

CHAPTER ONE



Finding a Path for Life

The Quest for Goodness and Happiness

We are made for happiness, fashioned for bliss.

This is an odd way to begin a book on the moral life, because we do not customarily associate the study of morality with learning about happiness. If a friend told you she was about to begin a course in ethics, you would not likely respond, “Good! After so many years of searching, you’ll finally discover where real happiness can be found!” Wouldn’t we more likely assume that in the weeks ahead our friend would be introduced to the world of moral principles, rules, and laws; to the language of rights and obligations; and to an array of ethical traditions and theories? Wouldn’t we conclude that such a class would teach our friend what to do when confronted with difficult matters of conscience, or how to make a decision when no trouble-free choice seems possible? Or wouldn’t a good course in ethics—a really practical course—address some of the confounding ethical dilemmas of our day so that by the end of the semester our friend could tell us how best to think about abortion, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, cloning, war, or capital punishment? Besides, given the ever-expanding list of seemingly insurmountable problems facing the world, doesn’t focusing on happiness trivialize the real work of ethics? And wouldn’t it encourage precisely the self-centeredness and indifference that enflame so much of the suffering and misery that diminish life throughout the world?

Not necessarily. It all depends on what we take happiness to be, and a book on the Christian moral life might answer this in surprising ways. Is happiness a matter of getting whatever we want whenever we want it? Am

I happy when I try to arrange things so that everything always works to my best advantage? Is happiness essentially piling up achievements so that we shine a bit brighter than our friends? Are financial success, lots of possessions, and the latest technological gadgets the key ingredients to a good and happy life? Many of us would answer “yes” to these questions; indeed, we have been so thoroughly socialized in this understanding of happiness that it is hard for us to imagine that it might be lacking, hard for us to consider other possibilities.

In our society today, happiness is typically identified with the triumvirate of wealth, power, and pleasure, so that anyone who has an abundance of each is believed to have a good and satisfying life. In fact, happiness is so commonly understood as the unfettered pursuit of self-interest and the unceasing gratification of our desires that we are convinced a good and happy life is something each of us must determine on our own. Thus, despite all the lofty rhetoric about happiness, when pushed to explain it, all we know to say is that happiness is unavoidably a matter of personal choice and opinion. It’s up to each one of us to decide.

Christianity offers another—strikingly different, but abundantly more hopeful—understanding of happiness. If we follow the path of Jesus, we discover that the most satisfying life is not governed by self-interest, but is characterized by justice, generosity, faithfulness, truthfulness, courage, compassion, and even suffering love. In more theological language, if we ask how we can attain a truly good and happy life, Christianity answers that we will be happy when we are what God calls us to be—people of goodness, kindness, mercy, and forgiveness; people who come to life in loving and serving others. Christianity is an ongoing initiation into a genuinely good and happy life based on the conviction that God desires our happiness and, in the life, teaching, and example of Christ, shows us how to attain it. There is nothing any of us wants more than to know what counts as a good and happy life, a life that brings us peace and answers the deepest longings of our hearts. Christianity offers a compelling—if sometimes surprising—account of what that life would be. It is a life determined not by self-promotion or the gratification of desires but by transcending ourselves in undying love for others. This is why, when Christians want to learn about happiness, they turn to the scriptures, especially the gospels, and the lives of the saints.¹

Investigating the nature of authentic happiness is a fitting subject for ethics, because happiness is the one thing everyone seeks. A hunger for happiness propels everything we do. It explains the choices we make, the relationships we seek, the jobs we desire, the hobbies we pursue, the clothes we wear, and even the food we eat. We don’t need a Declaration of Inde-

pendence to tell us to pursue happiness. We do it naturally, albeit sometimes misguidedly. The story of our lives can be read as one unfolding search for happiness because we relentlessly pursue whatever we think will be good for us; whatever we suspect will fulfill us, delight us, bring us peace, and deepen the meaning of our lives. It is the intention behind every intention, the key to unlocking all motivation.

When we look back over our lives, even the mistakes we made and the wrong choices we embraced often came from misunderstanding where true happiness would be found. The greedy person covets money because he believes wealth is the answer to happiness. The unfaithful lover betrays because she thinks the excitement of an affair will bring her more fully to life. The thoughtless student makes a cruel but anonymous comment in an online chat room because it makes him feel momentarily important. Much of the harm we bring to others, as well as ourselves, stems from costly fantasies about what constitutes real joy. But happiness is the pursuit of a lifetime. No matter how much sadness, and even harm, we reap by not knowing where real happiness can be found, we never relinquish the search, because finding joy abides as the most passionate desire of our hearts.

Years ago the French philosopher Etienne Gilson said that the purpose of Christian morality was to teach men and women how they must live if the story of their lives was to have a happy ending. How must we shape our lives, what must we learn to desire and to seek, Gilson asked, if we are to bring our humanity “to the very peak of achievement”?² What must we love and cherish if we are to reach the greatest excellence possible to us as human beings? Or, more briefly, if not more simply, what would it mean to live a good and beautiful life? Learning principles and rules, being conversant with a variety of traditions and theories, and being skilled in addressing controversial moral issues are all crucial elements of moral education. But they are not the heart and center of any exploration of the moral life because they present a much too narrow and constricted view of the moral adventure. The scope of morality is much grander and more dramatic; its essential business is not the solving of problems, but rather the growth and development of persons in the various goods that will truly fulfill them. Helping us discover, and then achieve, the most promising possibilities for human beings is the primary business of ethics because ultimately nothing less will content us. How must we plan our lives so they can be lived as well as possible?³

This is the question that drives the study of ethics and makes it both challenging and practical. The philosopher and theologian Herbert McCabe put it well when he suggested that one studies ethics in order to learn “how to be good at being human.”⁴ And, as McCabe insisted, the business of ethics is not

simply to teach people how “to talk about being good”; more importantly, it is “to make people good as well.”⁵

As any good novel shows, human life takes the form of a quest. Dealing with nettlesome moral dilemmas or debating complex moral questions may be episodes in this journey, but they are not the crucial task of the adventure. What drives us on the quest is not a desire to master a theory, know a principle, or resolve a dilemma, but to discover the good for which we are made, the good or goods that can satisfy us, complete us, and still the turbulence of our restless hearts. We have days when we must wrestle with tough moral choices or suffer through anguished matters of conscience. But to reduce morality to these occasions, however momentous, does not do justice to the overall drama of our lives.

What do we do on all those other days without momentous decisions to be made or dilemmas to resolve? We do what we always do: We search for a happiness that lasts, a happiness that endures despite adversity and hardship. We admire, are attracted to, and sometimes even envy people who are genuinely happy. We want to know what they know; we want to discover their secret. What brought them to happiness? What did they do to find joy? Did it come quickly, or was it the work of a lifetime? We ask these questions because every human being shares one resounding ambition—we want a joy that abides.

