant expectation of the master's return, found in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospel accounts,[70] with a variant in Mark's Gospel as well,[71] stresses the need for watchfulness and offers more material for understanding what Jesus will be looking for when he comes. In Matthew's version the parable forms part of Jesus' "Sermon on the End," in the midst of a string of parables around the theme of readiness for the end times, whereas Luke places this passage after general moral teachings concerning true treasures, trust in providence, and almsgiving, and just before his announcement of the Passion. What does it mean to be ready for the master's return? The Gospel passage recommends preparedness ("See that you are dressed for action and have your lamps lit" [v. 35]) and vigilance ("Happy those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes" [v. 37]). The emphasis falls on the unexpectedness of the master's return,

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[68] See, for example, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. I of the *Sacra Pagina Series*, ed. D. J. Harrington, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 358.

[69] Catholic teaching distinguishes between a particular judgment administered to each at the very moment of death and a general or "last" judgment of all after Christ's second coming (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1021-22, and 1038-1041, where Matthew 25:31-46 is cited), but does not distinguish a separate judgment for Jews and gentiles.

[70] Matthew's version is found at 24:42-51.

[71] See Mark 13:33-37.

which demands constant watchfulness. No one knows the day nor the hour when he will arrive, just as a house owner has no way of knowing when a thief may break in to rob him.

Yet this teaching takes place in two stages. After hearing the instruction on watchfulness, Peter asks a follow-up question as to the intended audience of Jesus' parable: whether it was meant "for us" (for his disciples) or "for everyone" (v. 41). As is his wont, Jesus doesn't respond directly to Peter's query but in turn asks a rhetorical question: "Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time?" (v. 42).[72] Jesus distinguished between a servant that is simply given orders and a "steward" (οἰκονόμος) placed in charge of the household and entrusted with giving out the allotment of food at the proper time. Christian discipleship implies an added positive responsibility to *act*. Here Jesus speaks not only of being *awake*, but declares: "Happy that servant if his master's arrival finds him *at this employment*" (v. 43, emphasis added). The one found on the job when the master returns is favored. Again, we find a certain accentuation on the positive responsibility of Christian discipleship, and the master's pleasure/displeasure seems to parallel activity/inactivity, much as the parable of the sower contrasted fruitfulness with sterility. It is true that Matthew speaks of the dishonest servant who, finding the master to be delayed, sets about "beating the menservants and the maids, and eating and drinking with drunkards" (v. 45), activities that are reprehensible in themselves, yet the context of the following paragraph suggests that the real issue is the irresponsibility of the delinquent servant.

The sense of the added positive responsibility of the disciples is reinforced by Jesus' description of the punishment to be meted out to two servants, one of whom knew what the master wanted and the other that lacked this knowledge. "That servant who *knows* what his master wanted, but "*has not even started to carry out* those wishes" (v. 47, emphasis added) will receive a severe beating. The one who *did not know*, "but deserves to be beaten for *what he has done*" (v. 48, emphasis added) will receive fewer strokes. While the second servant receives punishment for what he has done, the first receives a more severe punishment for what he has *not* done. Jesus encapsulates this message in his final statement: "When a man has had a great deal

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[72] "The answer to Peter's question is that although the parable was for all, its challenge is more pressing and the answerability greater for the disciples than for the crowds (cf. at 12:10)" (Nolland, 704-5).

given him, a great deal will be demanded of him; when a man has had a great deal given him on trust, even more will be expected of him" (v. 48).[73]

For the wicked servant, the failure to act merits being "cut off" and "sent to the same fate as the faithless (ἀπίστων); i.e., faith in Christ not backed up by corresponding positive works cannot save. Here Matthew speaks of being sent to the same fate as the "hypocrites" (ὑποκριτῶν), and adds a characteristic eschatological reference to "weeping and grinding of teeth" (v. 51).

Common threads

Despite the diversity of times and places of these five Gospel passages and their respective pedagogical nuances, several recurring elements emerge that furnish important lessons for moral theology, especially as regards the Christian obligation to bear fruit in charity. Taken together with the explicit Gospel references to fruitfulness seen earlier, these passages provide helpful material for fashioning a Christian ethics of responsibility. Such reflections should not be taken as a new paradigm for moral theology that would seek to supplant existing moral systems, but rather as a complement to more traditional considerations on the moral life.

