

Session 2 Slide 1

## Session 2- Asceticism vs. Abundance

- GK Chesterton – "the whole point about St. Francis of Assisi is that he certainly was ascetical and certainly was not gloomy. He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold. And it is precisely the positive and passionate quality of this part of his personality that is a challenge to the modern mind in the whole problem of the pursuit of pleasure."

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Session 2 Slide 2

## Desert Fathers- Asceticism

- In the fourth century a fantastic and terrible thing happened. Constantine became a Christian...
- Flight to the desert... Egypt- considered as a new holy land
- Silence, solitude, the importance of the cell
- Gnosticism- restraining the body so the soul can rise to God
- Asceticism (from the Greek: ἄσκησις, áskēsis, "exercise" or "training") describes a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from various worldly pleasures, often with the aim of pursuing religious and spiritual goals. (from Wikipedia)
- Saint Simeon Stylites or Symeon the Stylite (c. 390 – 2 September 459) was a Christian ascetic saint who achieved fame for living 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar near Aleppo in Syria. Several other stylites later followed his model (the Greek word style means pillar).

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Session 2 Slide 3

Road map: The Development of Ascetical Theology and Practice from Anthony to John Cassian to William of St. Thierry

- Today there is an absence of ascetical thinking in the church. We have somehow cut ourselves off from millennia of Christian thought on the topic. Have we done this because it needed to be left behind, or have our selfish natures won out and left us as shallow Christians?
- Three snapshots... start with the asceticism of Anthony, then move to the asceticism of John Cassian, and finally William of St. Thierry. What we will see is a developing asceticism as they depend on each other. We will also see a consistency among their thought as they learn from what has gone before them.

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**The Influence of Anthony**

- The Life of Anthony was chosen because of Anthony’s significant contribution to the desert tradition, and subsequent influence in the middle ages.
  - As Jean Leclercq has said... “He remained truly the father of all monks; and so in all milieux and in every period of the Western Middle Ages they considered themselves as truly his sons. Everywhere they claimed his support, sometimes even against each other. During each monastic revival, they hark back to ancient Egypt; they want, they say, to revive Egypt, to inaugurate a new Egypt, and they call upon St. Anthony, his example and his writings.”
- It is no wonder then that as William of St. Thierry harkens back to Egypt that we can hear the example of Anthony in his writing.
- The Life of St Anthony was a very popular book written about Anthony by Athanasius in the 4th century.

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## The Ascetic Theology of Anthony (why live this way?)

- As Athanasius says, “Anthony’s way of life provides monks with a sufficient picture for ascetic practice.”
- His practice flows from the belief that, “...the soul’s intensity is strong when the pleasures of the body are weakened.”
- The goal of Anthony’s asceticism is to keep the image in a pure state so that image reflects God.

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Session 2 Slide 6

## The heroic Ascetic Ideal: Anthony

- When he slept it says, “A rush mat was sufficient to him for sleeping, but more regularly he lay on the bare ground.”
- He had night vigils often, “His watchfulness was such that he often passed the entire night without sleep, and doing this not once, but often, he inspired wonder.”
- He was very careful with the use of food, “He ate once daily, after sunset, but there were times when he received food every second, and frequently even every fourth day. His food was bread and salt, and for drinking he took only water.”
- He did not clean his body, “He neither bathed his body with water for cleanliness, nor did he wash his feet at all, and he would not even consent to putting them in water unless it was necessary.”
- He would punish his body with a hair shirt, “...he had clothing with hair on the interior and skin on the exterior that he kept until he died.”
- Lastly we see that he worked hard as he was “diligent in his labor”, but this wasn’t emphasized as an ascetic discipline as it will be with later monastic writers.

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## Anthony: Battling with Demons

- All of this asceticism was necessary for the battle with demons that the monk found in his cell.
- Anthony spoke at length about his struggles with the demonic and said, "They (demons) are afraid of the ascetics on several counts- for their fasting, the vigils, the prayers, the meekness and gentleness, the contempt for money, the lack of vanity, the humility, the love of the poor, the almsgiving, the freedom from wrath, and most of all for their devotion to Christ."
- Anthony was an ascetic warrior and found his purpose in battling demons in his cell. Once when Anthony was visiting a city he dismissed a crowd of people although there may be more that he could heal. He did this because it was more important that he return to fight demons than to help those people.

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## Anthony's example- What do you think?

- What do you think about Anthony's example? What parts of it do you think are helpful or unhelpful?
- What experience have you had with denying yourself things in pursuit of spiritual goals? Did it help? Why might this be especially helpful in this day?