Morality comes to life with the question of happiness because the real business of ethics is helping us discover in what happiness consists.⁶ If the story of every human life can be read as a never-ending quest for happiness, a good morality guides us on that journey. It helps us understand how we must live and what we must learn to love if we are to find peace and satisfaction in our lives. If everything we do begins in an intention for happiness, then the critical first step in moral education is coming to understand what constitutes happiness for human beings. Indeed, the study of morality can best be understood as training in happiness, as an ongoing initiation into the desires, attitudes, habits, and practices that make for a happy and good life. For those accustomed to parsing morality primarily through the grammar of laws, obligations, and rules (a deontological model of ethics), this may seem mistaken. But a venerable tradition in Christian ethics sees the heart of morality to be discovering, and entering into, a way of life that answers the deep human desire for happiness and goodness. We may have lost a rich sense of the good life, but a fundamental purpose of Christian ethics is to help us understand what such a life might be. Put differently, ethics should be judged on its ability to make every human being flourish.⁷

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This was the approach of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, two of the most influential theologians in the history of Christianity, and their accounts of happiness will be our principal focus in this opening chapter. They understood the substance of Christian morality not primarily through the language of law and obligation, but as the ongoing quest to discover, share in, and ultimately be perfected by whatever brings the most complete and enduring happiness to our lives. They found this in God because they believed that only in God is the truth, the beauty, and the goodness in which we are ultimately fulfilled. We will be happy, they argued, in the measure that we grow in, and are transformed by, the love and goodness of God. It may take us a lifetime to discover this, and that life might be speckled with countless costly detours and endless wrong turns, but ultimately this quest alone is worthy of us and can answer our most pressing need.

Augustine and Aquinas are worthy guides as we begin our exploration of the Christian moral life. But they may challenge our customary understandings of happiness. First, both Augustine and Aquinas maintain that happiness is inseparable from goodness. Happiness and goodness are one; therefore, in order to be happy we must become good.⁸ In this life we will never be perfectly happy, but we will advance in happiness to the degree that we advance in goodness. This means that, if we are to flourish and excel as human beings, we must find goodness compelling and irresistible. We must be attracted to goodness more than evil, to virtue more than vice. Thus, according to Augustine and Aquinas, people who think only of themselves, people who lie and cheat, manipulate and exploit, even if in doing so they become wildly successful, can never be genuinely happy.

Again, happiness and goodness are one, but not just any goodness. Christianity teaches that happiness comes as we grow in the goodness of God. In more theological language, holiness brings happiness. Many of us would balk at that claim, if not immediately reject it. Clearly, not everyone thinks this way anymore; perhaps most of us don't. We may agree that goodness has something to do with happiness, but we resist identifying happiness specifically with the goodness of God. We may not believe in God. Or perhaps any talk of God or religion means nothing to us. Neither God nor religion has ever been part of our lives, and we've never felt anything important was missing.

Moreover, we may argue that belief in God and the practice of religion have not only diminished happiness but have also unleashed oceans of sorrow and suffering in the world. And so to claim, as Augustine and Aquinas do, that one cannot be genuinely happy without being transformed in the

goodness of God seems nonsense to us, even dangerous. We may be skeptical about our culture's gospel of happiness but find Christianity's claim completely farfetched. And so we hold fast to our conviction that one does not have to know and love God in order to have a good and fulfilling life. Nonetheless, as we shall see, both Augustine and Aquinas insist that becoming happy requires cultivating a heartfelt desire for God.

Second, Augustine and Aquinas taught that we misunderstand happiness if we think of it primarily in terms of positive and uplifting feelings. Such feelings would be better described as pleasures rather than happiness. Pleasure and happiness may be connected, but they are not the same. Pleasures come and go in ways that happiness should not. Happiness is something deeper, something much more stable and resilient than pleasure, because happiness comes from excellence in goodness.⁹ Happiness has to be something more substantial and lasting than the pleasures that come on those wonderful days when everything seems to go well. What really matters is knowing how to sustain happiness on those unfortunate days when nothing goes well, or during those painful periods of life when we experience more defeats than successes, more adversity than good. Moreover, happiness is different from pleasure because I can take pleasure in things that are wrong or in good things but in the wrong way; happiness requires loving something in proportion to its goodness, whether a family member or friend, one's job, favorite sports team, or even flavor of ice cream.

Overall, Augustine and Aquinas believed that happiness is not so much an emotional state as a distinctive way of life that brings joy because it makes one good. Goodness is the cause of joy, and the greatest possible joy is found in possessing the greatest possible good. Thus, Christian morality is best understood not as a set of theories and ideas but as the ongoing initiation into a way of life that is happiness, because in living it we seek, grow in, and ultimately possess the most excellent and promising good.

In this chapter we will first explore what Augustine and Aquinas took that way of life to be. We'll consider what, according to them, happiness is, how we can achieve it, and also why we sometimes fear it and flee from it. Moreover, both Augustine and Aquinas believed that although we may naturally seek happiness, we do not naturally know what genuine happiness is; consequently, we need to be educated and initiated into the way of happiness. We need to learn the attitudes, habits, and practices most conducive to happiness. Christians believe that Christ shows us the way to happiness, so we'll conclude the chapter by considering what Jesus said about happiness and the kind of life that makes it possible.

Augustine

One of the most important, complex, and, admittedly, controversial figures in the history of Western Christianity is Augustine (354–430). Born in North Africa (present-day Algeria), Augustine was a man of tremendous intellect and talent, a powerful personality, and an amazingly prolific writer whose theological works became the cornerstone of much of subsequent Western Christian theology; indeed, many would argue that no one has shaped Christian theology, particularly in the West, more than Augustine. Even those who disagree with him cannot afford to ignore him.

Augustine's writings address virtually every dimension of Christian theology, but he is best known for *The Trinity*, which many still consider the most profoundly insightful meditation on what Christians believe about God: his theology of sin and grace, which emphasizes the virtually inescapable self-centeredness, weakness, and corruption of human beings and, therefore, their absolute need for grace; *The City of God*, a massive and monumental work in which Augustine offers a theological analysis of the fall of Rome in 410; and the lasting impact he has had on a Christian understanding of sexuality and marriage.

Still, his most famous work is undoubtedly *The Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography that recounts the first thirty-three years of Augustine's life prior to his conversion to Christianity. One reason Augustine wrote *The Confessions* is that he believed the story of his life, for all its drama and uniqueness, was everyone's story. Like Augustine, each of our lives can be read as an ongoing—and often meandering—search to discover in what human happiness and peace consists. As we take that journey we, like Augustine, experiment with different possibilities in our pursuit for some kind of meaning, satisfaction, and contentment in our lives. Some are promising, many offer glimpses of happiness that propel us forward; others, we quickly discover, are dead ends. Too, like Augustine, we sometimes lose our way on that journey because, despite our deep desire for love and peace and contentment, we cling to things that can never bring us real joy.

