

Playing by the Rules, Part 2 of 2

It happens to me over and over; I think that the other person and I are on the same frequency, and then I discover that we aren't. I had just reached that point in my conversation with Mark. We had been talking about abstinence.

"Are you telling me now that you don't know the great and beautiful thing for the sake of which we have all these complex and difficult rules?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," he answered.

"You don't know what abstinence is *for*?"

"No!"

"But you must have heard of chastity."

You know how someone looks when he's trying not to laugh. Mark looked that way now. The corners of his mouth quivered with the strain of not twisting upwards. When he tried to speak, only little panting sounds came out. The effect was so comical that I smiled myself.

"You might as well let it out," I told him. Of course as soon as he knew it was all right to laugh, he got himself under control.

He said, "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

I snorted.

"All right, I do," he admitted. "Nobody on campus uses the word 'chastity,' except maybe as a gag. For a second, all I could think of was the title of that movie, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. That's when I lost it."

Something like his grave look returned. "Prof, I don't *really* think 40-year-old virgins are ridiculous. Why did I laugh?"

"Why do you think you laughed?"

"Maybe the pop culture messages have more influence on me than I think."

"Maybe," I said. "On the other hand, maybe there really is something ridiculous about the way you think of chastity."

"How could that be, when I don't know what it is?"

"Do you really *not know*, Mark?"

"Well, I thought it meant the same thing as abstinence, but you seem to think it's something -- nobler. Like chastity is the end and abstinence is just the means."

"That's exactly what I do think."

"Could you draw me a picture?"

"How about if I draw you three pictures?"

He looked at me quizzically. "I didn't mean it literally, Prof."

I laughed. "Neither do I. I mean word pictures. Are you ready?"

"Go ahead. You might as well. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"First picture. A muddy road stretches out toward the eastern horizon. Three figures stand on the road. One is a man; the next is a shaggy-eared donkey; the third is a scrawny wildcat. In his left hand, the man is holding the donkey's reins, though he doesn't know what to do with them. In his right, he's holding a whip. Are you with me so far?"

"This reminds me of something I've read before."

"That's not surprising; people have been telling and retelling these pictures for centuries. The earliest versions go back even before Christian times. But let me finish. The donkey is always demanding, 'You had better feed me,' and whenever he speaks, the man obeys. All along the roadside he walks in search of things for the donkey to eat. If anyone asks him what he's doing, he says 'I'm pursuing my happiness.'"

"You said the three figures are on a road. Are they going someplace?"

"It hasn't occurred to the man that there might be someplace to go. Besides, it's nighttime, and the road is hard to see. But there's more. Every now and then, the man thinks it might be more dignified to ride in the saddle, but whenever he tries to climb up, the donkey bolts, and drags him around by the reins. Then the wildcat bites the man and cries, 'Do as the donkey says.' Sometimes the man strikes back at them with his whip. Then the donkey sits down and the wildcat cringes, cowed but not tamed, eyes flaming with anger. Can you tell what the picture is about?"

"Not yet. Draw the second one."

"Very well. In this picture the man has some control over the animals, but his control is uncertain because the animals are also more powerful. The donkey has turned into a big, brawny mule, and the wildcat has turned into a starving leopard. This time the man is seated on the mule's back. Although he is trying to direct it down the King's Highway, they aren't making good time. Sometimes the mule turns aside into the pasture, or even gallops down the road the wrong way. The man uses the whip and reins, but the mule hates being checked; it twists its head around on its neck, shows its teeth, and says to the man, 'You had better fear me.' Whenever it does that, the leopard snarls and punishes the mule by sinking its teeth into its flank; then the mule reverts into sullen obedience. But the leopard is always giving the man dark looks and muttering, 'I don't know why I should help *him* out.' If anyone asks the man what he's doing, he says 'I'm trying to be good.'"

"Is it still nighttime?"