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## The Conferences by John Cassian

- The work of John Cassian has been tremendously influential for monastic life.
- The Rule by St. Benedict that most of monastic history has lived by is based on the work of Cassian. At the end of the Rule the suggestion is given that monks read the scripture, Cassian and St. Basil. Cassian's writing was so common in medieval monasteries that the historian Owen Chadwick says that the manuscript tradition is "over-abundant", and still needs to be explored.
- Cassian wrote both The Institutes and The Conferences. The Institutes were targeted at communal monastic life, and The Conferences were for anchorites or the eremitic life.
- The Conferences are from Cassian visiting the desert fathers to learn from them whatever he could and later writing about it.

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Session 2 Slide 10

## The Purpose of Asceticism to Cassian

- With Cassian we get the goal of purity of heart.
  - As he says, "For its sake (purity of heart) we hold family, country, honor, riches, the delight of this world and indeed all pleasure in low esteem...". He also says that everything we do serves this end, and that is why we face "loneliness, fasting, vigils, work, nakedness."
- Purity of heart allows contemplation of God.
  - For example in Conference three we are told of three renunciations. The first two renunciations correspond to the ascetic life, however, we must move beyond that to contemplation of the unseen. It is because of this difference between Anthony and later monasticism that Andrew Louth says, "in the Life of Anthony, we read nothing of the soul's ascent to God in contemplation, but rather of its descent into the world given over to sin, a descent to the place of the demons there to do battle with them."
  - Cassian compares the soul to a feather of the lightest down. The soul rises to the sky if it is not weighed down by dampness or water. Asceticism is useful in removing the "dampness" so the soul can contemplate God. As he says for prayer there must be a, "complete removal of all concern for bodily things." Cassian's goal of purity carries with it the desire for mystical union with God.

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Session 2 Slide 11

## Moderation in The Life of Anthony developed by Cassian

- When we compare the ascetical practice of Cassian with that of Anthony we notice a significant difference. With Cassian we need moderation and discernment when dealing with the body.
  - The Life of Anthony does show some development in this direction in speaking about Anthony.
  - "He used to say that we ought to devote all our time to the soul instead of the body. He urged us to concede a little time to the body, out of necessity, but to be intent, for the most part, on the soul and to seek its benefit, so that it would not be dragged down by bodily pleasures, but rather that the body might be subservient to the soul."
- Anthony accepts the need to tend to the body "out of necessity". With Cassian this has grown into a more complicated understanding of moderation.
  - As Owen Chadwick has said that Cassian, "gave the west a sane and balanced view of the aims and ideals of the Antonian movement and the Greek theories of ascetical spirituality."
- The ascetical practices are still used (although in The Conferences bathing is allowed, and using a hair shirt is discouraged), but are not to be overdone. In a discussion on discernment Cassian shows several examples of people that in being zealous for God did foolish things. Cassian goes so far as to quote Anthony as saying, "... the lack of discernment prevented them from reaching the end."

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Session 2 Slide 12

## Moderation as care for the body- Cassian

- At the end of the first conference Moses says they should sleep or, “the body will claim everything if denied the little to which it is entitled.”
- Similarly we are advised to take enough food so that “the body is refreshed” and the spirit ready to address spiritual things.
- They were still to live by ascetic standards, but would set the times and amounts of food and sleep. As Cassian said, “...allow oneself as much food as will sustain the flesh but not satisfy its longings.”
- Cassian also said, “Too much fasting and too much eating come to the same end.” And also, “...the road must be traveled between the two kinds of excess so that in the end we may not allow ourselves to be diverted from the pathway of restraint... nor fall through ...carelessness into... self-indulgence.”
- The heart’s inclination is important as well... he says, “We must not anticipate food before the time for it and we must not overdo it; on the other hand, when the due hour comes, we must have our food and our sleep, regardless of our reluctance.”
- Have you ever been too zealous causing you to overreach and leading to failure? When you decide you want to do something what has helped you stick to it?