Seekers Who Go Astray

No wonder, then, that the biblical figure with whom Augustine most compares himself in *The Confessions* is the prodigal son, the infamous figure whose story is told in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Convinced that he knows best where the path to happiness lies, the son asks his father for his share of the inheritance, breaks free of family and home, and sets

forth on his quest. With wealth and freedom as provisions for the journey, the son has ample reason to expect that good fortune will be his; after all, he sets out on his quest beholden to no one, responsible for nothing, and free of all restraints. With an open road and seemingly limitless horizons before him, why wouldn't he succeed? But the choices he makes lead not to bliss and fulfillment but to desolation and disillusionment. As Jesus tells the story, the prodigal son's attempt to find happiness bottoms out in desperation and despair because the path he felt surely would fulfill him led not to pleasure and success but to barely surviving as a servant whose job is to watch over pigs (Luke 15:15).

Augustine sees himself, and all of us, in that story. He opens *The Confessions* with his famous prayer to God, a prayer written to tell us something important about ourselves: "Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise. . . . And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you. . . . You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."¹⁰ Men and women, Augustine suggests, are creatures of hungry, restless hearts, moving through life looking for something to bring us peace. What he had first resolutely resisted acknowledging, but later discovered and wholeheartedly embraced, is that because we are made for God, we will never find happiness and peace apart from God. Fashioned from God and for God, we are fulfilled in loving, praising, and worshiping God. God is our joy; God is our delight.

But, as Augustine's story poignantly reveals, we reject the identity given to us by God and choose to find happiness in counterfeit ways. The first thirty-three years of Augustine's life read as one long and increasingly frustrating attempt to find happiness apart from God. Augustine seeks happiness through sexual pleasure, through a series of love affairs, through fame and reputation as a teacher, through philosophy, through social status, and even by consulting astrologers about his horoscope. At nineteen, he's introduced to philosophy when he reads Cicero and commits himself to search for wisdom and truth. For nine years he associates with the Manichees, a strange group who believed anything spiritual or immaterial was good but anything physical, like our bodies, was evil.

Early in *The Confessions*, Augustine says that as a young man what he wanted more than anything was "loving and being loved,"¹¹ but he had no idea what real love involved because, he admits, he struggled to tell the difference between love and lust. He describes himself as "casting about for something to love,"¹² but with every attempt he ends up frustrated and confused. The longer he pursues happiness, the more miserable he becomes.

Late in adolescence, Augustine speaks of himself as an “unhappy beast”¹³; as “floundering in the mud”¹⁴; and, despite the apparent freedom and pleasure of his life, as little more than “a runaway slave.”

One of the key scenes in *The Confessions*, and a pivotal moment in Augustine’s quest for happiness, involves his unexpected encounter with a drunken beggar. Now thirty-one years old, Augustine has distinguished himself as a teacher of rhetoric, first in Carthage, then in Rome, and now in Milan. He’s also achieved a certain measure of fame as an accomplished speaker. And for many years he has been living with a woman who he later hints cared deeply for him, as he did for her. They have a son, Adeodatus, which means “gift of God.” Thus, according to the expectations of his society, Augustine ought to be happy because he has attained all the things that are said to count for success: love and intimacy, material well-being, social status and reputation, connections to people of influence.

On this day, Augustine and some of his friends are walking through the streets of Milan. The emperor has died; Augustine, in recognition of his skills as a speaker, has been invited to offer a eulogy in honor of the emperor. It is clear from what he writes that Augustine didn’t think much of the emperor, but he knows giving the eulogy will embellish his reputation and advance him in the eyes of people who matter. An ambitious man, Augustine admits he is willing to lie about the virtues of the emperor if he can win favor with others by doing so. It does not matter that he really does not believe what he is about to say as long as the speech profits him. “I was preparing to deliver a eulogy upon the emperor in which I would tell plenty of lies,” Augustine writes, “with the object of winning favor with the well-informed by my lying.”¹⁵

But on his way to give the eulogy, Augustine and his friends stumble across a drunken beggar and make an unsettling discovery. What confounds Augustine is that this disheveled mess of a man who has failed all of society’s criteria for success, with only a few coins and a bottle of wine, seems much happier and content than Augustine and his sophisticated friends. They had worked so hard and devoted so many years to securing success and reputation—indeed, they had plotted their entire lives to achieve them—but remained dissatisfied and discontent. By contrast, before them sits this beggar who may have been scorned and dismissed by society but who nonetheless seems far more carefree than Augustine and his companions. Augustine may not want to change places with the beggar, but he admits that the man had achieved a happiness that continues to elude him. It is a moment of unnerving recognition.

Despite so many years of experimenting with different possibilities for happiness, Augustine, with all his education and opportunities, remains bur-

dened with anxieties and fears. His friends and he had devoted all of their talents and all of their time toward achieving happiness, but "it appeared that this beggar had already beaten us to the goal."¹⁶ Moreover, even if the beggar's happiness was incomplete, he was at least doing some good in achieving it. As he begged for coins and drank his wine, he would "wish good-day to passers-by, while I was seeking a swollen reputation by lying."¹⁷ The experience makes Augustine question his understanding of happiness, as well as the whole direction of his life. Has he been mistaken? Have all those years of searching and planning and plotting been a waste? And why, if he has been so successful, does peace still elude him?

The cry of a restless heart resounds throughout *The Confessions*. Throughout his first thirty-three years, Augustine strives to find the answer to two questions: What will make me happy? What will bring me peace? His discontent grows not only because he makes wrong choices about happiness but also, more strikingly, because he fears where his search may ultimately lead and what it might ask of him. The older he grows, the more Augustine knows he is not happy. Still, the closer he comes to knowing real happiness, the more he resists it. Augustine fears what he most claims to desire. He is afraid of happiness because embracing it will force him to change, and he knows old habits are not easily left behind. He may be miserable, but his misery asks nothing of him. Happiness, however, will ask much of Augustine. It will ask him to change his heart and refashion his attachments. It will demand that he love new things, or at least love old things in new ways. Augustine senses it will be safer, and certainly easier, to stay with his misery because happiness will require him to reorder his life. In short, he may not be happy, but he's comfortable.

And so every time Augustine comes near happiness, he retreats. Like a boy attempting his first dive off the high board, Augustine inches up to happiness and then backs away. He wants the new life happiness will bring, but he is afraid to relinquish his old life. He wants to be freed from his misery but fears letting go of the very things that drag him down. He compares himself to the person who has been asleep for a long, long time and knows that "the hour for rising has come" but begs for a few more minutes of sleep: "Just a minute,' 'One more minute,' 'Let me have a little longer.'"¹⁸ The prospect of happiness makes Augustine anxious, because he knows it will demand entering a way of life that will ultimately re-create him. A man with a divided heart, both wanting and not wanting peace, paralyzed by indecision and enslaved by fear, Augustine describes himself as "turning and twisting in my chain."¹⁹

The climactic scene of *The Confessions* occurs in a garden. Exhausted by the tug-of-war being waged in his soul, Augustine sits alone in a garden and

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weeps. He speaks of the tears flowing from his eyes "like rivers"²⁰ and writes as if he is at the point of an emotional and psychological breakdown. He knows his life cannot continue as it is but, like an addict, feels absolutely powerless to change it. Then he hears the voice of a child "from a house nearby—perhaps a voice of some boy or girl, I do not know—singing over and over again, 'Pick it up and read, pick it up and read.'" Taking the child's words as a sign, Augustine, who had been reading the New Testament, describes how he picked up the Bible "and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted."²¹ It was from Paul's letter to the Romans, a passage in which Paul summons the reader to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14).

And so Augustine's conversion occurs when he heeds the advice of a child. After thirty-three years of searching for happiness on his own, thirty-three years of following his own advice, the bliss Augustine had been seeking comes not by his own efforts, but in a sudden, unexpected moment when he responds to the counsel of a child. This suggests, surprisingly, that the happiness we seek may be as much a gift—an unexpected blessing—as the fruit of our own efforts.

Prior to his conversion, Augustine believed whatever meaning and peace he might have in life depended entirely on him. His happiness would result from his choices and his decisions, from careful planning, and from taking advantage of the opportunities before him. But that didn't work. Trying to arrange his life so that everything contributed to what he thought best for him left him famished. The experience in the garden taught Augustine that he would have to think differently about happiness; he would have to reimagine it. Perhaps happiness is less about being in control and more about openness and vulnerability—maybe happiness is accepting something, receiving something. Maybe it is less about careful planning and more about being alert and responsive to the goodness that is already and always around us.

From a Christian perspective, Augustine's conversion and his decision to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" suggest that sometimes happiness requires abandoning some paths in order to take up another. But, again, what stuns the reader about Augustine's conversion is that after so many years of toil and disappointment, the beginning of his new life happens so effortlessly. The educated, worldly-wise Augustine takes his first steps in the way of happiness when he recognizes God speaking to him through the voice of a playful child.

What Augustine Teaches Us about Happiness

Augustine "puts on Christ" at Easter in the year 387 when he, along with his friend Alypius and his son, Adeodatus, is baptized by his mentor, Ambrose,

bishop of Milan. A year later he writes a short theological work, *The Way of Life of the Catholic Church* (*De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*). Augustine begins that work by noting, "Certainly, we all wish to live happily."²² But he goes on to say that we will not be happy if we lack what we love, if we possess what we love but it is harmful, or if we have not learned to love what is best. This aptly describes Augustine's own odyssey. He realized that happiness is a matter of possessing what we love.

But he also discovered that having what we love does not bring happiness if what we love is bad for us or even if what we love is good but not sufficient to complete us. We are restless and dissatisfied either because we choose the wrong things to love, or because we love good things with disproportionate devotion. For example, it is good to love a friend, but not so exclusively that it leaves us neglecting other relationships. And it is good to be devoted to our careers, but not if we ignore other more important commitments of our lives. Happiness comes when we have what we love, but only when what we love is worth the devotion we give to it.²³

And so Augustine learned, first of all, that happiness comes to the person who both loves and possesses what is best for human beings. Human beings have a natural attraction to the good; it is what we cannot help loving and desiring.²⁴ But we will not be satisfied with anything less than perfect goodness because only perfect goodness can complete us. As the Swiss theologian Servais Pinckaers says, "We could therefore define the human person as a being aspiring to perfection and the plenitude of goodness." What Augustine took from his own search for happiness was that happiness is not simply a matter of having one's desires and preferences fulfilled regardless of what they may be. No, we learn to be happy by scrutinizing our desires and by asking if what we have chosen to love possesses goodness exquisite enough to complete us. We will never be happy until we learn to love things in proportion to their goodness, whether it is a good meal, a favorite sports team, or a lifelong friend. But even more, Augustine teaches that whatever happiness we enjoy will always be deficient until we learn to love the good for which we are made.²⁵ In short, happiness is a way of life characterized by loving and enjoying what is supremely good for human beings. This is why, from a Christian perspective, happiness requires the ongoing transformation of our desires.

As a Christian, Augustine finds that consummate goodness in God. Loving God wholeheartedly and faithfully is the happy life because God is the perfection of goodness, the supreme and most excellent good (*summum bonum*) in whose image we are made and in whose love we are completed. And because we are fashioned in the image of God—because something of God dwells within us—we already know, at least intuitively, that our utmost be-

attitude resides in fellowship and communion with God. This is why, after his conversion, Augustine, who had spent the first thirty-three years of his life fleeing God, argued that no one could be truly happy without God. Increasingly, however, many people would either disagree with Augustine's claim or else find it very odd because many of us, unlike Augustine, no longer have a religious view of human beings or a religious understanding of life. We do not see ourselves as creatures who are called to God and fulfilled in God. We see no necessary connection between a life of happiness and devotion to God; in fact, we might reasonably argue that the good things of this world are more than enough to provide whatever joy, comfort, and satisfaction we need.

Augustine would not, at least initially, disagree. In saying that God is the highest and most perfect good, Augustine wasn't claiming that God is the only good. Far from denying the genuine goodness of all the good things in our world, Augustine unhesitatingly affirmed that their goodness is real. This is why we should trust, rejoice in, and celebrate the good that comes to us from another's love, from an act of kindness, from a friend's faithful presence, from the hospitality of a stranger, or from the beauty of nature. The world abounds in a staggering variety of good things, each of which contributes something important to our lives. For Christians, God may be the most important and necessary good, but we cannot, and are not meant to live, as if God is the only good. In fact, to turn to God should not lessen our appreciation of the goods of this world but rather help us prize their true goodness and help us love them rightly.

At the same time, Augustine insists that although their goodness is real, it is incomplete. Anything truly good brings a degree of genuine joy and contentment to our lives, but even the best of human goods and the deepest of human loves are never enough for creatures like us who will be satisfied with nothing less than perfect goodness and perfect love. This is why, after he became a Christian, Augustine believed our hearts would be restless with anything other than God.

And yet, because we can neither know nor love God perfectly in this life, our happiness is always incomplete. This is a second important truth that Augustine teaches about happiness. There is continuity between the happiness we enjoy now and the happiness we will have in heaven, but there is also an important difference. Our happiness in this world is real and should not be doubted. It is real because, like the perfect happiness of heaven, it comes from sharing in the love and goodness of God. In this world we participate in God's love and goodness as we behold it in other persons and creatures, in any act of justice, kindness, mercy, and compassion, and in the beauty of Earth. Indeed, human love, goodness, and happiness are sacraments

pointing to and anticipating the perfect love, goodness, and happiness that we will know with God and the saints in heaven. Still, precisely because we are pilgrims making our way to God, our sharing in the life and goodness of God always remains incomplete. We grow in the love and goodness of God, but we never possess it completely. Similarly, our communion with God is real and resilient but nonetheless imperfect and unfinished.

