

Thomas More Reader: Essays on Manners and Morality (modernized selections)

67. “The Rich Man and the Beggars”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Vincent: That will be very hard, Uncle, for them to do, when they see themselves richly clothed and the beggar rigged in rags.

Anthony: Suppose, Nephew, that here are two men, both of whom are beggars, and a great rich man calls one of them over and invites him to stay for a little while at his house, where he will clothe him in silk and give him a huge bag filled to the brim with gold. There is, though, this one catch: that within a little while, out he will go in his old rags again, taking not a penny with him. Well, if this beggar should happen to meet his fellow beggar while he has his silken finery on, might he not for all that finery still take this other man for his equal? And would he not be a complete fool if, for a wealth of a few weeks’ duration, he were to consider himself by far his better?

Vincent: Yes, Uncle, if there was no other difference between them.

Anthony: Actually, Nephew, I think that in this world, the difference between the richest and the poorest is not even that much. Let the highest look upon the lowest and consider how poor they both came into this world. And then let them consider the fact that however rich they are now, they nevertheless will within a while—perhaps less than one week—walk out again as poor as that beggar will. And then, quite literally, I will consider this rich person much worse than crazy if, for a wealth of a short duration (perhaps less than one week), they seriously think they are any better than that beggar’s companion. No one who has any common sense and knows how to use it can possibly disagree with this.

68. “The Rich and the Poor”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

But, Nephew, there have to be people with wealth, because otherwise you’ll have, by God, more beggars than there already are, and no one left able to relieve anyone else. For in my mind I feel quite certain of this: that if tomorrow all the money in this country were brought together out of everyone’s hands and laid all in one heap, and then divided out equally to everyone, things would be worse on the day after that than they were on the day before. For I suppose that when it was all equally divided among all, the one who had been doing the best would be left little better off than the average beggar is now. Whoever was a beggar before would be so little enriched by what he received that he would still not be much more than a beggar. Many a rich person, on the other hand, if his riches consisted only of movable assets, would be safe enough from riches for perhaps the rest of his life.

People cannot, as you well know, live here in this world unless some individuals provide for many others a means of making a living. Not everyone can have a ship of his own; nor can everyone be a merchant without a stock. Not everyone can have his own plough. But such things, as you well know, must be had by somebody. And who could make a living as a tailor if no one could put in an order to have a garment made? Or as a construction worker, or a carpenter, if no one could finance the building of either a church or a house? Who would be the makers of any kind of cloth if there were no one with the capital needed to put different groups of people to work? A man with only two ducats to his name would most likely be better off if he gave them both away and left himself not a penny, if he lost absolutely everything he had, than if the rich man who puts him to work every week were to lose half of his money; for then the poor man would probably be out of work. The substance of the rich is, indeed, the wellspring of the livelihood of the poor. And so it would go with this poor man as it did with the woman in one of Aesop's fables. She had a hen that laid her a golden egg every day. But one day she decided she'd rather have a great many eggs at once, so she killed her hen-and found only one or two eggs inside her. Thus for a few she lost many.

73. "Lechery"

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

God may see, for example, that worldly prosperity is coming too quickly to a certain man-a man who is still good. Foreseeing how much weight of worldly well-being the man will be able to bear, and how much would overburden him and puff up his heart so high that grace would fall way down from him, God in his goodness, I say, anticipates his fall and sends him a tribulation before it is too late, while he is still good, to make him know his Maker. By causing him to like less the false, flattering world, God moves him to set a cross upon the ship of his heart and to fit that ship with a low sail, so that no boisterous blast of pride can blow him under the water.

Or say there's some lovely young lady who is still good enough, but God sees a storm coming toward her that would, if her health and rich diet were to continue a little longer, catapult her into some lecherous love and, instead of her old-acquainted knight, lay her in bed with a new-acquainted knave. God, loving her too tenderly to allow her to fall into such a shameful, beastly sin, sends her at just the right time a splendid, fine, burning fever that makes her bones rattle and wastes away her wanton flesh and beauties her fair skin with the yellowish color of the kite's claw. It makes her look so lovely that her lover will not be lusting to look upon her. At the same time, it makes her so lusty that if her lover lay in her lap, she would have such an overwhelming urge to bring forth to him everything inside her that, unable to keep it back from him, she would suddenly lay it all on his neck!

75. "Scrupulous Conscience"

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Faintheartedness brings forth, by the terror of the night, a very fearful daughter, a silly, wretched girl that is always whining: namely, that which is called scrupulosity, or a scrupulous conscience. This girl is a good enough household servant, never idle, always occupied and busy. But although she has a very gentle mistress who loves her dearly and is well content with what she does—or, if all is not well (for all cannot always be well), is always ready to pardon her, as she does her other servants and thus lets her know she will do for her as well—this foolish girl yet never stops whining and whimpering for fear that her mistress is angry with her, and that she will get a harsh punishment. Do you think the mistress is likely to be content with this situation? Surely not!

I myself once knew such a girl. Her mistress was a very wise woman, and (which in women is very rare) also very meek and mild, and she was quite pleased with the service this girl did her in her house. But she so disliked that continual disconcerting demeanor of hers that she would sometimes say, “Oh, what is the matter with this girl? The troublesome child thinks, I do believe, that I’m some kind of devil. Surely if she did me ten times better service than she does, but with this same absurd fear of hers, I would be most unhappy to have her in my house!”

76. “Pride”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Vincent: Indeed, Uncle, so you have! But we haven’t slept through it—we’ve been very well occupied. I fear, though, that unless you take a break now for lunch, you will go too long without eating.

Anthony: No, no, Nephew. I finished my breakfast just as you were coming in. And, too, you will find that this night and this day we are talking about are like a winter’s night and a winter’s day. The winter, you know, has long nights and short days. And so you will find that as long as I made this fearful night for you, so short shall I make for you this sunny, courage-inspiring day.

Indeed, the matter itself calls for such treatment. For by those words of the psalmist, “the arrow that flies by day,” I understand the arrow of pride. This is something with which the devil tempts a person not during the nighttime of tribulation and adversity, for that time is too disheartening and too fearful for pride, but in the daytime of prosperity, for that time is full of lighthearted vigor and confidence. But surely this worldly prosperity in which one so rejoices, and of which the devil makes one so proud, is very short even for a winter’s day. For we begin, many of us, poor and cold as can be, and then up we fly like arrows shot straight up into the air. Suddenly we are shot up into the highest, sunniest realms. But before we can get good and warm there, down we come again to the cold ground, and there we get stuck. And yet for the short while that we’re up on high, Lord, how exhilarated and proud we are! We busily buzz up there like the bumblebee that flies around in the summer with no idea she will die in the winter. So fare many of us, God help us. For in the short winter’s day of worldly wealth and prosperity, this flying arrow from the devil—this high-flying spirit of pride, shot out of the devil’s bow and piercing the heart all the way through—lifts us up, in our estimation, into the clouds. Thinking we sit on the rainbow, we look down on the world beneath us. Those other poor souls who used to be, perhaps, our friends,

we now regard as pitiful little bugs and ants in comparison to our own glorious selves.

But no matter how high in the clouds this arrow of pride may fly, and no matter how exuberant we may feel while being carried up so high, let us remember that the lightest of these arrows still has a heavy iron head. High as it may fly, therefore, it inevitably has to come down and hit the ground. And sometimes it lands in a not very clean place. The pride turns into shame and disgrace, and then gone is all that glory.

77. “The Physician who Cures all but Himself”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Those stuck in the troublesome fear of their own scrupulous conscience should, I say, submit the rule of their own conscience to the counsel of some good man who can temper his advice according to the variety and nature of the scruples. Though the scrupulous might themselves be very knowledgeable, let them in this instance adopt the practice that is customary among doctors. For even the most knowledgeable of doctors will not, when they themselves are sick or injured, put all their trust in themselves. They will, instead, send for colleagues they know to be well qualified, and they will put themselves in their hands, for several reasons. One of these is fear: they know that in their own pain and anxiety they may greatly exaggerate or completely mistake the import of certain symptoms, and that for the good of one’s health it is sometimes better not to know any of the medical facts.

In this very town, I once knew a man who was one of the most knowledgeable, expert, and famous doctors in his field. He accomplished some of the greatest cures for other people. But one time when he himself got seriously sick, I heard those colleagues of his who were then taking care of him—every one of whom would, in an illness of their own, have sought help from him before anyone else—I heard those same colleagues say that for the duration of his own illness, it being such a serious one, they wished he had known nothing at all about medicine. For he paid such great attention to every possible symptom, and so greatly feared the worst, that his fear sometimes did him much more harm than did the illness itself.

78. “Sickness and God (Our Chief Jailer)”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

And thus, as long as God, our king and our chief jailer too, tolerates us and leaves us alone, we think ourselves at liberty, and we abhor the situation of those whom we call prisoners, taking ourselves for no prisoners at all. We acquire a false sense of well-being and forget the wretched situation we are actually in, which is but a wandering about for a while in the prison of this world till we are brought to our execution, our death. In our foolishness we forget both ourselves and our jail, we forget our underjailers (both angels and devils), and we forget even our chief jailer, God himself.

God, on the other hand, never forgets us. All the while, he can see us well enough. And because he is extremely discontent to see such bad rule kept in the jail, he sometimes sends the hangman death to put to execution, here and there, thousands at a time. But he also gives many others, many of those whose execution he is putting off for a time, just as severe a punishment and as harsh a handling in this common prison of the world as anyone is given in one of those particular prisons that strike your heart with such horror and loathing because of the terrible ways, you say, that people are treated in them.