1. A first element to emerge in these moral teachings of Jesus is the nearly exclusive emphasis on the *positive responsibility to action* of the disciples, with little said about the avoidance of evil. The positive examples set forth by Christ in the figures of the Good Samaritan, the compassionate "sheep" of the Last Judgment, the industrious investors of the talents who doubled their capital, and the prudent stewards found busy at their tasks upon the master's return all accentuate the importance of responsibility to do affirmative good, and attest to the significance that God attributes to such actions. Similarly, the negative examples of the priest and Levite who pass by the half-dead stranger, the rich man who failed to come to the aid of Lazarus, the "goats" who did not succor Christ in the persons of his "least brethren," the servant who buried his talent in the ground, and the stewards who did not even begin to carry out the master's wishes all testify to the moral importance of sins of omission, in that all incur God's displeasure for their laziness and failure to carry out positive actions. In

[73] Nolland sums up the message: "The gifts of opportunity create the demands of responsibility" (705).

these parables the focus on affirmative responsibility takes for granted the avoidance of evil as a minimum prerequisite, but forcefully asserts the inadequacy of this category as a description of the Christian moral life.

2. A second common element discernable in these passages is the *relation between fruit-bearing and the question of eternal life.* Here the positive obligation to bear fruit does not appear as something tangential to the moral life, or as a stage of perfection for those who already fulfill all the commands of the Law. Rather, fruitfulness expressed in positive action has a direct bearing on one's eternal salvation and thus forms part of the essential core of the moral life.[74] The parable of the Good Samaritan comes as a response to the lawyer's question regarding eternal life, and makes explicit the commandment of love of neighbor, which, together with love of God, "sums up the Law and the prophets."[75] The rich man who failed to help Lazarus finds himself after death in the torment of "hades" (ᾅδης) for the selfish use of his wealth, a term often understood by Scripture scholars as signifying eternal condemnation. The parable of the talents culminates in the final reckoning on the master's return.[76] Matthew here includes the eschatological reference to the wicked servant being cast into "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth," whereas the faithful servants are invited to "enter into the joy of your master." In the narration of the Last Judgment, the eschatological tone is exceptionally clear, as is the universal nature of this judgment with "all the nations" assembled before the throne. Those who failed to do good are called "accursed" and sent "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels," while those who came to the assistance of their needy brethren are called "blessed by my Father" and invited to "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." In the story on being ready for the master's return, the unfaith-

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[74] "The Church knows that the issue of morality is one which deeply touches every person; it involves all people, even those who do not know Christ and his Gospel or God himself. She knows that it is precisely *on the path of the moral life that the way of salvation is open to all*" (Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993, no. 3, emphasis in original).

[75] See Matthew 22:40.

[76] "The usual moralizing approach to Matt 25:14-30 ('use your talents to the best of your ability') does not take into account the eschatological horizon that is essential to the parable. The return of the master and the accounting are essential aspects of the story, and they should not be omitted in teaching and preaching" (Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. I of the *Sacra Pagina Series*, ed. D. J. Harrington, [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991], 355).

ful steward is "cut off" and "sent to the same fate as the faithless." Each of these teachings, in its own way, highlights the close tie between eternal salvation and the moral life, especially as regards one's positive activity.

3. A third recurring feature of these different teachings regards the *content* of the fruitfulness incumbent upon Christians as an expression of *charity*, especially compassion toward the least fortunate. Moreover, in conjunction with the first point, the charity demanded by Christ does not consist merely in abstinence from harmful activity to others, but in constructive activity for their benefit. Whereas the parable of the talents speaks more generally of industrious activity to produce a return on investment, the parable of the Good Samaritan deals specifically with coming to the aid of a fallen human being, at one's own expense, both in time and goods. Similarly, the story of the rich man and Lazarus alludes to the positive responsibility of those who *have*, and are able to come to the assistance of those who *have not*. Jesus' description of the Last Judgment gets down to still greater detail, and lists a series of concrete acts (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick…), which Christian tradition has handed down under the title of the corporal works of mercy, and whose accomplishment or neglect determines the eternal outcome of the subjects being judged. Jesus' teaching regarding readiness for the master's return focuses on busyness with the master's affairs, but also ties these affairs to charitable care for others in that the steward is charged with giving his fellow servants "their allowance of food at the proper time."

4. A fourth common trait of these teachings identifies the fruit Jesus expects from his disciples with *deliberate, chosen activity*, and not merely the spontaneous outcome of "living in Jesus." This element of Jesus' teaching helps resolve the difficulty noted above in defining the concept of Christian fruitfulness. The preceding moral teachings offer little ground for supposing that a Christian's moral obligation would consist in merely "remaining in Jesus' love," if this were understood as essentially distinct from active charity toward one's fellows. All these teachings, in fact, suggest an obligation to directly pursue the fruit of charity as a deliberate, willed act. The parable of the Good Samaritan suggests that any presumed "piety" of the priest and the Levite, if not coupled with practical service to the needy, fails the test both of love of God and of neighbor and thus remains sterile. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus doesn't speculate on the quality of the rich man's intentions and attitudes, but concentrates on his

choices, specifically on his repeated failure to alleviate Lazarus' sufferings despite his ability to do so. The parable of the talents does not call into question the third servant's affective loyalty to the master, but rather addresses his mistaken decision to bury his master's money rather than "do business with it" and thus yield a profit, as he had been instructed. The punctual, deliberate nature of the fruitfulness God expects is similarly apparent in Jesus' description of the Last Judgment, where the acts of negligence of the "goats" are enumerated one by one in great detail.

