
#2 – CONVERSATIONS



Dirck van Delen (1604/5-1671) – “Church Interior with the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican of Luke 18:9-14 (1653)”, in the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.¹

¹ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dirck_van_Delen_-_Church_Interior_with_the_Parable_of_the_Pharisee_and_the_Publican_\(Luke_18-9-14\)_-1981.63_-_Clark_Art_Institute.tiff](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dirck_van_Delen_-_Church_Interior_with_the_Parable_of_the_Pharisee_and_the_Publican_(Luke_18-9-14)_-1981.63_-_Clark_Art_Institute.tiff). *Grove Art Online* (Oxford): **Delen, Dirck (Christiaensz.) van** (b Heusden, nr 's Hertogenbosch, 1604–5; d Arnemuiden, May 16, 1671), Dutch painter. He also painted church interiors, for the earliest of which (e.g. 1627; St Petersburg, Hermitage) he used the print by Johannes van Londerseel after a painting by Hendrick Aerts (d Gdańsk, 1603) as a point of departure. Other sources for his gothicizing church architecture may have been the work of Antwerp architectural painters, although he did not adopt their rigid tunnel perspective. His style seems closer to that of church interiors by his contemporary Bartholomeus van Bassen. Certainly, some of van Bassen's works served as models

PAINTING

Luke 18:9-10 - ⁹He spoke the following parable to some people who prided themselves on being upright and despised everyone else, ¹⁰“Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. ² ... ¹³The tax collector stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”³

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**publican**” – **1.a.** - **c1175** – *Roman History*. A person who farms the public taxes; a tax-gatherer, esp. any of those in Judaea and Galilee in the New Testament period, who were generally regarded as traitorous and impious on account of their service of Rome and their extortion.

A couple things to notice in the painting. (1) Did you notice the shadows? See the one attached to the Pharisee and the one attached to the Publican/Tax Collector. So subtle! The shadows show us that the Pharisee *has turned himself away from the light*; the Publican *faces the light*. Eloquent; elegant. (2) It is essential for the self-impressed, because of their hollowness, successfully to secure and to maintain the (undivided) attention (the envy; the adulation, the fear, etc.) of others. We get the strong impression that the two other men (the one over there advancing from the right; the other peeking out from behind the pillar, over there in the background) are looking at the Pharisee, not at the Publican. The Pharisee pretends not to notice.

for the interior views that van Delen produced from 1628. The architecture in these is massive, more suited to the exterior of a building, with rooms covered by heavy coffered ceilings. The use of colour, too, is heavy, with many dull brownish tints.

² [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 18:9-10.

³ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 18:13.

CHAPTER 2 - ON TAKING A LOW VIEW OF ONESELF

1. As for knowledge, it comes natural to all of us to want it; but what can knowledge do for us, without the fear of God? Give me a plain, unpretentious farmhand, content to serve God; there is more to be made of him than of some conceited University professor who forgets that he has a soul to save, because he is so busy watching the stars. To know yourself – that means feeling your own worthlessness, losing all taste for human praise. If my knowledge embraced the whole of creation, what good would it do me in God's sight? It is by my actions that he will judge me.

2. Why not take a rest from this exaggerated craving for mere knowledge which only has the effect of distracting and deluding us? People are so fond of passing for learned men, and being congratulated on their wisdom – yes, but what a lot of knowledge there is that contributes nothing to our souls' welfare! And there can be no wisdom in spending yourself on pursuits which are not going to promote your chances of salvation. All the talk in the world won't satisfy the soul's needs; nothing but holiness of life will set your mind at rest, nothing but a good conscience will help you to face God unashamed.

3. The wider, the more exact your learning, the more severe will be your judgement, if it has not taught you to live holily. No art, no science should make a man proud of possessing it; such gifts are a terrifying responsibility. Meanwhile, however well satisfied you are with your own skill or intelligence, never forget how much there is that remains unknown to you. Let us have no airs of learning; own up to your ignorance; what is the use of crowing over some rival, when you can point to any number of Doctors and Masters who can beat you at your own game? If you want to learn an art worth knowing, you must set out to be unknown, and to count for nothing.

4. There is no lesson so profound or so useful as this lesson of self-knowledge and of self-contempt. Claim nothing for yourself, think of others kindly and with admiration;

⁴ **Ronald Knox (1888-1957)** -Throughout the first half of the 20th century, both as an Anglican and as a Roman Catholic, Ronald Knox was a well-known part of the English literary landscape. He was a favored preacher for occasions great and small; his articles on a host of topics found a place in the newspapers and monthly literary magazines; his voice was heard often on the BBC. Best known for his English translation of the Scriptures (the "Knox Bible"), he also wrote numerous works of apologetics and collections of sermons, retreat conferences, and lectures, as well as six detective novels. This translation was begun by Monsignor Ronald Knox but then completed (by the express wish of Knox himself) by Michael Oakley following Knox's death in 1957. It captures the "frill-lessness" and crisp candor of the original.

that is the height of wisdom, and its masterpiece. Never think yourself better than the next man, however glaring his faults, however grievous his offences; you are in good dispositions now, but how long will they last? Tell yourself, “We are frail, all of us, but none so frail as I”.

CONVERSATION

Point One

Someone mentioned to me recently that he finds that my essays are “loaded”, that they contain so much that it takes work to “understand everything”. (I do listen closely to and consider what I hear from my readers.) Perhaps I could make two points that I think may illuminate my method and assist my readers. These points will also assist a reader in learning how to read *The Imitation of Christ*.

First, I *want* my readers to have to work to understand. It is only when one must *reach* for understanding, to think and then to think again, that the Holy Spirit has a real chance to give him or her greater understanding. Only when one is pushed beyond his or her grasp does he or she become *teachable*. And we each must learn, and constantly re-learn, to accept with humility how small is our understanding. Second, I do not expect my readers to understand every point that I make. No. But if even *a single point* lays hold of my reader and begins its good work inside him or her, and he or she lets it work, then he or she has successfully read the essay.

Consider this analogy. If you walk into a great Catholic cathedral, then you quickly notice how crammed that space is with, well, with so much! There is the architecture itself, the paintings, the statues, the stained-glass windows, the shifting nature of the light, the Stations of the Cross, the carvings, the patterns on the floor, all the furniture and other objects placed up in the sanctuary, and especially the Crucifix. So much; too much! But the point is not for you coming into that space to “figure it all out”. No, you soon pay attention to one thing and focus on it. God meets you there.

St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, in the Second Annotation writes (in part): “For, a person ... *finds something* that makes the meaning a little clearer or brings it a little more home to him or her, whether this comes through his or her own reasoning, or because his or her intellect is enlightened by the divine Power. ... It is not **knowing much** [i.e. a lot of things or grasping every point in a text] *but catching on to one thing and relishing it interiorly*; this is what contents and satisfies the soul.”

Point Two

When the Gospels reference “the Pharisees”, it is referencing a distinct religious association of men (laypersons; not Priests) operating in the Judaism of Jesus’ time. But the Pharisees are merely one historical example of *a kind of person* who has appeared always and everywhere in human history. We call it *pharisaism*,⁵ which could more fairly be referenced as persons who have become distorted, or “bent” (a favorite expression of C.S. Lewis), by *Vainglory*, a particularly popular form of the capital sin of *Pride*. A vainglorious person becomes especially difficult to endure when he or she models a religious form of this blight.

The sin of *pride* is widely viewed as the “root of all the other sins” (Eccl 9:15). It is marked by a self-aggrandizement that clouds not only God’s sovereignty and others’ worth but also an appreciation of one’s true self. Distinct from healthy self-esteem and from a justifiable pride in one’s own God-given talents and achievements, the sin of pride often involves disregard or contempt for ideas and judgments other than one’s own. A chief aspect of pride is *vainglory*, which comprises the inordinate effort to show one’s own excellence and the insatiable need for approval.⁶

The author of *The Imitation of Christ* in this chapter is getting at this, exposing this competitiveness in us to appear smarter, better, more esteemed, more noticed, better looking, more worthy to be praised than others. The key words here are “*more ... than*”. A person caught in a “*more than ... less than*” world of his or her making will be pharisaical. Our author writes:

Why not take a rest from this exaggerated craving for mere knowledge which only has the effect of distracting and deluding us? People are so fond of passing for learned and being congratulated on their wisdom – yes, but what a lot of knowledge there is that contributes nothing to our souls’ welfare! ... Meanwhile, however well satisfied you are with your own skill or intelligence, never forget how much there is that remains unknown to you.

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* writes:

Now what you want to get clear is that Pride is essentially *competitive* – is competitive by its very nature – while the other vices are competitive only, so to

⁵ “**Pharisaism**” – I call it unfortunate that this character flaw, this powerful temptation of the evil spirit against our human nature, gets so famously associated with a historical group of Jewish men living in the time of Jesus. The point is not that group of men; they are only one example of what happens when vainglory damages personalities. The point is the mortal danger posed to human nature by the sin of Pride, and its pal, Vainglory, of which the Pharisees are just one, tiny historical example.

⁶ Michael Downey, in [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 249, specifically the article on “Capital Sins” by George P. Evans.

speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, but only out of having *more* of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others.

Point Three

Our author writes: "If you want to learn an art worth knowing, you must set out to be unknown, and to count for nothing."⁷ In our psychologized American culture, we so often talk about a person's need for "self-esteem" (as if it were a "right" owed us by others) and talk about our kids as "special". We are furious when we feel that we or they are being ignored or slighted. But we rarely address the far more powerful and penetrating significance of humility. To us Americans it seems just plain *wrong* to "think of ourselves as low" or to "count ourselves as nothing". After all, we Americans are notoriously convinced that we are exceptional.⁸ Our author insists: "There is no lesson so profound or so useful as this lesson of self-knowledge and of *self-contempt*."

Jeremiah 17 (NJB):

⁹ 'The heart is more devious than any other thing,
and is depraved; who can pierce its secrets?

¹⁰ I, Yahweh, search the heart,
test the motives,
to give each person what his conduct
and his actions deserve. ⁹

⁷ Professor Walter A. Elwell, in his article on the website of the C.S. Lewis Institute, writes: "The *Imitation of Christ* is a devotional work with a profound, yet simple, message. It calls us to look away from our self-sufficiency to God who is all-sufficient, then to look back with transformed vision to a world in need where service replaces self-seeking. God becomes central in our lives as we systematically bring ourselves into line with his sovereign control. **This will involve self-mortification, a ruthless honesty with ourselves, a determination to change, and plain, hard work.** When we have done this, we will be following the pattern of Jesus' earthly life in imitation of the God-man. Such is the essence of Thomas à Kempis's attitude toward the spiritual life."

⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**exceptional**" – a. – 1846 – Of the nature of or forming an exception; out of the ordinary course, unusual, special.

⁹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Je 17:9–10. There is a way that God, and godly people, can communicate a "hard" truth about you or me – as we see happening in this quote from Jeremiah 17. Less godly or just plain pharisaical people could say these biblical lines to us in a crushing way, leaving us embarrassed and devastated. But God, and the godly, can say these lines to us, and we feel *found out*, finally (!), and we are so grateful that we have been. They tell us the truth lovingly ... *and it frees us* from our elaborate scams built to help us hide from others and from ourselves what embarrasses us.

I recall what C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, in chapter 8, which he titles: "The Great Sin".

I now come to that part of Christian morals where they differ most sharply from all other morals. *There is one vice of which no person in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he or she sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself or herself of this vice. And at the same time, I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a person more unpopular, and no fault of which we are more unconscious in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.* The vice I am talking of is **Pride or Self-Conceit**: and the virtue opposite to it, in Christian morals, is called **Humility**. [my emphases]

The goal is not to speak of ourselves derogatorily¹⁰ (self-contemptuously) or to pretend to be humble (the famous example of Uriah Heep of *David Copperfield* [1850] by Charles Dickens), because both are sins against the truth of one's life. One is still in the trap of a "more than ... less than" world.

No. What an imitation of Jesus will get us, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, is a greater and more comprehensive attention to others, to the otherness of others. We will be freed from seeing people competitively (i.e., as a threat) and begin to perceive them *contemplatively*, loving their otherness, admiring what is best in them.

One of the most famous and incisive remarks ever made about humility came from C.S. Lewis. I think it likely that he formulated it from having read *The Imitation of Christ* ", about which book he wrote that he had read it "pretty nearly every day." He wrote: "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself; it means thinking of yourself less."

¹⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**derogatory**" - 2. - 1570 - Having the effect of lowering in honour or estimation; depreciatory, disparaging, disrespectful, lowering.