Vincent: Most of what you say, I will not dispute, since I think I see it as really so. But that God, our chief jailer in this world, uses any prison-like form of punishment—that point I must deny. For I never see him put people in the stocks, or fasten fetters on their legs, or so much as lock them up in a cell.

Anthony: Is no one a musician, Nephew, who does not play the harp? Does no one make a melody who does not play it on a lute? One can, as you well know, be a musician and make melodies with some other instrument—some curiously constructed instrument, perhaps, that has never been seen before.

God, our chief jailer, being invisible himself, uses for his punishments invisible instruments. Now, in that respect, to be sure, they are unlike the instruments used by other jailers. However, they are very similar both in effect and in how painful they feel. For with a hot fever he puts some of his own prisoners as ill at ease in their warm beds as the other jailer puts his on the cold ground. He squeezes their foreheads with a migraine; he collars them by the neck with a sore throat; he straps down their arms with such a paralysis that they cannot lift the hands to the head; he manacles their hands with the gout in their fingers; he squeezes their legs with cramps in their calves; he binds them to the bed board with the crick in their back. He lays some there at full length and as unable to rise as though they were fastened by the feet in the stocks.

Some prisoner in the other kind of jail sings and dances with both feet in fetters, and has no fear of bumping into a stone, while God's prisoner with just the one foot fettered with the gout lies groaning on a couch and trembles and cries out for fear that a pillow may fall on that foot.

So as I say, Nephew, if we really think about it we will find this general prison of this whole earth a place in which people are handled just as harshly as they are in the other kind of prison. And, conversely, we will find in those other prisons some people who are just as happy as are many inmates of this one who are so happy to be outside of those.

79. “God, Our Great Physician”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

But though the philosophers are far from being able to cure our disease by themselves, and therefore are not qualified to be taken as our physicians, they nevertheless do have some good drugs in their shops. They may therefore be allowed to operate as pharmacists—that is, if their medicines are concocted not by their own brains, but according to the formulas drawn up by the

great Physician, God; in other words, if he is really prescribing the medicines himself and correcting the faults of their erroneous prescriptions. For unless we take this attitude toward them, they will not fail to do what so many bold, blind pharmacists do, who either for money or out of a foolish pride give sick folk medicines of their own devising. They, too, will quietly kill all the simple folk they can find who are so foolish as to put their lives in the hands of such ignorant, unlearned, reckless fools.

80. “Suicide”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Anthony: Now, lest you reject both of those examples, thinking they’re just made-up stories, I shall remind you of one which I’m sure you yourself have read in Cassian’s Collations. If you haven’t read it, I hope you’ll soon look it up, for I myself have half forgotten the thing, it’s been so long since I read it. Anyway, as I recall, Cassian tells there of a monk who for many a day had been an extraordinarily holy man in his way of living. By the other virtuous monks and hermits who lived there in the wilderness, he was marvelously much esteemed—except by some who were not so sure that the revelations that he related to many people weren’t actually illusions from the devil. And so, indeed, they later proved to be. For the man was by the devil’s subtle suggestions brought into a state of such colossal spiritual pride, and to such a horrible point, that in the end the devil made him go kill himself. And as well as I can remember now (without seeing this book once again), the devil brought him there by this line of persuasion: he made him believe that it was God’s will that he kill himself, and that by so doing he would go straight to heaven.

Now, of course, if that was the decisive line of persuasion, he surely took it with a very great sense of comfort in his own mind, in which case his act falls outside the scope of our discussion. He then needed not comfort, but counsel against giving credence to what the devil said. It is, however, also possible that the devil, instead, first made him see how deluded he had been, and then tempted him to take his own life out of shame and despair. And in that case, see, his suicide is pertinent to our discussion. For then his temptation fell down from pride to faintheartedness and became that kind of “terror of the night” of which I have been speaking, wherein a good part of the counsel that the person needs to be given consists of good comforting. For then he was brought into a terribly severe tribulation.

But as I was about to say, there is in this act of suicide no stoutheartedness, no courage. In the first place, as Saint Thomas says, true strength of character—that strength which in rational creatures is called virtue—can never exist without prudence. And in the second place, even with regard to those who seem the most daring, anyone who seriously thinks about it will realize that the mentality leading these people to destroy themselves grows out of faintheartedness and very foolish fear.

Take, for example, Cato the Younger, who in Africa killed himself after hearing of Julius Caesar’s great victory there. As Saint Augustine says so well in his work *The City of God*, there was in that act no strength or magnanimity. It was plain cowardice, it was a weak stomach, that

moved Cato to destroy himself. His heart was just too feeble to bear either the beholding of another man's glory or the suffering of other worldly calamities that he feared might fall on himself.

81. "Merry Tales serve for Sauce, not Meat"

[From *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Vincent: First, good Uncle, before we go any further, I will be so bold as to bring up again one thing we talked about when I was here before. When I turned over in my mind the conclusions you had made here, it seemed to me that you would in no way want anyone in tribulation to seek comfort in any worldly or fleshly thing. And that attitude of yours, Uncle, seemed to me rather harsh. For a funny story shared with a friend greatly refreshes a person. Without doing any harm, it lifts one's spirits, restores one's courage, and improves one's disposition. So it seems only right that we should take such recreation. Solomon, I believe it was, said that in hard times we should give wine to the sorrowful to make them forget their sorrow (see Prv 31 : 6 Ð 7). And Saint Thomas said that appropriate pleasant talking is a virtue—one that serves to refresh the mind and make it quick and eager to labor and study again, whereas continual exhausting toil would dull and deaden it.

Anthony: Nephew, I did not overlook that point, but I didn't much want to discuss it. It's true, on the one hand, that I wouldn't completely forgo playful talk in cases where it wouldn't do any harm. But on the other hand, I thought that in such cases there would be little need to encourage it. Folk are susceptible enough to such tendencies on their own. Look at ourselves, for instance. We come together now to talk of as serious and sad things as anyone can think of, and yet we start off by telling frivolous, silly stories. Really, Nephew, as you know quite well, I am by nature far too fun-loving. I wish I could as easily correct my fault as know it, but I can hardly control it, old fool that I am. However, I will not be so partial to my fault as to praise it.

But since you ask what I think about this matter of whether it is legitimate for people in tribulation to seek recreation and to comfort themselves with some good, clean fun, I'll say this. Agreed, first of all, that our chief comfort must be in God (that with him we must begin, and with him continue, and with him also end), for a person to indulge now and then in some good, clean worldly fun is something I would not dare be so harsh as to forbid utterly. Good and very learned individuals have, indeed, in certain cases allowed it, especially in consideration of the perversity of many people's minds. If it were otherwise, if we all were the way that I wish to God we were, and that natural wisdom dictates we should be (and it is not entirely excusable that we're not), I would then not hesitate to say that to any person, the most comforting thing possible would be to hear about heaven. But now, God help us, our wretchedness is such that after doing that for a while, people grow almost weary, and, as though to hear about heaven were a heavy burden, they have to refresh themselves afterward with a silly story.

Our enthusiasm for heavenly joys has grown amazingly cold. If the dread of hell were as far gone, very few would fear God; but that fear does still stick a little in our stomachs. Notice, Nephew, how in the sermon—usually somewhere near the end—the priest speaks of hell and of

heaven, and while he's preaching on the pains of hell, everybody stays there and listens to him, but as soon as he comes to the joys of heaven, they run out the back door in droves.

It is with the soul somewhat as it is with the body. Some people come, by nature or bad habit, to a point where a worse thing sometimes helps them more than a better one. Some people, when they are sick, cannot get down any wholesome food or medicine unless it's mixed with something else, something more to their liking, that makes the food or medicine less wholesome than it would otherwise be. And yet, as long as that's the best they're going to do, we must let them have it that way.

Cassian, that very good and virtuous man, relates in one of his treatises that a certain holy priest, in the giving of a sermon, spoke of heaven and of heavenly things in such a celestial way that much of his audience, with the sweet sound of it, began to forget this whole world and fall asleep. When the priest saw this, he pretended not to notice it. Suddenly he said to them, "I'll tell you a funny story." Instantly they lifted up their heads and started listening. And then, their sleep thereby broken, they heard him tell of heaven again. In what way that good priest then rebuked them for their perverse attitude—so apathetic toward the thing that all our life we labor for, and so avid for trifles—I don't remember and don't have any need to relate here. For our purposes, this much of the account will suffice. For if you ask me whether in tribulation a person may not sometimes seek refreshment in worldly fun and recreation, I can only say that when someone cannot long endure to hold up his head and hear talk of heaven unless from time to time (as though heaven were a heavy burden) he is refreshed with a foolish funny story, there is then no other remedy—you must let him have one. I wish there were a better alternative, but there isn't, and I can't help it.

My advice, however, is that we at least make such times of recreation as short and infrequent as we can. Let them serve us only as sauce; let us not make them our meat. And let us pray to God, and have all our good friends pray to God for us, that we may develop such a taste for the delights of heaven that in comparison to talking about those joys, all worldly recreation will be a pain to think about. You may be sure, Nephew, that if we could once purchase the grace to come to that point, we would never in a year of worldly recreation find so much comfort as we would in less than half an hour of thinking about heaven.