

Harry Potter fans will likely remember—not too fondly—Dudley, Harry’s spoiled cousin whose taunting Harry was forced to endure. And yet ... Dudley’s obnoxious entitled attitude is not so uncommon these days.

For instance, it’s not infrequent that people come to priests and ministers with the same plaint directed at Jesus: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” (Luke 12:13) Sorry, dude (my phrase; not Jesus’); if that other person isn’t doing right, his conscience is not going to be suddenly shocked into doing so. Anyway ... how do I know that you’re not grasping contrary to the deceased’s wishes, hmmm?

One of the most contentious things within families is inheritance when loved ones (sometimes not so loved ones) pass away. “That’s not fair!” says anyone who gets less than anyone else. Perhaps it’d be more productive for that person to ask himself why he got less. One might imagine the deceased quoting Jesus from the parable of the workers of the vineyard: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” (Matthew 20:15). It’s not yours, after all, Mr./Ms. Grumbler; if you didn’t earn or receive something legitimately, it doesn’t belong to you. After all, inheritance is pretty much a windfall and gift. Be thankful for what you received, and maybe do a bit of self-analysis and ascertain the deceased’s reasons and/or purpose.

But we tend to be a lot more “glass half empty” than “glass half full”—lamenting what we don’t have rather than being grateful for what we do have and/or are given. Perhaps this is one of Jesus’ (many) possible intents of the first Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3)—having a heart happy with little rather than requiring more than is needed. After all, is having the fanciest car or house much more than just showing off? Or is it as much about announcing “Because I can” and “Behold ME.” I’m sure Freud would have a few things to say.

But scripture reminds us: “...we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. “(1 Timothy 6-9), and in Proverbs: “...give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, lest I be full, and deny you, or I shall be poor, and steal...” (Proverbs 30:8-9)

Ah ... that good ol’ ruin and destruction—that lust for wealth that has been the ruin of so many ... and for so many families, friendships, etc. Who has not witnessed the destructive nature of envy—the lost friendships, the stabs in the back, the ruining of reputations ... all because of our desire for “more” than the other. As the saying goes, a luxury once tasted becomes a necessity ... and thus once we have something, anything less is simply unacceptable.

But who progresses in anything by lamenting what he doesn’t have rather than leveraging what he does? Cry in your beer all you want, but you’re just going to have watery beer. Often—oh, so very often—people complain: “But I don’t have anything!” Well, God has given all of us three great gifts: our minds, our bodies and their driving force: the will. We are not meant to leech upon society, but rather use what we have for our own support and to help the helpless. St. Paul again: “Anyone unwilling [not ‘unable’—a critical distinction] to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness...not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10-13) As parents often find, what is given is taken for granted; what is worked for is always appreciated.

Many are very blessed with strength and health in both intellect and body; for such gifts they should be most grateful. But those with weaker bodies still have minds; those with weaker minds still have strength/bodies. Those who struggle at having neither we have the honor and privilege of caring for with our excess and charity. Yet one neither need be Einstein nor Atlas; we Christians know that if one is unable to work, often he/she can do some of the greatest activity of all—that of Mary of the Martha and Mary story (Luke 10:38-42) ... the “better part” of sitting at the feet of Jesus, imploring God in prayer for the benefit of the world.

Everyone who can has the moral obligation to work for the betterment of his community. If we work only for ourselves, ourselves is all that we’ll ever have. Certainly one is bound to care of those for whom he is responsible—family especially (“...whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (1 Timothy 5:8)), and yet also in reference to those in need: “...it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need...As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’” (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). After all, no one needs excess and opulence.

In the popular medieval murder mystery Cadfael, an oft-used chastisement directed to grouchers is “Be content!” After all, constant discontent does little more than depress and drive others away. So ... what’s the point? Be happy you’re fed, warm and watered (a lot better than a LOT of humanity), and light a candle rather than curse the darkness.

Yes, simplicity is good ... charity is good. Perhaps a good way to live is by the engineer’s version of the glass parable: Some people see the glass half empty, some see the glass half full; an engineer sees a glass twice as large as it need be. So maybe it’s not about content, but contentment; therefore, let us always be filled to the brim with what we have, and spill over to those who have not.

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[Jesus said:] Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)