5. A fifth and final thread running through these diverse moral parables is a *shift away from punctual acts and toward habitual attitudes*. Though the teachings revolve around deliberate choices, as opposes to vague intentions, these choices tend to be habitual and enduring, rather than single and isolated. This emphasis underscores the centrality of virtues and vices in the moral life. With the exception of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which focuses on a single, concrete opportunity for doing good, the other parables relate to decisions confirmed day after day as to how one will use the gifts with which he has been entrusted. The rich man does not merely refuse aid to Lazarus in one chance encounter, but as a matter of course. Day after day while he feasts Lazarus languishes at his gate. The choice not to love becomes a habitual way of life. In the parable of the talents, though the third servant buries the money in a given moment, it is always at his disposal, and if he chose to, he could invest it at any moment. He thus ratifies his choice for inaction day after day until the master returns and he is obliged to render an account of his stewardship. The Last Judgment as presented in Matthew 25 again underscores the habitual nature of the choices of both the blessed and the cursed, in their relations with their needy brothers and sisters. The parallel litanies of action and inaction in the face of others' needs give a sense of habitual activity rather than singular moments of generosity or selfishness. Finally, Jesus' teaching on readiness for the master's return again emphasizes the enduring decision not to carry out the master's wishes, rather than a specific moment of laziness. The servant was called to be busy with the constructive employment that the master had commended to him and instead was found doing nothing. This characteristic of habitualness does not detract from the importance, indeed the moral decisiveness of punctual choices, nor should it obscure the direct relationship among punctual acts, habits and attitudes. Yet it does stress that the Christian life is an ongoing project and not merely a moral boundary consisting of a string of restrictive norms within

which one is called to act. The commandments to love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself require building up virtue, a habitual way of living for God and neighbor that integrates and transcends and undergirds punctual choices and indeed gives meaning and direction to one's entire life.

Conclusion

While the foregoing considerations do not furnish specific norms regarding the Christian's obligation to bear fruit in charity, they do offer criteria by which more specific theses could be formulated. Yahweh's initial moral injunction to our first parents—"Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28)—resonates in the moral teaching of the Gospels and thus fecundity becomes a distinctive characteristic of the Christian life. A positive response to baptismal grace in the form of active love of God and neighbor, surpassing the mere avoidance of evil, is essential to the moral message preached by Christ and witnessed to by the first generations of Christians. Moral theologians will have to confront the centrality of this element of Christian ethics and work to integrate it into treatises on the moral life.

A strict separation between moral theology on the one hand and spiritual, mystical and ascetical theology on the other was common in theological treatises prior to the Second Vatican Council. In many cases this led to the unfortunate elimination of the Christian vocation to sanctity and to the perfection of charity from the domain of moral theology. A minimalistic ethics centered on obedience to the Ten Commandments often formed the crux of manuals of moral theology. The Council Fathers appealed to moral theologians to use their craft to illuminate the beauty of the Christian life and to highlight the Christian obligation to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world. Though 40 years have passed since the Council marked out these specific guidelines for the renewal of moral theology, considerable work still needs to be done.

Summary: *The essay endeavors to unpack the Second Vatican Council's recommendation that Moral Theology shed light on the obligation of the Christian faithful to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world. Drawing on the insights of Biblical Theology, the author examines the concept of fruitfulness first in the synoptic Gospels and then in the Johannine text, noting that good fruit and bad fruit inevitably reveal the quality of one's discipleship but also that Christ enjoins his disciples to bear lasting fruit, and that fruitfulness itself takes on the characteristics of a moral category. Finally, the essay explores five of Christ's moral*

parables and shows how common threads emerge regarding the Christian obligation to fruitfulness, regarding both its nature and its content.

Key words: fruit, fruitfulness, fecundity, moral theology, sterility, barrenness, positive action, discipleship, Christian ethics, biblical theology, Christ's moral teaching, Second Vatican Council, Optatam Totius, Vatican II, renewal, charity, last judgment, good samaritan, corporal works of mercy, good works.

Parole chiave: frutto, fecondità, fruttifero, teologia morale, sterilità, azione positiva, discepolato, etica cristiana, teologia biblica, insegnamento morale di Cristo, Concilio Vaticano II, Optatam Totius, rinnovamento, carità, giudizio finale, buon samaritano, opere di carità.