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DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE

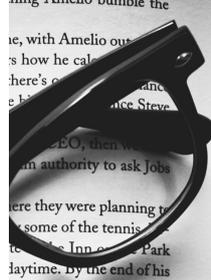


**GREGORY THE GREAT,
THE BOOK OF PASTORAL RULE**



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INTRODUCTION

Gregory the Great (540-604) was born into a notable Christian family. He was raised by a father who served in a Christian order, and he had two relatives who had held the Bishopric of Rome at various points (a great-great grandfather and an uncle). He was well educated in classical and Christian literature. In 574 he entered a monastic retreat on family lands. After only five years in monastic life, however, Pope Pelagius II (no: not that Pelagius) called him into service as a deacon and then a church representative to the emperor. Five years of service in Constantinople afforded him time to begin his writing career, and he first penned his *Morals on the Book of Job*. He served as an abbot for five years at his former monastery near Rome. In the year 590, however, he was elected as the next Bishop of Rome. He would serve roughly 14 years in that role, having tried to avoid appointment beforehand (to which he alludes in the preface).

Gregory's literary works have remained in print to this day. His commentary on Job remains in print in three massive volumes, and it offers something of a theological summa in the form of a commentary on one of the most challenging books of the Bible; John Calvin regularly cited this text. *The Book of Pastoral Rule* remains his most read work, however, and it has had impact in East and West, amongst Roman Catholics and Protestants. Gregory's thought shows varied influences, including the Cappadocian Fathers (not surprising, perhaps, given that he was Roman but spent lengthy time as an emissary in the eastern capital city). Augustine is perhaps his greatest influence; in speaking of sin and grace, for instance, Gregory will say this: "it is through ourselves that we have been brought to the ground, but to rise again by our own strength is beyond our ability" (*Moralia in Job*, 1:423). Gregory's role as leader of the church involved all sorts of achievements (extending the church into Britain, building campaigns, etc.).

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knew
temporarily, and I wasn't even sure it was legal. I didn't know what
wanted to do. I was enjoying spending more time with my family. I was
torn. I knew Apple was a mess, so I wondered: Do I want to give up
this nice lifestyle that I have? What are all the Pixar shareholders going
to think? I talked to people I respected. I finally called Andy Grove at
about eight one Saturday morning—too early. I gave him the pros and
the cons, and in the middle he stopped me and said, "Steve, I don't give
a shit about Apple." I was stunned. It was then I realized that I *do* give a
shit about Apple—I started it and it is a good thing to have in the world.
That was when I decided to go back on a temporary basis to help them
hire a CEO.

The claim that he was enjoying spending more time with his family was not convincing. He was never destined to win a Father of the Year trophy, even when he had spare time on his hands. He was getting better at paying heed to his children, especially Reed, but his primary focus was on his work. He was frequently aloof from his two young daughters, estranged again from Lisa, and often prickly as a husband.

So what was the real reason for his hesitancy in taking over Apple? For all of his willfulness and insatiable desire to control the company, Jobs was indecisive and reticent when he felt unsure about something. He craved perfection, and he was not always good at figuring out how to settle for something less. He did not like to wrestle with compromise or make accommodations. This was true in products, design, and furnishings for the house. It was also true when it came to personal commitments. If he knew for sure a course of action was right, he was unstoppable. But if he had doubts, he sometimes withdrew, preferring not to think about things that did not perfectly suit him. As happened when Amelio had asked him what role he wanted to play, Jobs went silent and ignore situations that made him uncomfortable.

This attitude arose partly out of his tendency to see the world in binary terms. A person was either a hero or a bozo, a product was

During this period many of his other exegetical writings were composed, only some of which survive (his writing ranged from Song of Songs and Ezekiel to the gospels). Though letters reveal that he expected the world to end in the near future, he devoted himself ardently to the varied institutional responsibilities of his office.

The Book of Pastoral Rule speaks of the task of spiritual direction, merging spiritual care (evident in the monastic setting) with the biblical range of pastoral duties (integral to the pastoral office). The text encourages men to consider the office and pursue it with realistic expectations. He says in the preface, “I write the present book to express my opinion of the severity of their weight [of the “burdens of pastoral care”] so that he who is free of these burdens might not recklessly pursue them and he who has already attained them might tremble for having done so” (27). The book moves in four parts. Part 1 “concern[s] the qualifications of the one who comes to a position of spiritual leadership.” Part 2 “concern[s] the life of the pastor.” Part 3 addresses “how the spiritual director who lives well should teach and advise the laity.” Part 4 briefly exhorts “that the preacher, after he has done everything that is required, should return to himself so that he does not take pride in his life or preaching.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

If you or any participants want to read further on Gregory the Great, here are recommended resources:

Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* (3 volumes; repr. by Ex Fontibus, 2012).

George Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 2006), ch. 5.

G. R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

R. A. Markus, *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum, 1983), esp. part 3 on Gregory the Great.

Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 55-75.



1ST MONTH

Book of Pastoral Rule, Part 1

Concerning the Qualifications of the One Who Comes to a Position of Spiritual Leadership

In this initial part, Gregory addresses the question of qualifications for service as a pastor/spiritual director. He warns about those who approach that duty glibly (those who are either novices or lacking in holiness) as well as those who dodge it with pious excuses (wanting to have peace and space for stillness before God). Some need to be warned away from this kind of ministry, while others need to be encouraged that God has gifted them to serve others (i.e. a parallel might be the way W. E. B. DuBois would address the “Talented Tenth” and the need for their service to all, especially in his retrospective comments on the essay of that title).

His first concern involves the pursuit of leadership by the unfit (whether through inexperience or lack of holiness):

“No one presumes to teach an art that he has not first mastered through study. How foolish it is therefore for the inexperienced to assume pastoral authority when the care of souls is the art of arts” (29).

“No one does more harm in the Church than he who has the title or rank of holiness and acts perversely” (32).

His second concern relates to those who are fit but flee leadership because they desire “stillness” or the peace of contemplation. Examples abound in this regard of influential and famous pastors who sought to avoid public ministry (Jonah, of course, but also folks such as John Calvin and Gregory the Great himself).

“If, therefore, the care of feeding is a testament to loving, then he who abounds in virtues but refuses to feed the flock of God is found guilty of having no love for the supreme Shepherd” (36).

“For clearly, there are two types of affection—the love of God and the love of neighbor. Therefore, Isaiah, who yearns to profit his neighbors through the active life, seeks the office of preaching; while Jeremiah, who zealously clings to the love of the Creator through the contemplative life, opposes being sent to preach. Therefore, what one laudably sought, the other, just as laudably, avoided” (39).

He sums up these two concerns: “Indeed, no one who has not been cleansed should dare to approach the sacred ministries, just as no one whom supernatural grace has selected should proudly oppose it under the guise of humility” (39).

What does it mean to be “cleansed”?

“He must, therefore, be the model for everyone. He must be devoted entirely to the example of good living” (43).

“Whoever, then, is subjected to any of these vices that I have mentioned is prohibited from offering bread to the Lord. Because he is still consumed by his own sins, he would be unable to cleanse the sins of others” (48).

He observes unique challenges in the life of leadership, showing a savvy awareness of the interpersonal and sociological realities of being a public figure or leader and their potential influence upon one’s own spiritual or moral growth:

“For commonly in the school of adversity, the heart is subdued by discipline; but if one rises to a position of spiritual authority, the heart is immediately altered by a state of elation that accompanies the experience of glory” (33).

“For no one is able to acquire humility while in a position of authority if he did not refrain from pride when in a position of subjection” (42).

Discussion Prompts

- G. R. Evans observes that “Gregory’s imagery is always the best means of approach to his thought” (*The Thought of Gregory the Great*, 99). What are telling images or metaphors in this section?
- Gregory expresses two worries here: about those rushing too quickly into soul care and others who are hesitant lest it disrupt their peacefulness. Looking backward, do we see biblical texts speaking to each one? If so, where? Looking forward, are they both still relevant today? If so, how so?
- Gregory mentions ways that caring for others can place one’s own heart in danger. What threats does he highlight? What might we add today regarding unique temptations for those involved in soul care?

2ND MONTH

Book of Pastoral Rule, Part 2



Concerning the Life of the Pastor

In part 2, Gregory begins to speak of the lifestyle or daily activities of the pastor/spiritual director. Picking up on the distinction between the active and the contemplative life, he will address the significance of each for personal wholeness.

Gregory addresses the significance of both the life and doctrine of a pastor/spiritual director (1 Tim. 4:16), which he addresses throughout the chapter and in numerous ways.

“The active life of the leader ought to transcend that of the people in proportion to how the life of a shepherd outshines that of his flock” (49).

“What he enjoins by speaking he helps by showing how it is to be done” (51).

“For it is certainly difficult for a preacher who is not loved, regardless of how well he speaks, to be heard. The one, then, who is set over others should study how to be endearing so that he may be heard, but not so that he can be loved for its own sake” (76).

He speaks of someone’s love and behavior, as well as their loveability, being significant to their teaching and leading. What are key traits he highlights in that regard? How do they relate to traits listed in the pastoral epistles (e.g. 1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1)? If there are new emphases, why?

The balance of the active and the contemplative life is a major concern in helping to cultivate that personal holiness. Gregory regularly uses the categories of external and internal to speak of matters of lesser and greater concern. He clearly prioritizes the heavenly, though he argues that heavenly communion with God is meant to equip and send Christians out to others in active service.

“He must not relax his care for the internal life which he is occupied by external concerns, nor should he relinquish what is prudent of external matters so as to focus on things internal” (49).

“Inferior matters, therefore, are to be conducted by the laity, while the most weighty matters are considered by spiritual directors” (70). In what ways is he building off Acts 6:2 and the principle that ministers/apostles ought not be distracted from the ministry of the Word and prayer by other matters? Are any other principles influencing him (whether neo-Platonic or even gnostic)? For instance, elsewhere he draws the idea of the “mean” or middle from Aristotle to describe the experience of pain in a valid but not exaggerated way (*Moralia in Job*, 1:84). Are there parallels here?

“In other words, attention to temporal concerns should extend as far as it is necessary, but these concerns should also be cut short so that they do not grow immoderately” (74).

A poignant passage elsewhere conveys this idea: “So then let Holy Church regard the true riches of the Eternal Country, let her behold the throng of the citizens Above, let her discern in her Elect Children the culture of the mind, and the excellencies of countless virtues, and from these let her recall the eye of the mind to the life of the wicked, which is made void of all goodness, and by comparison with them let her see how and in what way that life is destitute of all virtuous attainments, because it has abandoned the things on high, and coveted those beneath” (*Moralia in Job*, 2:441).

Gregory then tends to how a pastor/spiritual director speaks and keeps silent in a way that is loving and effective. In fact, concern with effectiveness is part of the calling to love, to seek not merely to do something but to do something that will make a difference.

“Accordingly, the spiritual director should be discerning in his silence and profitable in his speech, otherwise he might say something that should have been suppressed or suppress something that should have been said” (54).

“In short, gentleness is to be mixed with severity—a combination that will prevent the laity from becoming exasperated by excessive harshness or relaxed by undue kindness” (67-68). Gregory likely draws the notion of “merciful severity” from Augustine (who used it in his treatise published in 413, “On Faith and Works” [Ancient Christian Writers 48; trans. Gregory Lombardo; New York: Newman, 1988], 9-10 [III.3-4]).

“Indeed, some things should be, as we have said, prudently overlooked but made known that they are being overlooked, so that when the sinner learns that he has been discovered, but also that his behavior is being tolerated, he will be too embarrassed to add to those sins that are being tolerated in silence and will become his own judge because his spiritual director has patiently and mercifully excused him” (77).

“[W]hen the mind of the teacher is engaged with the correction of subordinates, it is very difficult for him to keep in those things that he should not say” (82).

Discussion Prompts

- In our present day culture, soul care and self-care tend to be named more often than the active life and the contemplative life, though they are overlapping concepts. Does Gregory help us see why both seem to be a perennial, enduring concern?
- Gregory's emphasis on the need for balance between the active and the contemplative life was later extended to laypersons as well, for instance in the thought of fourteenth century reformer Walter Hilton (who was involved with the Lollards). How might this apply to lay counselors? How might this apply to you?
- Elsewhere he says "because the more a man contemplates heavenly things, the more does he amend his earthly doings, after the grace of contemplation he fitly adds the righteousness of his doings" (*Moralia in Job*, 3:57). Are our churches as committed to heavenly-mindedness and contemplation? Does that limit our "earthly doings"? What would be ways to restore that set of practices in our congregations?
- Gregory speaks of the witness of both speech and silence. What wisdom does he offer regarding biting the tongue and practicing intentional silence in key junctures? In what ways does good soul care or spiritual direction involve knowing when to shut up?



3RD MONTH

Book of Pastoral Rule, Parts 3-4

How the Spiritual Director Who Lives Well Should Teach and Advise the Laity (pt. 3) and That the Preacher, After He Has Done Everything That is Required, Should Return to Himself so That He Does Not Take Pride in His Life or Preaching (pt. 4)

Part 3 is by far the longest section of the text. It turns from the person of the pastor to address those to whom the pastor offers spiritual direction. It looks at 72 different traits that demand particular care (described in the form of 36 pairings). The overarching principle is stated as an allusion to teaching from Gregory Nazianzus: “[O]ne and the same exhortation is not suited for everyone because not everyone shares the same quality of character” (87, likely alluding to Gregory’s *Apology for his flight to Pontus*, 2.30). “And so every teacher, in order to edify all by the single virtue of charity, ought to touch the hearts of his audience with the same common doctrine but by distinct exhortations” (88). We might sum up what he says in this introduction to part 3 by saying that he wants to show how the one gospel (“common doctrine”) can be applied and directed to “distinct” situations.

Elsewhere he says much the same thing: “For one and the same exhortation is not suited to all; because the same kind of habits does not bind all. For those things that benefit some, often hurt others”; thus, “every holy preacher first considers in his hearers the quality of their life, and afterwards frames the voice of preaching, fitted to instruct them” (*Moralia in Job*, 2:344). He then gives two full pages of binary distinctions resembling those in our text.

He then lists 36 binaries. Some are permanent distinctions (men and women). Others have lengthy significance but will change over time (young and old). Some have lengthy significance but possibly change over time (unmarried and married). Some may change very frequently (joyful and sad). Some are temporary but near universal (healthy and sick). Others are related to what we might call personality differences that are not at all universal (bold and modest). Some relate to virtues and vices (humble and proud, merciful and thieving). The list is lengthy and varied, though, of course, it is not exhaustive. It is representative. It is also overlapping: several categories can and are applicable at the same time (gender, marital status, happiness level, health, etc.).

Gregory then describes each binary pair to offer comment on how each category is “to be advised” (running from 90-201). Some receive brief treatment whereas others are considered at greater length, such as advising the sick (115-118). The third part concludes with pedagogical tips. He describes how “it is all the more laborious to admonish with a single exhortation an entire congregation that is composed of persons with different passions” (202), so personal direction will be important, on the one hand, and sermons ought to be prepared thoughtfully, on the other hand, by ensuring that “the greatest good should be praised in a way that does not ignore lesser goods” (203). Sometimes, he notes, a director or preacher must pick their spots, watching other errors pass by for the sake of dealing with more significant challenges (204-205). Also, the director must communicate in a way that matches the intellectual bandwidth of the audience (205-206).

The very brief fourth part reminds the director or pastor to be mindful of their own spiritual state when trying to counsel such a wide, complex range of persons. “Unfortunately, there are some for whom the greatness of their virtue has become the occasion for their perdition because they were foolishly secure in the confidence of their strength and then died unexpectedly through negligence” (209). Elsewhere Gregory said “when we are in possession of power, it is both to be taken account of for purposes of utility, and to be kept of sight because of Pride, in order that he that uses it, on the one hand, that he may render service therewith, may be aware that he has the power, and on the other, that he may not be elated, may not be aware that he has the power” (*Moralia in Job*, 1:234).

Discussion Prompts

- One way to look at what Gregory is doing in part 3 is to see his pairings as a guide to how the one gospel of Jesus Christ relates to many maladies or problems. Does that help make sense of how he addresses each of the binaries? If not, why not? If so, how?
- Some of Gregory’s words have lingered through the centuries. He says: “Let the humble hear how the things they strive for are eternal, and the things that they despise are transitory; let the proud hear that the things that they pursue are transitory, and the things that they abandon are eternal” (131). It’s not unlike the “comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable” quip in recent decades. Do any others seem familiar?
- Which binary pair(s) surprised you by (1) their inclusion or (2) the recommended advice? What other binary pairs would be similarly important today and would need to be added if this text was written now?
- Gregory says: “whenever we associate foolishly in friendship with the wicked, we are bound to their sins” (152). Is he saying all friendship with wicked persons is foolish and thus bound to their sins? If not, what makes such friendship foolish and thus culpable? Does he tend to call us to befriend pagans wisely or simply to shirk association with pagans altogether?