Moreover, the love, peace, or joy we experience now is haunted by a sense of incompleteness because we are creatures who live in time. We experience moments of love, intimacy, thanksgiving, and delight that are so intensely blessed we wish we could grasp them forever. But we cannot. The present becomes the past, and those gracious moments become memories we can recollect but never re-create. And we are bodily creatures whose happiness is hindered by suffering and sorrow; by physical, emotional, and psychological anguish; and by the inescapable vulnerability of love. For example, no matter how firmly my life might be anchored in God, the joy I find in God will, at least for a while, be overshadowed by the grief that seizes me at the death of someone I love or the loss of something dear to me. Knowing that God abides with me can help me navigate my way through the sorrow, but it cannot make it any less poignant or any less real.

Likewise, our happiness is affected by illness, by adversity, by the behavior of others, and by loneliness. Such experiences need not destroy the happiness God offers us, but they are bound to diminish it because they bring sorrow into our lives. And perhaps today our hold on happiness can seem especially fragile in a world that is increasingly vulnerable to acts of terrorism, a world where violence never ceases, a world where economic security is something billions of people will never know, and a world where disregard for nature imperils the future of Earth. A Christian account of happiness will always have an "already" but "not yet" quality to it because knowing that happiness is found in loving and being loved by God may change the way we live in the world, but it does not take us out of the world. The happiness we enjoy now points to and hopes for the fullness of happiness in heaven, that celestial happiness that nothing can threaten and that can never be lost.

Third, Augustine's account of happiness is inherently social. This can be seen in two ways. First, a life of happiness requires that our love for God always be extended to our neighbors. Loving God should never mean turning away from others; rather, real love for God empowers us to expand the circle of love so that we become increasingly attentive not only to the needs of those around us but also to persons throughout the world. Loving God stretches us. It continually draws us beyond the well-established borders of our love so that we are no longer able to dismiss, no longer able to exclude,

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and no longer able to be unmindful of the needs and sufferings of persons we may never meet. For Augustine, loving God most of all does not mean loving only God; in fact, if our love for God does not unfold in love for others, we do not really love God at all. This is why the way to God is always through love of neighbor, whether the neighbor is a spouse or family member, a dear friend, a stranger, or even an enemy.

Augustine's understanding of happiness is social in another respect. In a more individualistic view of happiness, we may think we can achieve happiness all on our own; indeed, we may even see others as obstacles to our happiness. But, for Augustine, human beings are social creatures. We not only need one another and depend on one another, but we are also made to be in relationship with each other. This is why Augustine would find an individualistic account of happiness unthinkable, even unnatural. A life of happiness—a truly good human life—requires the company of others. Happiness is impossible without friendships and communities because it is an inescapably social enterprise—a truly good and happy life is something we pursue together. For Augustine, other persons do not hinder my happiness; rather, they make it possible.

Furthermore, the social character of happiness means that I cannot consider my happiness apart from and irrespective of the happiness of others. And that means I must see my well-being enmeshed with the well-being of others. Put more strongly, the social character of happiness heightens the responsibility we have for others, so much so that it summons us to speak out against and work to overcome whatever unjustly diminishes or harms other persons or species. In a Christian understanding of happiness, our human solidarity—as well as the kinship we share with all creatures—prevents us from settling with any understanding of happiness that would make us unmindful of others. A Christian understanding of happiness both begins with justice and requires persons of justice. Without this important qualification, an approach to the Christian moral life centered on happiness becomes highly self-centered and unavoidably elitist, something only the privileged could ever enjoy. In summary, Augustine maintained that happiness is a shared activity, a collective endeavor, but one that draws us out of ourselves in response to the needs of others. This is why our more individualistic accounts of happiness would strike Augustine not as fulfilling but as incredibly lonely, oddly self-destructive, and blatantly selfish.

Why Happiness Is Not an Impossible Dream

We are made for happiness, fashioned for bliss. It sounds nice, but can we afford to believe it? Even though it's impossible to deny our hunger for hap-

piness, is achieving the happiness we desire an impossible dream? Is it wiser to lower our expectations? Is it wiser to settle for less? Augustine was no stranger to disappointment, but he would argue passionately against anyone who suggested that a Christian account of happiness was more fantasy than reality because he was utterly convinced that the God who is our good wants our good. God wants our good. Augustine learned this from the fascinating, messy, and sometimes sorrowful saga of the first thirty-three years of his life.

All thinking about Christian ethics needs to begin with the pivotal truth that God wants our good. This fact should ground, inform, inspire, and direct all consideration of the Christian moral life. Christian morality begins, Augustine discovered, not with our initiatives and actions, but with the befriending activity of God. God befriends us in grace, Christ, and the Spirit, as well as through one another. God fashioned us from goodness and for goodness, wants our happiness, and works far better than we do to accomplish it because God is love, and love always seeks the good of the beloved. This is why happiness is not an impossible dream.

The Christian moral life begins with a gift. It begins in God's grace, grows from that grace, and is sustained by that grace. We are to respond to God's grace. We are to use our freedom, ingenuity, and intelligence to cooperate with it and live according to it. But we are never solitary agents in the Christian moral life. We never "go it alone," because we always live and work in partnership with the gracious initiatives of God and in partnership with others. The Christian moral life abides as a response to grace. It is our ongoing response, formed from gratitude, to the providential initiatives of God. We misconstrue the Christian moral life if we picture ourselves as autonomous, independent agents on whom everything depends. Such a life would be dreary, burdensome, and ultimately defeating. On the contrary, the language that best befits the Christian moral life is not the language of autonomy and independence but of receptivity and cooperation. We thrive when we open ourselves to the grace, love, and goodness of God—when we allow God's spirit to move freely within us—and when we use our intelligence and freedom to work in harmony with God's grace, not against it or apart from it.

Thomas Aquinas

Our second guide on the subject of happiness is Thomas Aquinas (1224/1225–1274). The youngest son of nine children, Aquinas was born in a small town between Rome and Naples. When only five years old, his parents took him to the famous Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino where he would be educated by the monks and introduced to the Benedic-

tine way of life. His parents hoped that Thomas would someday be abbot of Monte Cassino, a dream they had for their son that would never be realized. He remained at Monte Cassino until 1239 when, at the urging of the abbot, he began his studies in the liberal arts at the University of Naples. There Thomas was introduced to the philosophy of Aristotle, which was to have such an impact on his own thinking. What was Thomas like at this time? One of his biographers, James A. Weisheipl, described him as being "somewhat taller than most of his Italian contemporaries, and somewhat corpulent."²⁶ Another observed that Thomas "was a quiet boy with an unusually mature bearing; saying little, but already thinking much; rather silent and serious and seemingly, much given to prayer."²⁷

In April 1244, Thomas joined the Dominicans, a relatively new religious community. A year later, the Dominicans sent him first to study in Paris and then, three years later, to Cologne.

Thomas Aquinas could be the patron saint of every student who has ever felt his or her talents were overlooked or unappreciated. Because of his large size and reserved nature, his youthful peers, assuming that Thomas was not very bright, nicknamed him the "Dumb Ox." But Thomas's genius soon became known. One day Thomas dropped a sheet of his class notes in the corridor outside his room. A fellow student saw the notes and took them to their teacher, the famous philosopher and theologian Albert the Great. Glancing at the notes, Albert was so impressed that he remarked, "We call him the Dumb Ox, but the bellowing of that ox will resound throughout the world."²⁸

Albert's prediction certainly was proven true because the theology of this thirteenth-century saint and scholar has bellowed resoundingly for almost eight hundred years. Aquinas died before he reached fifty, but few have written more extensively and prolifically, or as astutely, as this man whose abiding desire was to help people understand the limitless expanse of God's goodness and how they should respond to it. Aquinas wrote commentaries on many of the works of Aristotle, on the Book of Job, and on each of the four gospels as well as other books of the New Testament; however, of all of his writings, undoubtedly the most important is his magnum opus, the massive *Summa Theologiae*, a stunning exploration of virtually every dimension of Christian theology, but a work Aquinas intended for "beginners."

In the preface to the *Summa*, Aquinas said his aim "was to present those things that pertain to the Christian religion in a manner befitting the education of beginners, to present the fundamentals of theology briefly and clearly."²⁹ The *Summa Theologiae* is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the existence and nature of God, and the creation of all life from God. The second part considers how men and women who come from God

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are to make their way back to God, particularly through the virtues. The final section of the *Summa* deals with Christ and the sacraments.

But Thomas never finished part three of the *Summa* because of an experience he underwent on the morning of December 6, 1273. From that day on, he never wrote another word. When his fellow Dominican and friend Reginald urged him to continue writing, Thomas gave the response for which he is famous: "All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me."³⁰ No one is sure what exactly happened to Thomas that day. Some speculate that he may have suffered a stroke. But it was also surely a profound spiritual experience, because whatever was revealed to Thomas that morning was of such unsurpassable beauty and goodness that he felt his own achievements paled in comparison. He told Reginald: "The only thing I want now is that as God has put an end to my writing, He may quickly end my life also."³¹ It was not long before his prayer was answered. Thomas died early on Wednesday morning, March 7, 1274, not yet fifty years old.³²

Seekers of Happiness

No work has shaped and impacted Christian thinking more than the *Summa Theologiae*, and it is in its pages that Aquinas's most trenchant analysis of happiness is found. Like Augustine, Aquinas puts the human desire for happiness at the heart of life. He begins his investigation of the Christian life with the simple declaration that happiness is our true good—the one good every person naturally seeks—and that we will not be satisfied until we possess a happiness that "essentially remains and is forever."³³ Seekers of happiness, we move through life in search of whatever we think will fulfill and complete us, something so abundantly good that once we possess it nothing is left for us to desire. Aquinas calls this consummate good our "ultimate end." It is the good on which we set our hearts, that one thing we want for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else. To know what functions as our "ultimate end," we only have to consider what matters most to us. What is it that most consistently motivates us, captures our attention, or frustrates us when it is missing?

We don't want a flimsy happiness; we want a happiness that lasts. Aquinas held that such happiness comes from possessing whatever good can bring us to our fullest and most complete development. We will be happy, Thomas thought, when we not only possess, but are also transformed by, whatever good is capable of drawing us to our utmost possible excellence as human beings—the good that enables us to be who we are created to be. But we are easily misled about where such fulfilling goodness is found. We are often

more mistaken than astute about happiness. The common thread in all of our actions is the desire for happiness, but we seek happiness in different places and in different ways. This may be inevitable, but it can also be costly because, Aquinas saw, wrong choices about happiness diminish us.

Consider, for example, what our society teaches about happiness. In a culture of consumerism, are we not bombarded with messages promising happiness through wealth and possessions? Aren't we every day besieged by advertisements promising bliss through the clothes we wear, the phones we buy, and even the beer we drink? Or in our celebrity culture are we not taught to believe that fame and power, not service and commitment, bring happiness? But if all of these things really bring happiness, why are so many people depressed and discontent, lonely, angry and dissatisfied, and perhaps, amid all their comforts, slipping into despair? Aquinas's response to our society's convictions about happiness would be that anyone who thinks wealth, fame, pleasure, or power can make us supremely happy is following the "mass opinion of silly people" who are so misguided about happiness that we ought to pity them, not imitate them.³⁴

Aquinas was a realist. He knew how people think. Thus, when he begins his study of happiness, he does not leap to the conclusion that God must be our ultimate good. No, the first candidate for happiness he offers is not God but money, because, Aquinas notes, many people live as if money is their ultimate joy. Apparently, things were no different in the thirteenth century than they are today! He also looks at honor and fame, power and prestige, bodily health, and pleasure as possibilities for our "ultimate end" because he knows the way we live. We look for satisfaction in fame and prestige, think pleasures will content us, and sometimes conclude that nothing matters more than being healthy and fit. All of these inclinations bear some truth.

Aquinas does not study these tendencies only in order to dismiss them; rather, he acknowledges that something is good about each of them, and they contribute something important to life. A certain amount of money and material goods is essential for a good human life. A good reputation and a little recognition do add something to our happiness. No one who has ever enjoyed a gourmet meal, a fine martini, or Italian ice cream will deny that such pleasures enrich us (sometimes more than our waistlines can bear). And no one truly alive will deny how powerful the pleasures of touch can be. A God who made all things good made these things good too.

Aquinas agreed. He did not deny their goodness; in fact, he insisted that they are important elements to a good and happy life. Human beings are spiritual creatures, but we are also bodily creatures, which means we have physical needs that must be satisfied. For Aquinas, human happiness is always an

embodied happiness, and that is why he appreciated how physical well-being, food and shelter, and adequate wealth and possessions are necessary for a truly human existence.³⁵ Similarly, we need community and friendship, just societies and governments, opportunities, suitable employment, leisure, and many other things if we are to flourish as persons. All of these contribute something essential for a good and happy life.

For Aquinas, however, their goodness can only take us so far. Each of these things is unquestionably good, but insufficiently good. They go a long way to making our lives pleasant and fulfilled, but they still fall short because none has the goodness necessary for bringing us to our optimum excellence as human beings. We may have all earthly goods and pleasures, Aquinas said, but we will still be dissatisfied—or we ought to be dissatisfied—because even when we have them in abundance we “recognize how incomplete they are and how far short of our highest good.”³⁶

For example, money cannot be our ultimate end any more than power, fame, health, or pleasure, because we will be brought to peace only by something whose goodness surpasses us, not by something less than us. Our happiness resides in something so superior in goodness that through desiring, loving, and possessing it—and gradually being transformed by it—we are brought to our highest possible excellence. The good that is our ultimate end, Aquinas reasons, is so perfectly good that it fulfills all desires.³⁷ Money and possessions cannot do this because no matter how much wealth we have or things we own, we always want more. The same is true with power and fame and pleasure. We can have them all in abundance but still be restless, still sense something is missing. Whatever will make us happiest must be able to do great things for us. It must be a good that stretches us, a good that can consistently carry us beyond previous levels of achievement and growth. Thus, for Aquinas, the happy person is not necessarily the woman or man who has all she or he desires; rather, the happy person is the woman or man who possesses the greatest possible good in the deepest possible way.³⁸

Why Our Ultimate Happiness Is God

Such goodness is found only in God. Nothing other than God and nothing less than God can ultimately satisfy us because we are happy insofar as we possess the highest possible good, and God is the perfection of all goodness. Human beings seek the unsurpassable good, “the good without reserve,” Aquinas says, because we grow and flourish through goodness and are fulfilled through the highest goodness. Such unexcelled goodness cannot be found in any created thing, but only in God whose goodness is lacking in nothing.³⁹ For Aquinas, to be happy is to live in and from the most beautiful

good, and to grow in the likeness of that good. "There is a drive within all things towards some likeness to God, who is their first beginning and their final end," Aquinas wrote. Thus, we cannot enjoy happiness unless we "become like God in goodness."⁴⁰

Throughout his analysis of happiness, Aquinas maintains that the ultimate end of men and women is whatever brings us to our most complete development as human beings. Union with God, sharing God's life intimately and continuously, is the true ultimate end for human beings because nothing less than God can appease our natural desire for the absolute good.⁴¹ Our goal is to "become like God in goodness," because in that transcendent possibility is our most authentic and unqualified joy.

Still, even though we may follow the logic of Aquinas's argument, we may not be persuaded. Like Augustine, Aquinas has a religious understanding of life. He assumes that human beings are religious creatures who are called to and fulfilled in a relationship with God. This is why for people who do not believe in God or who have had little experience with or interest in religion, his claims seem empty. To say "Nothing other than God and nothing less than God can ultimately satisfy us" means nothing. And to claim that happiness will elude us unless we "become like God in goodness" seems not only impossible to prove but also manifestly false. Besides, aren't there plenty of nonbelievers who would readily attest to being content with whatever happiness, however incomplete, the world can offer?

Aquinas's account of happiness will not resonate with people who reject, have little interest in, or are not convinced by his theological convictions. But perhaps something is still worth considering in his analysis even for people who are not Christians. In *Lost in Transition*, a sociological study of what emerging adults think about a good life, Christian Smith notes, "However the views vary, by most accounts offered by the people generally considered the wisest among us, the good life involves some kind of transcendence beyond one's own self. To live a good life, in other words, means progressing on some kind of journey to become something more than what we already are."⁴²

For Aquinas, we are to transcend ourselves in worship and love of God, and in unstinting love of our neighbors. For him, we are to take up a journey through which we grow in the love and goodness of God. But, putting his religious framework aside, Aquinas's more general point is that what is truly good in life can only be experienced when we break through the ultimately suffocating confines of self-centeredness and seek a life that is not geared to satisfying every desire. Most of us, even if we resist it, know this is true. Even though we may have been socialized into a life of comfort, consumption, and the pursuit of self-interest, we know that such a life is hardly a path to flour-

ishing and peace; we know there must be something more, something better. This conviction is fortified when we consider people who have everything society says we should want yet never seem satisfied, never seem content, and, frankly, don't manifest the joy we've been taught to believe they should have. Whether or not we accept Aquinas's claims about God, we know he is right: happiness is possible only when there is room for others in our life and when we allow those others to draw us out of ourselves in love.

Even Christians can make one more objection to Aquinas's views on happiness. Aquinas says happiness is a way of life in which we grow in friendship and communion with God. But how can we who are clearly other than God—finite, mortal, earthly, and sinful—possibly share in the life and goodness of God? How can we find happiness in a goodness that so infinitely surpasses us, a goodness that seems eternally out of reach? Like Augustine, Aquinas says such happiness begins with a gift. Left to ourselves, we cannot possibly have a life of friendship and communion with God because God absolutely transcends us. The happiness we need is a happiness we cannot, by our resources alone, possibly reach. But we can receive it as a gift. Human beings are fulfilled through a life of love, friendship, and communion with God—what Aquinas calls a life of *caritas* or charity. And this way of life is attainable not because of our own powers or capacities, but because, Aquinas says, the gift of God's love and happiness is poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5).⁴³ We can move toward God because God has already drawn toward us in the gift of God's own life. We begin life already to some degree possessing the love and goodness that completes us. This is why being drawn to God, Aquinas insists, is the deepest and most natural inclination of our hearts.⁴⁴

Still, we have to nurture and deepen the gift we have received. We have to grow in the life, love, and goodness God shares with us and we do so through the virtues we develop, through the rituals and practices of the Christian life, and through a persistent commitment to reach out in kindness, love, and compassion to our neighbors. In short, the happiness that God's grace makes possible must be received and responded to by us. Like any relationship, we must invest in, care about, and remain committed to a life of friendship with God; indeed, for Christians, it must be the most important relationship of their lives. This is why, for Christians, happiness is both a gift and a calling.

Christ—Our Preeminent Teacher in the Way of Happiness

Our analysis of a Christian account of happiness has argued that even though everyone desires happiness and seeks happiness, that doesn't mean we know where genuine happiness can be found. We need guidance about ways of

living that will lead to happiness as well as ways of living that will leave us strangers to happiness. If we are just taking our first steps on an itinerary to happiness, we need mentors to show us the way. We need communities whose members are wise in the habits and practices of happiness because having a natural desire for happiness is no guarantee we shall find it.

Augustine and Aquinas knew this. They recognized that, if the heart of the Christian moral life is learning about happiness, then we begin not as experts but as apprentices. We are novices in the habits of happiness, and novices need a teacher. In the Christian life, the primary teacher in the way of happiness is Christ. For Christians, he is their mentor; they are his disciples. And it is by observing him, listening to him, learning from him, following his teachings, and imitating his example that Christians grow in happiness. In Christ, one sees the path to happiness and discovers the virtues and practices constitutive of happiness. For Christians, happiness is a way of life by which one is gradually conformed to the love, goodness, and beauty of God revealed in Christ. It is a life of discipleship through which one learns that happiness comes through resolute imitation of the attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors outlined in the Gospels. Consequently, the Christian moral life is best understood as ongoing training in happiness. It is being progressively initiated into ways of being and acting that will enable one to know and abide in not just any joy, but the joy of Christ; the joy Jesus promised to anyone who took his teaching to heart. As he said to his disciples the night before he died, "I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete" (John 15:11).⁴⁵

And yet, like Augustine prior to his conversion, we can fear and resist what Christ teaches because it goes against our intuitions about happiness. We may all want to be happy, but a Christian understanding of happiness clashes with our culture's gospel of happiness because it offers a vision of human flourishing characterized not by endless self-seeking, much less clever self-promotion, but heartfelt love of God and others. In this respect, Jesus shows us life in an "alternative frame of reference"; in his life and in his teachings, he shifts our horizons—our ordinary ways of thinking and perceiving—to such an extent that we are forced to reimagine what happiness is.⁴⁶

Jesus tells us that happiness is a way of life characterized by serving others rather than lording over them, by forgiving rather than retaliating, and by loving enemies instead of plotting against them. Nobody would win an election with that platform! On the contrary, we often think we will feel better when we get even, not when we forgive. Seeking the good of our enemies seems downright unnatural, surely the antithesis of happiness, not an essential ingredient of it. And aren't we sometimes taught that to be successful we

something better. We have everything, but we never seem content, because we believe they should be. We know he is the best in our life and love.

Aquinas's views on happiness, which we grow in, are clearly other than those we are in the life and love that so infinitely draw us. Like Augustine, we ourselves, we cannot have God because God's happiness we cannot, it is a gift. Human communion with God through this way of life is not because, Aquinas says, our hearts (Rom. 7) are drawn toward us to the degree possessing in God, the love of our hearts.⁴⁴ We have to do so through the Christian life, kindness, love, and God's grace makes any relationship, we have a friendship with God, a relationship of a gift and a calling.

7 of Happiness

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must be among the lucky people who are served, not the poor souls who are serving? We are reluctant to trust, much less commit ourselves to, a teacher who says an important first step to happiness is selling your possessions and giving what you have to the poor (Matt. 19:21). And, if that isn't bad enough, even more irksome is Jesus' promise that anyone who undertakes his path to happiness can count on tribulation, misunderstanding, and rejection. No wonder we are more likely to decline Jesus' invitation to follow his way than accept it. There must be more congenial paths to bliss.

Take the Beatitudes, the heart of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, where he sets out the way of life and the kind of community that will help bring about the reign of God (Matt. 5:1–12). For Augustine, the Beatitudes, as their name suggests, are the concrete practices by which Christians know happiness by being formed in the goodness of God.⁴⁷ But the Beatitudes, to say the least, present an unconventional understanding of happiness. Jesus promises happiness to the lowly and the humble; to those who hunger for holiness more than for power or wealth; to those generous with mercy and hesitant to condemn; and to peacemakers who will suffer violence rather than inflict it. The Beatitudes outline Jesus' path to happiness, but some Christian theologians and preachers have assured discomfited believers that Jesus really didn't mean for us to take the Beatitudes seriously. They are, the argument goes, "eschatological ideals," declarations that are so otherworldly and unreachable that they express what Jesus would like the world to be but knows it never can be.

But Augustine thought otherwise. In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Augustine suggests that Jesus' teachings on mercy, peacemaking, forgiveness, and justice are not impossible ideals too unreasonable to practice but precisely the attitudes and actions that constitute happiness; by practicing and embodying them we grow in the ways of God. Augustine believed "the Beatitudes give us Christ's answer to the primary human question about happiness" because by living according to them we are conformed to the goodness of God and participate more completely in the life of God.⁴⁸ More recently, the Jesuit James Martin has suggested that happiness is living the Beatitudes and becoming a person of the Beatitudes. "The Beatitudes," he writes, "are a vision not only for the end times, or for society, but for us. We become who Jesus hopes us to be, as a people and as individuals. So we are blessed."⁴⁹

Like Augustine, Aquinas linked happiness with a life of discipleship, a life of following, learning from, and imitating Jesus. Christ is the center of the Christian moral life because we grow in the goodness of God and, therefore, know happiness only in the measure that we more deeply possess and prac-

tice the virtues of Christ. Furthermore, for Aquinas, a life of discipleship is mediated through the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas writes, “Baptism is required in order to begin the spiritual life; the Eucharist is necessary in order to bring it to its culmination.”⁵⁰ Baptism begins the Christian life because through that sacrament Christians join their lives to Christ and begin their lifelong initiation into the ways of Christ. In addition, baptism ritually expresses that happiness is learned in community as men and women apprentice themselves to Christ by learning from fellow believers—especially those recognized to be exemplars in the ways of Christ.

But baptism also indicates that this training in happiness is never complete. We never “finish our baptisms” because at no point do we achieve perfect conformity to the goodness of God. We strive for that goodness by claiming the Gospel as our rule of life, and we grow more deeply in that goodness as we follow the way of Christ, but we never equal or surpass it. Similarly, the Eucharist is an essential practice for the Christian moral life because it is the ritual through which our communal training in happiness primarily occurs. At the Eucharist, we gather to listen to the words and teachings of Christ in order to learn how to better model our lives on his. At the Eucharist, we together eat the body and drink the blood of Christ—we consume Christ entirely—so that his attitudes and virtues might become our own. The Eucharist is the true center of the Christian moral life because it is the indispensable context for learning about happiness and for becoming people capable of delighting in the happiness that is God.⁵¹

Conclusion

We are made for happiness, fashioned for bliss. In this opening chapter we have suggested that Christian ethics is best understood as ongoing education in what constitutes authentic happiness. Indeed, it would not be amiss to title a course on Christian ethics “How to Be Happy.”⁵² If humans are made for happiness and have an ineluctable desire for happiness, it is important that we discover the kind of life that is most conducive to happiness. However, this happiness must not just be for us but for every human being. As we have noted, the problem with too many contemporary accounts of happiness is that they are aggressively self-centered. They form us in attitudes, habits, and practices that leave us woefully unmindful of others, thus becoming unjust persons living unjust lives.

This is why if an ethic for happiness is not to nurture indifference toward the well-being of others, much less be something only the privileged can en-

joy, it must truly be global. It must consider what brings flourishing not just for a few but for all persons and species. When it asks what is truly good in human life, it must have all human beings—and other creatures too—in mind.

Christians think differently about happiness because they live by a different story. What we think about happiness as well as what we believe counts as a good human life—a life well worth living—depends on the stories and narratives that guide us. For Christians, the most formative narrative, and the one that claims their utmost loyalty, is the Bible. It is in light of those inspired writings that Christians understand who they are and what they ought to be about in this world. It is from the biblical narratives that they learn that a good and happy life summons us continually to move beyond ourselves in love and justice toward others, particularly those who are poor, suffering, or being crushed by an onslaught of dehumanizing forces. And it is also there that Christians learn that we ought to protest any understanding of happiness that allows some to flourish blissfully while millions of others can barely live at all.

Given how injustice abounds throughout the world, we need to ask—especially the privileged and the prosperous—if it is possible to live differently. How we answer that question depends on the narratives that guide our lives. For almost fifty years now, Christian ethicists have given increasing attention to the importance of narrative for how we think about the moral life. In the next chapter, we will examine why.

Some Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Prior to reading this chapter, what did you think Christian morality primarily involved?
2. The chapter argues that happiness has to be learned; that we must be educated in the habits and practices of happiness. How did you react to this claim?
3. Do you think you can be happy without being good?
4. Was there anything about Augustine's story that connected with your own life's story? Have you ever, like him, feared happiness? Do you agree with his understanding of happiness?
5. Thomas Aquinas said that every person has an "ultimate end." What do you see people choosing as their "ultimate end" today? What do you think ought to serve as our ultimate end?
6. What in a Christian understanding of happiness do you find challenging? Agreeable or disagreeable?