

Courage in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

There are seasons in every servant's life when the work itself requires not only fidelity but courage. A word must be spoken that no one else is willing to speak. A person must be loved who makes himself hard to love. A stand must be taken when an easier posture is available. A cross, small or large, must be picked up in the middle of a Tuesday. This lesson looks at courage as the Scriptures and Fathers understand it — not as a temperament some of us were born with and others were not, but as a gift of the Holy Spirit given to those who ask for it, and strengthened through use. We will see that the courage of the servant is not bravado and not stubbornness; it is the steady willingness to remain where the Lord has placed us, speak what He has asked us to speak, and endure what He has permitted us to endure, because He Himself is with us there.

The Shape of Christian Courage

The world's picture of courage is often a moment — a decisive act caught in the spotlight of a crisis. The Scripture's picture of courage is almost the opposite. It is long. It is usually quiet. It consists, most of the time, in simply not running away. The Greek word the New Testament uses most often for courage is *tharseo*, a word our Lord Himself speaks to frightened disciples on more than one occasion: 'Be of good cheer; it is I; do not be afraid' (Matthew 14:27). Courage, in His mouth, is the other side of fear dissolved by His nearness.

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." John 16:33, NKJV

Notice the grammar of His sentence. Our courage is not a quality we must first manufacture; it is a consequence of His victory. 'I have overcome.' The world's pressure is real, but it is no longer final. The servant who grasps this in his bones can stand where others sit down.

Augustine gives us a lovely small definition that has traveled down the centuries:

"Fortitude is the love of God bearing all things readily for His sake." St. Augustine, On the Morals of the Catholic Church XV

Courage, for the Christian, is love in its enduring form. It is not detached bravery; it is affection for the Lord strong enough to carry the weight that love always eventually asks us to carry.

The Fear That Silences Us

Most of us do not lose our courage in a moment of persecution. We lose it, bit by bit, to smaller fears — the fear of being disliked, the fear of being misunderstood, the fear of losing standing with a friend or a family member. These fears have a name in the Scriptures: the fear of man.

“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.”
Proverbs 29:25, NKJV

Proverbs calls it a snare — a trap that catches animals by the leg. That is exactly what it does to servants. It catches us when a hard truth ought to be said in love and we say nothing. It catches us when a student is wandering and we do not want to be the one to raise the question. It catches us when the culture around us is moving against the Gospel and we would rather not be noticed.

Our Lord speaks directly to this fear in the instruction He gives His disciples before sending them out.

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Matthew 10:28, NKJV

The cure for the fear of man is not a larger dose of self-confidence; it is a larger awe of God. When the Lord grows heavier in our sight, the opinions of men grow lighter. This is not a technique; it is a slow reorientation of the heart that happens in the places of prayer and worship the previous unit described.

Courage to Speak

One of the particular courages asked of a servant is the courage to speak. The prophets knew this. Jeremiah was told to stand and speak at the city gate; Ezekiel was placed as a watchman whose silence would be accounted against him. The New Testament continues the pattern. The apostles before the Sanhedrin did not argue; they simply bore witness.

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.” Acts 4:13, NKJV

The Greek word for 'boldness' here is parrhesia — freedom of speech, the frankness of those who have nothing to hide and nothing to lose. The council noticed that this boldness was not the product of their education; it was the residue of their company. They had been with Jesus, and courage was what the nearness had left behind in them.

For our own work, the application is direct. A servant who stays close to the Lord receives, almost without noticing, the gift of speech when it is needed. A servant who has drifted from that nearness will find the words difficult to come by, because parrhesia is not mainly a technique but a trace. We need to guard, therefore, not only the moments of hard conversation but the hours of quiet communion that precede them.

“The sign of a man who has true freedom of speech before God is not that he speaks much, but that his words, few or many, come forth unafraid, having been first spoken in prayer.” St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 28

Courage to Stay

There is a particular kind of courage that does not look like courage at all — the courage to stay. A servant who has been loving a difficult community for seven years and has not left is exercising a discipline that a single dramatic act could never match. The temptation in every difficult service is to find a reason to move on: a new parish, a new ministry, a new group of people who may be easier. Sometimes the Lord does move us; more often, He calls us to remain.

“Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” Galatians 6:9, NKJV

The phrase 'lose heart' is the exact opposite of courage. To lose heart is to be emptied of the Lord's own encouragement, and the remedy is not a bigger push but a deeper drinking from the well. A servant who is considering giving up should first ask whether he is drinking.