"No, the sun has risen. That's why the man can see the road. But he's ashamed to be seen, because he feels he looks ridiculous, and much of the time, he does. Do you understand now?"

"I'm beginning to. Draw picture three."

"Now the man is clad in knight's armor. He's laughing and singing fighting songs. The mule has turned into a white stallion, and the leopard has turned into a great, tawny lion. The lion comes up to his knee, purring, and says 'Command me!' The stallion says, 'Let me run! Tell me where I may carry you!' Reins and whip are no longer needed, because now the man guides the stallion with his knees and a few quiet words. In place of the whip, he carries a sword, in case they meet enemies on the road. Going at a steady canter, the three of them head down the road straight toward the sun. It's so bright that it ought to hurt their eyes, so blazing that it ought to burn them, but instead it gets inside them like molten gold. If anyone asks them where they're going, they answer only 'Joy.'"

Mark snapped his fingers.

"So you've finally figured it out, have you?"

"Partly," said Mark. "Where I went wrong was in thinking that the man represented the soul. The soul is actually all three of them *together*, isn't it?"

"If you've figured out that much, tell me more."

"The man -- that must be my power of directing myself. My mind. My understanding."

"Right so far."

"The donkey, the mule, and the stallion are different images of my desires. In the first picture they jerk me around. That's the donkey. In the third picture they've become servants instead of masters. That's the stallion. In the second picture I have them more or less under control, but they aren't happy about it. That's the mule. Why is the mule brawnier than the donkey?"

"Because at first, when you deny your desires, they just become stronger and more sullen. Haven't you read your St. Paul?¹ But keep going."

"The wildcat, the leopard, and the lion -- I'm not so sure about them, but are they different images of my emotions? I mean, like shame and anger?"

"Right again. Do you understand why the wildcat sides with the donkey, *against* the man, but the leopard reluctantly sides against the mule, *for* the man?"

"I think so. The man who just follows his desires -- he's ashamed and angry when he *does* exercise self-control. He thinks he's been stupid and missed an opportunity. All that anger and shame are biting at his understanding, telling it what a sucker it is and how it should have obeyed his desires. Right? But the man who tries to govern his desires -- *he's* ashamed and angry when he *doesn't* exercise self-control. He thinks he's been base and defiled himself. All that anger and shame are biting at his desires, telling them to shape up."

"You're doing great. Keep going. How about the sunlight?"

"That must be the light of Christ, right? The grace of God? At first you don't have it at all. Then it makes you ashamed. But if you keep on following it, then it fills you."

"So my three pictures are really pictures of what?"

"Of three different conditions of the soul. But Prof, wait. This was supposed to tell me about chastity."

"Doesn't it?"

"Does it?"

"Let me put it this way," I said. "Which of the three conditions of the soul would *you* call chastity? The first one?"

"Certainly not."

"The second one?"

He hesitated. "That's what I *would* have called chastity. I mean, before we had this conversation. Now I see that the second picture is more like the soul's first efforts at chastity. And you're right, Professor T. They do look pretty ridiculous."

"Never forget the other side, Mark. There is something lofty about those efforts too. The sensual man sees efforts toward chastity as ridiculous, because he sees only the second picture -- all those beginners, struggling not to fall off their mounts. But he can't see himself. And it's noble to try to learn to ride."

"So chastity is the *third* picture," Mark said. He thought for a moment. "But *I'm* still in the second one. Do you know what I mean? I'm abstinent -- so I thought I'm chaste -- but I'm not chaste. I'm not like that knight on the stallion with a lion purring at his knee. I'm sitting on a mule, clenching the reins for dear life."

"So now do you see the great and beautiful thing that all those complex and difficult rules are for?"

"For removing obstacles. Obstacles in my desires and my emotions."

"Obstacles to what?"

He smiled. "To riding straight into God and becoming like molten gold. And -- to letting Molly do the same thing."

I said, "I think you're getting the idea."

Notes

1. "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead." (Romans 7:7-8, RSV.)
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