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Session 2 Slide 13

## William of St. Thierry's The Golden Epistle

- William of St. Thierry's most noted book The Golden Epistle was written calling monks back to the spirituality of the desert (that of Anthony and Cassian).
- Jean Leclercq has said that William represented the desire of the Cistercians when he wrote in The Golden Epistle the wish that they, "may implant in the darkness of the West and in the cold of Gaul the light of the East and the ancient fervor of Egyptian religious life."
- William speaks well of the "ancient glory of the solitary life and the great grace of God manifested in it" from the writings of the desert as he speaks as though they were now rediscovering that glory.
- William calls his readers to a life like that of Anthony who with others are regarded as those who, "won victories over the world and the Prince of this world and over their own body..."
- In some places William sounds like Anthony as we are to, "gain control of the body and bring it under subjection".
- Also he compares our body to a sick person in that we are to "go against its many wishes in refusing it what is harmful to it and in forcing upon it what is profitable."

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Session 2 Slide 14

## Ascetical practice with William

- Careful use is made of food, “Watch must be kept then on the manner and the time of eating, on the quality and the quantity of the food; all superfluity and seasonings that only adulterate food should be shunned.” And that we are to, “not give yourself wholly to the business of eating.”
- We are to not enjoy our sleep as he says, “Take care... never to give yourself wholly to sleep...”.
- We even find added to the example of Anthony the need for a spiritual father. This relationship was mentioned in Cassian, but becomes much more rigid in the writing of William.
- Also William wants the regulation of work, rest, silence, solitude, and “...everything to do with the formation or the needs of the outward man...”.

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Session 2 Slide 15

## Moderation- William

- Whereas William harkens back to the example of Anthony we see that he has adjusted this example in similar ways to Cassian.
- We find no mention of hair shirts or avoiding bathing.
- In a tone unlike Anthony, William refers to vigils and fasts by saying, "If, however, through the vice of indiscretion they are practiced in such a way that either the spirit grows faint or the body is enfeebled and so spiritual things are hampered, the man who so behaves cheats his body of the effects of good work, his spirit of its affections, his neighbor of good example and God of honor."
- William warns against the "vice of indiscretion" to stop the monks from being too zealous.

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Session 2 Slide 16

## Our relationship with our body- William

- As William says elsewhere, “Therefore the body is to be treated strictly, so that it will not rebel or grow wanton, yet in such a way that it will be able to serve, for it has been given to the spirit to serve it. It is not to be regarded as the purpose of life but as something without which we cannot live.”
- William is teaching that we should have control over the body only in such a way “that it will be able to serve”.
- William seems to hold out the possibility that the body could become an ally in the battle instead of an enemy. He says that the animal way of living is perfect, “...when the habitual exercise of virtue has become a pleasure.”

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Session 2 Slide 17

## Importance of the Cell- William

- Something that we find in William that is similar to Anthony and Cassian but more pronounced is the emphasis on place, the cell, and solitude.
- Anthony was described by Athanasius at having, "...loved more than everything else his way of life in the mountain." Anthony compared monks away from the desert to fish out of water soon to perish.
- Cassian assumes the value of the cell, while William develops it into a tool for disciplining the flesh. We need times to be alone with God. Jesus took time in solitude as did the prophets and John the Baptist. William said of the ascetical practices that, "... all these good practices demand the cell as their workshop and an enduring perseverance in it."
- What is your experience of solitude? Have you ever taken a silent retreat? How do we balance solitude and silence with God while avoiding boredom?

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Session 2 Slide 18

The soul taking control of the ‘animal man’ is just the start- William

- William’s asceticism is, like Cassian, only a small part of a person’s journey toward God.
- For William the “animal man” is an area of life that must be controlled to allow a person to draw closer to God.
- The monk must also persist to learn to pray and contemplate God to aspire to the heights of his profession.
- What William perceives is that people are often enslaved and directed by their senses.
- This insight into the shallow flesh driven nature of humanity helps show the need for asceticism. As he says to the animal man, “Up to the present he has been the willing slave of his body but now he is beginning to subject it to the spirit and fit himself to perceive the things of God.”
- Is it to combat this weakness in the human person that William places such emphasis on not being idle. He says, “The servant of God should never be idle, although he is at leisure he should devote himself to God.”

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Session 2 Slide 19

### Development between Anthony, Cassian, and William

- From Anthony we see a passionate ascetical practice that is very austere. Cassian added to Anthony's example the importance of moderation, and showed that asceticism is only the beginning of a long spiritual journey. William of St. Thierry had a more developed anthropology to inform his asceticism with the goal of flesh becoming godly in its desires.

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Session 2 Slide 20

# Abundance

- Delight in God for His glory... delight in what he has created for His glory...
- Psalm 96:7-10- the message translation
  - Bravo, God, Bravo! Everyone join in the great shout: Encore!
  - In awe before the beauty, in awe before the might.
  - Bring gifts and celebrate, Bow before the beauty of God,
  - Then to your knees - everyone worship!
  - Get out the message - God Rules! ...

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Session 2 Slide 21

## Worship

- Wider than we normally think- We often give God worship without realizing it
- When you tell a joke and everyone laughs... what does it feel like? Carry it with you for the day... catch yourself laughing about it later... it is nice isn't it?
- When you make something or do something... and other people look on amazed... wow... what does it feel like?
- When we enjoy life- it gives worship to God... all the better when we give God credit...God likes it when you laugh
- God is glorified by many things that don't explicitly bear his name, but intrinsically give him credit.
- We are unique among what God has created in that we able to recognize what he has done and worship him.

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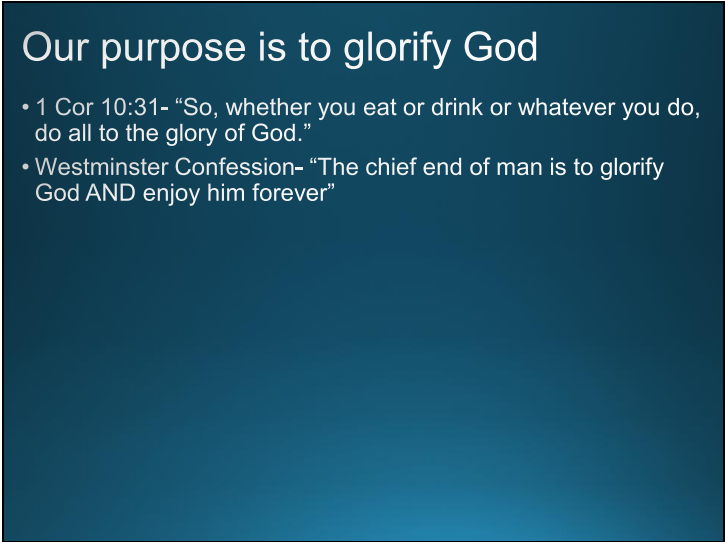
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Session 2 Slide 22



Our purpose is to glorify God

- 1 Cor 10:31- “So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”
- Westminster Confession- “The chief end of man is to glorify God AND enjoy him forever”

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Session 2 Slide 23

## Our purpose is best realised when we delight in God

- John Piper- “God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in Him”
- The chief end of man is to glorify God BY enjoying him forever
- Psalm 37:4- “Delight yourself in the LORD; and he will give you the desires of your heart.”
- Psalm 34:8- “O taste and see that the LORD is good.”
- Psalm 16:11- “In thy presence is fullness of joy; in thy right hand there are pleasures forever.”
- C.S. Lewis calls God in the Psalms the ‘all-satisfying Object.’

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Session 2 Slide 24

## Clarifications

- 1. God is not our means to get worldly pleasures
- 2. This does not make a god out of pleasure
- 3. Nowhere is an act right because it produces pleasure.
- We have a capacity for joy that we don't know yet... we were made to enjoy God. You were made to enjoy God.
- Do you want to be happy? Your happiness is found in God.
- Do you want to serve God? You glorify him best by enjoying Him.

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Session 2 Slide 25

## God's Pleasure

- Sometimes people have an idea of God that is too stodgy- God has a sense of humour
- Luke 10:21 (ANIV)- 21 At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."
- Pleasure of God in his creation
- Gen 1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25- it is good!
- Ps 104:31, Job 38:4-7
- There is beauty throughout creation that we can't see!

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Session 2 Slide 26

## Desire at natural

- Blaise Pascal- “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”

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Session 2 Slide 27

## Desire properly filled in God

- Longing to be happy in good, not sinful, and is best satisfied in God. This satisfaction in God is best when shared with others. Our enjoyment of God gives Him glory.
- Quote- C.S. Lewis- “If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

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Session 2 Slide 28

## Change of desire

- Matthew Henry- “The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.”

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Session 2 Slide 29

## Worship without delight is hypocrisy

- The world rings with praise. Enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. Worship is basically adoration. We adore that which delights us. If we worship something we do not delight in then it is hypocritical.
- If I kissed my wife out of duty and not joy I would not honor and cherish her.
- John Piper- “The engagement of the heart in worship is the coming alive of the feelings and emotions and affections of the heart. Where feelings for God are dead, worship is dead.”
- To not engage the emotions in worship is wrong- “These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”

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Session 2 Slide 30

How do we reconcile asceticism and abundance, or is one right and the other wrong?

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