Isaac the Syrian, who spent his life observing the long perseverance of the monks, wrote with the tenderness of one who had stood beside many who were ready to give up:

“Do not say, 'I cannot.' Say, 'Yet a little, with the Lord's help.' A thousand times the good man falls, and a thousand times he rises. This very pattern is the beauty of his life before God.” St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies XLVII

The servant who rises again is the servant who is exercising courage in its truest form — the courage not to let yesterday's failure decide tomorrow's faithfulness.

Courage to Be Unseen

A less obvious courage, but one essential to the long life of the servant, is the courage to labor without being seen — and to labor especially when it would be easy to arrange for the work to be noticed. The Lord has warned us, in the gentlest and most pointed way, that the praise we harvest from men is the whole reward we will ever receive for that particular deed.

“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Matthew 6:1, NKJV

Courage to be unseen means that we are willing to do the hidden work — the prayer offered in a room with the door closed, the quiet note of encouragement unsigned, the extra hour with the struggling student after everyone has gone home — because we are serving an Audience whose reward is real and whose memory is perfect. This is the same courage that St. Andrew possessed, as the previous unit described: a freedom from the need to be noticed.

It takes courage to be unseen precisely because we are social creatures who feed on recognition. The servant who offers his labor to the Lord rather than to his peers is learning the deepest freedom a human being can learn.

Growing the Gift

Courage, like every fruit of the Spirit, is grown rather than manufactured. The Scriptures and the Fathers agree on the means by which it grows.

First, courage grows by remembered presence. 'Fear not, for I am with you' is the sentence God gives His servants again and again — to Abraham, to Moses, to Joshua, to Jeremiah, to Paul. The deliberate remembering that He is with us in the current difficulty is itself an exercise of courage.

“Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.”

Deuteronomy 31:6, NKJV

Second, courage grows by small obediences. The large stand is prepared for, silently, by thousands of small ones. A servant who has spoken the gentle truth in a dozen small conversations is a servant who will be ready when a hard one comes. We practice courage the way a musician practices scales.

Third, courage grows by the prayers of the Church. We do not have to generate bravery alone. The Divine Liturgy is full of petitions that the servants of God be strengthened, and those petitions are not decorative. They are answered — sometimes suddenly, more often slowly, always reliably.

Fourth, courage grows by the stories of the saints. When we are afraid of a difficult conversation, it helps to remember that St. Athanasius stood against the whole empire, that St. Moses the Black left the wilderness to welcome his executioners with tea, that St. Mary of Egypt walked into her own long desert, that the martyrs sang on their way to the flames. Their courage is ours too, if we are willing to be drawn into their company.

May the Lord who has overcome the world make us, in our small daily hour, servants who are not afraid. May He give us the parrhesia of those who have been with Him, the patience of those who do not grow weary, the hiddenness of those who serve His eyes only, and the peace of those who know He has not left them alone in the work. May we say in every season what Joshua was told to say on the edge of the Jordan: 'The Lord my God is with me wherever I go.'

Review Questions

1. Our Lord's own definition of courage — 'be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' — roots courage in His victory rather than our temperament. Where in our current service are we being invited to stand on His victory rather than on our own strength?

2. Proverbs names the 'fear of man' as a snare. What specific fear of others (disapproval, being misunderstood, losing a relationship) most often catches us, and what would it look like this week to be freed from it?
3. The apostles' boldness before the Sanhedrin was the residue of their company with Jesus. How does our current rhythm of prayer and worship protect, or erode, the parrhesia we need for the conversations ahead of us?
4. The courage to stay is often harder than the courage to act. Where are we tempted to leave a difficult field the Lord is asking us to remain in, and what drinking from the well would renew us there?
5. The Lord warns that deeds done to be seen receive their reward from the seeing. Where in our service is the secret audience of the Father being quietly traded for the audience of our peers?
6. Isaac the Syrian says, 'A thousand times the good man falls, and a thousand times he rises.' How does this picture of courage as repeated rising change the way we evaluate a week that has felt full of failure?
7. Name one saint whose courage speaks to our current situation. What does walking, for a moment, in that saint's company make possible for us today?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, On the Morals of the Catholic Church. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 4.
- St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent. Translated by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- St. Athanasius, Life of Antony. Translated in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 4.
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Book of Acts (on Acts 4).

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes