10 The Two Standards

Near the city of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is. He gets a variety of answers: Some say John the Baptist, others say one of the prophets of old has risen to life. He then asks the disciples who they think he is. Simon Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is a turning point in the gospels.

Jesus rejoices at Peter’s confession: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Flesh-and-blood humans don’t think like this. Only Jesus’ Father could have revealed to Peter that this carpenter, now itinerant teacher and healer, is the long-awaited savior. This encourages Jesus to take the group a step farther: “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” He will not be the conquering warrior-savior that people long for, and vote for, in every age. His role will be different. As the servant of Yahweh, he will confront evil with the naked weapon of truth—and suffer the terrible consequences.

That is too much for Peter. “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’” Apparently, Peter has not understood so well, after all. “Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’” Peter is thinking like flesh and blood, or worse. Jesus now turns to the disciples and lays things out clearly. Let there be no mistake, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Jesus will triumph, but not in the way flesh-and-blood thinking supposes. Those who want to share his victory will have to adopt his strategy and pay the price of hardship and rejection. But preparing the disciples includes encouraging them. Peter, James, and John are at least starting to understand. So a few days after this poor showing, Jesus takes them up a mountain where they see his glory. This will strengthen them for what lies ahead.1

At the beginning, the disciples accepted Jesus’ challenge to change and believe the good news. They have noble intentions, but common-sense thinking still plagues them. Their minds are not yet transformed (metanoia: a new mentality [Mark 1:15]).

Like the disciples, we want our lives to count. We hope that years from now we will be able look back and say we spent our time well. Will we follow through? It will be a bumpy ride. Many stall out along the way, or even reverse direction. Every recovering alcoholic knows how easy it is to fall off the wagon. Generosity does not come naturally. Unless we are vigilant, love can turn into its opposite before we notice. The flame flickers, the coals grow cold. Think of all those televangelists, politicians, prelates, community activists, revolutionaries—whole religious communities and social organizations—that started out with the best of intentions but ended up living on faded exploits or mired in scandal.

The prospect of dropping out, burning out, or just petering out obliges us to ask ourselves how we can sustain commitment and avoid pitfalls on the road ahead. For good intentions to bear fruit, we need interior knowledge of flesh-and-blood thinking and how to overcome it. That is the objective of what is arguably Ignatius’s most insightful contribution to our understanding of reality, the meditation on Two Standards [136–47]. It is the central meditation of the Spiritual Exercises.2

THE MEDITATION ON TWO STANDARDS

This meditation draws back the veil on the central drama of history, the struggle between good and evil. Christ leads the forces of light under his standard (in the old sense of the standard, or flag, that a king would use to lead his army in battle), and the enemy leads the forces of darkness. “Christ calls and desires all persons to come under
his standard, and...Lucifer in opposition calls them under his” [137]. We live and move within opposing force fields. The powers of egotism pull us backward to slavery unto death, while the divine Spirit draws us forward to freedom and life.

The imagery of the Two Standards calls to mind contemporary fantasies like Star Trek and The Lord of the Rings, but it clashes with modern sensibilities. While secular society scoffs at transcendent powers, hyper-tolerant liberalism supposes that we can be for life without being against death. By contrast, in the strange apocalyptic vision of the New Testament (and of the Two Standards), Jesus and the Reign of God clash in mortal combat with the prince of this world and his demons. The standards in Ignatius’s meditation are the banners that rally the forces of good and evil. They symbolize the strategies of Christ and Satan.

Flesh-and-blood humans easily miss how the great struggle plays out in real life. It would be simpler if “good guys” in white hats faced off against “bad guys” in black hats. But matters are not so simple. The enemy has sown weeds throughout the wheat field of the world, weeds that look like wheat. Every person, action, and institution, every real-world project is morally ambiguous and prone to corruption. Crusades and witch hunts, past and present, al Qaeda, cult suicides, and all the evil done in the name of good bear eloquent witness to how good things can turn demonic.

In this meditation our goal (Ignatius’s “what I want”) is to learn the deceptions of the enemy and learn effective countermeasures to use against them. I “ask for knowledge of the deceptions of the evil chief and help to guard myself from them, and knowledge of the true life shown by our supreme and true captain, and grace to imitate him” [139]. What are the two opposing strategies?

First, the enemy “summons innumerable demons...scatters them...throughout the whole world...[and] admonishes them to set up snares and chains” [141-42]. The enemy works everywhere, laying traps. Christ, on the other hand, “chooses so many persons, apostles, disciples, etc., and sends them throughout the whole world, spreading his sacred doctrine among...all people” [145]. It sounds like guerrilla warfare or spy vs. spy!

THE APOCALYPTIC VISION

Apocalyptic writing arose in Jewish circles just before and after the time of Christ. The books of Daniel and Revelation and the thirteenth chapter of Mark are classic examples. Apocalyptic visionaries wrote to keep hope alive among the faithful who were suffering persecution. They used exotic imagery (monstrous enemies, supernatural heroes like the “Son of Man”) to convey the transcendent meaning of current events. In apocalyptic thinking, God has a design for history as a whole, and our own struggles are part of a cosmic drama in which legions of good and evil spirits clash. Nothing less than the outcome of history is at stake. When the time comes, God will triumph and bring about a new world of justice and peace. In the meantime, the faithful need to decipher how the forces of death and the forces of life are at work in daily events. With this mythical apparatus, apocalyptic thought provided the first framework ever for understanding history as a whole.

Jesus rejected several apocalyptic ideas, however: for example, that God would destroy public sinners and gentile enemies, and that we can come to know the precise time and manner of God’s decisive intervention (see Mark 2:17 and 13:32). Four centuries later, Augustine of Hippo recast the apocalyptic vision in his City of God. Eleven hundred years after him, Ignatius reappropriated it in the Two Standards. The apocalyptic perspective has a lot to teach us about reality. We need not take the symbols literally in order to take the essential message seriously.

Satan directs his agents “first, to tempt people to covet riches, as he [the enemy] is accustomed to tempt them in most cases, in order that they may more easily come to the vain honor of the world, and then to swollen pride. In this way, the first step is riches, the second honor,
the third pride, and from these three steps the enemy leads them to all the other vices” [142].

The strategy is to lead people first to desire riches. Honors follow. But Satan’s real objective is “swollen pride.” From there, he leads to “all the other vices.”

In parallel fashion, Christ charges his collaborators “to seek to help everyone by attracting them, first, to the highest spiritual poverty, and if the divine majesty would be served and wishes to choose them, even to actual poverty; second, to desire insults and contempt because from these two things humility follows. So there will be three steps: first, poverty as opposed to riches; second, insults and contempt as opposed to worldly honor; third, humility as opposed to pride; so that from these three steps they might lead them to all the other virtues” [146].

Christ counterproposes the way of poverty, insults, and humility—and from there to all other virtues. This is the way of Christ as presented in the gospels, the way of humble service leading to the cross. In this meditation, Jesus’ followers face the questions he faced when he was tempted in the desert at the beginning of his ministry (Matt. 4:1–11). Would he seek to win people over by offering them bread alone or by ostentatious wonders or by pursuing power as a warrior-Messiah? Or would he empty himself as the servant of all in obedience unto death (Matt. 20:28; Phil. 2:8–9)?

In the Two Standards, we reflect on the contradiction between following him and coveting wealth, with its prestige and power. That would invite Jesus’ rebuke of Peter: “Get behind me, Satan!” Can we recognize the way of the cross as the road to life?

RICHES, HONORS, PRIDE;
POVERTY, REJECTION, HUMILITY

Ignatius, the practical genius, is sharing what he knows about how commitments unravel, and how they mature. Avarice, honors, and pride pave the typical road to ruin, while poverty, rejection, and humility lead to perseverance and abundant fruit. Let us look more closely.

As a rule (ut in pluribus, Ignatius says), the enemy first entices to riches. Greed as the first step to moral decline? Would you have said sex instead? Sex, too, can be a “dangerous good.” But, unlike many a Christian moralist, the Bible considers wealth far more dangerous.

“Riches” here means material wealth. “Covetousness” does not mean “disordered desire” for anything whatsoever, such as a long life, health, honor, one’s career, and so on (as in the Foundation [23]). Nor is it a generic option for the creature over the Creator. The issue is Mammon, the one idol Jesus mentions in the gospels. “The love of money,” says Paul, “is the root of all evils” (1 Tim. 6:10). The first step for undermining commitment—or the first obstacle to its deepening—is coveting possessions.

Wealth brings “honors” even without seeking them. Nothing wrong with wealth or recognition, right? Right. These are good things that can serve the cause. (“Think of what I could do for the poor with a billion dollars!”) The point, though, is that the creeping desire for them ensnares us and leads to pride. When pride takes over, the battle is lost.

“Pride” here does not mean healthy self-esteem. Nor is it the generic refusal of the creature to submit to the Creator, that pride (like Adam and Eve’s) which Christian theology traditionally considers the basis of all sin. Ignatius is thinking concretely. “Swollen pride” (crescita soberbia) refers to arrogance, contempt, selfish ambition, will to power. That is how hubris before God plays out in daily life. By bestowing honors on us, society says we are important. “Pride” means believing not just that we are important (we are, after all), but that we are more important than others. Once we catch this disease, we are on the slippery slope to “all other vices” [142].

In short, while the enemy sometimes tempts by other means, the usual strategy (ut in pluribus) is to lead to arrogant pride by way of material wealth and prestige. Following commonsense, flesh-and-blood thinking, well-intentioned people pursue this strategy today and end up failing to produce the good they might. Read the newspaper, look around; see if it isn’t so. Recall those televangelists, politicians, prelates, activists, communities, and movements that began well but ended up grasping, arrogant, and run amok.
Just recognizing this dynamic doesn’t protect us against it. Socrates, Gnostics, and moderns to the contrary, liberation requires more than awareness. On the moral battlefield, we must counterattack in practice. Christ “attracts” followers (he does not browbeat them) to a counterpraxis. Instead of wealth, he proposes, first, “the highest spiritual poverty” to all and “actual poverty” to some (Mark 10:17–31; Luke 14:33; etc.). “Highest spiritual poverty” means interior detachment from material riches and therefore a readiness for material want (“actual poverty”), should God choose us for that. Not everyone is called to share the same degree of material poverty or to work among the poorest. Solidarity with the poor is an objective criterion for our lifestyle, but the particulars depend on our callings.

Second, Christ invites his followers to desire “insults and contempt” rather than “honors” — but, again, only if this better serves God’s purpose. We should understand this in the spirit of persecution endured for the “Kingdom” and freedom to endure rejection.

Poverty and persecution are neither desirable in themselves nor infallible means to serve God and neighbor. We could be called to serve in a prestigious job that involves exercising power. But that is not the ordinary way of the Spirit, and we have to be free to embrace the poverty and contempt which following Christ normally entails.

Freedom for poverty and persecution leads, lastly, to humility, the chief weapon against the enemy. From there the Spirit leads to “all other virtues.” Again, humility here is not a generic subordination to the Creator, grounding all other virtues. While it includes submission to God, humility means recognizing that I have no greater dignity than anybody else, including the drunk down the street. So I demand no privileges. Humility means identifying with those whom the world deems unimportant. It means solidarity.

Poverty vs. riches, contempt vs. honors, and humility vs. pride are more than private matters between God and me. Poverty vs. riches is a matter of my relationship with the poor. Honors vs. contempt is a question of social status: With whom do I stand? With those whom society honors or with those it holds in contempt? Pride is contempt for others; humility means identifying with the outcast.

Just as the way of the world is individualistic upward mobility, the way of Christ is downward mobility leading to solidarity. Upward mobility undermines commitment; downward mobility deepens it, to bear fruit over the long haul.

TO WALK WITH HIM: THE TRIPLE COLLOQUY

The Two Standards meditation begins the preparation for the election, or choice, which caps the Second Week of the Exercises and is the climax of the retreat. Ignatius has in mind the choice of a way of life or major life reform in response to Christ’s call.

Christ calls everyone to humility via “the highest spiritual poverty” (freedom to share and give away possessions); some, not all, are called to actual material poverty. However, since fear of poverty and rejection can prevent us from hearing and responding, the Two Standards closes with a solemn “triple colloquy,” a conversation — first with Mary, then with Jesus, then with the Father — in which we beg to be chosen to walk with Christ in poverty and rejection. I ask

that I may be received under [Christ’s] standard, first, in the most perfect spiritual poverty and also, if… [God] should choose me for it, to no less a degree of actual poverty; and second, in bearing reproaches and insults, that through them I might imitate him more. [147]

We can gauge the importance of this petition from the fact that it is repeated three times in each of the five daily exercises for the rest of the Second Week, that is, from Day Four to as much as Day Twelve!

The triple colloquy helps break down our resistance to poverty and rejection. Its deeper motivation, however, is love. While no sane person would embrace hardship and contempt for themselves, those who have fallen in love with Christ and the poor may well choose to share their poverty and the contempt they receive, out of solidarity.

Some commentators propose a “richer” reading of the Two Standards. They believe “riches” and “honors” can have a wider, nonliteral
THREE TYPES OF PERSONS

The meditation on “Three Types of Persons” [149–56] follows the Two Standards meditation on the same day of the retreat and sharply focuses the issue of riches vs. poverty. The three “types” are really three groups (probably pairs, binarios in Spanish) of entrepreneurs, each of whom has acquired the fabulous sum of ten thousand ducats. Although they have not acquired the money dishonestly (which would oblige them to renounce it), neither did they acquire it with the purest of motives. Now they realize that they are unduly attached to their wealth and that this is an impediment to discovering and doing God’s will. Troubled in conscience, they want to free themselves of their attachment to the wealth [cf. 150, 153–55]. What should they do?

The parable presents the three ways people typically respond in such a situation. The first group wants to “clean up their act,” but they never get around to it. They procrastinate and die before taking effective action [153]. The second group goes farther. They, too, want to overcome their excessive attachment to the money. They are even willing to take practical steps. But they cling to one nonnegotiable condition: they will take measures as long as they do not actually have to give up the money [154]. They want to “make a deal” with God, like the employer who contributes to the church rather than pay his workers a living wage. Only the third group goes to the heart of the matter. Not that they simply give the money away. It is not completely clear that they should do that. But they will not know what they should do until they get free internally to hear God’s call and respond to it. Therefore, the third group strives for indifference to the wealth they possess. That is the key lesson of the parable of the Three Types. Those in the third group place their wealth in psychological escrow. They place themselves in God’s hands and strive to conduct themselves with this wealth with complete interior freedom. Then they discern what they should do with this money to bring about the greatest overall good.

What does it mean to strive for indifference, to neither desire nor repudiate the wealth out of hand [155]? The answer is given implicitly in the colloquy of the Two Standards meditation, just discussed here, which is repeated for the Three Types [156]. It is given explicitly in a note appended to the Three Types, which reads: “When we feel an inclination or a repugnance against actual poverty, when we are not indifferent to poverty or riches, it is very profitable… to ask… that the Lord choose [us] for actual poverty and to desire, ask and beg for this, only provided it be for the service and praise of the divine goodness.” [157]

The parable of the Three Types is not about indifference in general (as many commentators say) but specifically the freedom to give up riches. Ignatius’s note says that begging for actual poverty is a great help toward this freedom. (This, by the way, confirms that the meaning of “riches” in the enemy standard is material wealth.)

application: “In the wider sense, riches and honour can be anything at all that meets the inherent human need for identity, security, esteem, love.” That is, “riches” could be anything that I might cling to unduly, like my time or my friends. Similarly, “actual poverty,” “humiliation,” and “contempt” “are to be understood in an extended as well as in a literal sense.”

I cannot agree. All these words can have a wider meaning, but not in this crucial meditation. The meaning of “riches, honors, and
pride” and “poverty, insults, and humility” determines what it means to be received under the standard of Christ, or to “be placed with the Son.” This is the heart of Ignatian spirituality. My insistence on the concrete (and social) meaning of the key terms in the Two Standards is not motivated by “Ignatian fundamentalism,” however. The point is rather that Ignatius is faithfully and creatively communicating the gospel message, the good news, for today. To be placed with the Son is to be placed where he said he would be found: among the hungry, the naked, the sick, and imprisoned (Matt. 25:31–46). It is to opt for the poor. Only in this way will “thy Kingdom come,” the Kingdom of life in abundance, new social relations, with no more poverty, hunger, or tears (cf. Luke 6:20–26).

I believe there is a sound intuition behind commentators’ desire to expand the key concepts of the Two Standards, namely, the recognition that we should not apply the two strategies universally and uncritically. Covetousness, prestige, and arrogance really do make the world go around; they are what sabotage commitment. But are they the chief temptations of everybody, without exception? Of the downtrodden as well as the powerful? Shall we propose poverty and contempt to poor and abused people? Humility and obedience have long been used to keep second-class citizens “in their place.” Feminists argue that arrogant pride is more the capital vice of men than of women and other victims. Some believe that acedia, or excessive timidity (“sloth”), is more often the capital vice of women and other oppressed groups, and prescribe self-esteem and assertiveness as its antidotes.

Ignatius, too, recognized that different temptations beset people who are prone to self-doubt. We will revisit these important themes later.

In any case, the message of the Two Standards has lost none of its relevance for today. Covetousness plays a central role in consumer society. The “pride” of the Two Standards is precisely “patriarchal” arrogance, contempt, and ambition. Riches-honors-pride does describe how our patriarchal capitalist world operates. The enemy strategy translates into the individualistic upward mobility which traps so many of our contemporaries, women and men alike, social losers as well as winners.

The Two Standards speaks to our society, and to my middle-class “tribe,” in particular. While the gospels say a great deal about rich and poor, which were the most important social classes in Jesus’ day, they say little directly about those in between. The Two Standards’ inspired interpretation of the gospel message throws a bright light over the rocky moral terrain of today’s large middle classes. It reveals the ambiguity and danger of their situation and offers a solution: Christ calls us to humility and solidarity via a double freedom, the readiness to renounce everything, and even to embrace material poverty, and freedom from the fear of rejection to which members of the lonely middle-class crowd are so vulnerable.

**CONCLUSION**

The Two Standards meditation outlines two strategies which are not just for individuals. As the apocalyptic imagery suggests, it refers to social projects. Satan is enthroned in Babylon, “a world constructed from sin and by sin” (cf. Rev. 18:2, 9–17). Christ occupies the region around Jerusalem, “the holy city…God’s dwelling among humans” (Rev. 21:2–3) [cf. 138]. In the Book of Revelation “Babylon” is code for the Roman Empire, which resists God’s project, and Jerusalem stands for God’s Reign. Just as Revelation depicts the Babylon project and the Reign of God for the first-century Mediterranean world, we need to do the same for our own. What do the Babylon project and the Jerusalem project look like today?