



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Virtues for Dying Well
(*Death*, pp. 26-33)

Suggested Article:

📖 Dying Well
(*Death*, pp. 74-78)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Virtues for Dying Well

We can learn a great deal from the *Ars Moriendi* literature of the 15th to 17th centuries. Focusing on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus, it emphasized the importance of faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 2:10-18

Meditation[†]

Taking Jesus as a model, it is necessary for Christians to come to see their own dying as a venue where the possibility exists to find deepened self-understanding and to bear witness to God. In other words, dying must be made a part of living in the sense that one's efforts at discipleship persist through this stage of life. Dying is not a time or a task that is devoid of meaning, divorced from God's presence.

Christopher P. Vogt

Reflection

Interpreting death as not simply a medical event, but as "something that we can and should prepare for as part of a faithful life of discipleship," the *Ars Moriendi* ("art of dying") literature recommends specific virtues to resist the spiritual temptations we face in the process of dying, Brett McCarty and Alley Verhey explain. These virtues for dying well were exemplified in Jesus' preparation to die on the cross, and are encouraged today through the practices of his body, the Church.

- ▶ The first temptation in the pain and loneliness of dying is to stop trusting God. In response, the tradition commends *the virtue of faith*. McCarty and Verhey note, "Jesus is not just an example of faith; in our living and in our dying, Christians can have faith because of his faithfulness." On the cross Jesus faithfully uttered to God songs of both lament and trust (Psalm 22:1; 35:1); he did not welcome the agony of dying, but he valued God's cause more than extending his own life.
- ▶ As death threatens to shatter plans, sever relationships, and unravel the meaning of life, we are tempted to despair. Thus, *the second virtue is hope*. Here is the basis of Christian hope: "Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has given us grounds to hope that death will not have the last word in our world or upon our lives. Christians do not deny the awful reality of death, but they do insist that death will not have the last word, that the last word belongs to God, and it is not death but life, not suffering but *shalom*."
- ▶ Impatience is a third temptation we face in the process of dying. "The daily care received from doctors, nurses, and loved ones can be spurned, and this impatience in the face of death receives its most terrible expression in suicide." *Ars Moriendi* commends two virtues in response: *love* and *patience*. They object to the "escapist" way the tradition characterizes the virtue of love as detaching ourselves from earthly relations and focusing solely on God. Rather, they think, "by loving God and all else as it relates to God, we learn



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to properly love our bodies, our lives, and the innumerable relationships that define who we are. Because of this, there is room to lament when death threatens these loves." Jesus' patient love is our model: "he was willing to suffer unto death, but this display of love's patience is not a glorification of suffering."

- ▶ At some point we may be tempted to congratulate ourselves for developing (by our own efforts) the virtues of faith, hope, and patient love. To counter this prideful tendency, the tradition recommends cultivating *the virtue of humility* by focusing on the grace of God. "Attentive to God, we can acknowledge our neediness and no longer fear it. Attentive to the grace of God, we need not pretend that it is our little righteousness that makes us worthy of God's care (or anyone else's); we can learn to receive care graciously," McCarty and Verhey explain. "We need not anxiously hoard the little resources we think we have against our vulnerability to suffering and death; we can be a little less anxious, a little more carefree."
- ▶ This freedom from anxiety helps us to resist the temptation to avarice, which "manifests itself in an anxious, tightfisted grasping, a desperate and idolatrous clinging to life above all else." McCarty and Verhey variously name the corresponding virtue as *letting go*, *serenity*, and *generosity*. Following Jesus' example on the cross, we may trust ourselves into God's hand as we die. Also, "we may let go also of those we love and must leave behind, confident of God's care for them."

Together these virtues – faithfulness, hope, patient love, humility, and serenity – enable us to have *courage* in the face of death. "By remembering Jesus and his dying, we may find a paradigm for dying well and faithfully," McCarty and Verhey conclude. "We find and follow that paradigm, however, only in the light of the resurrection. ... The resurrection assures us that we will not finally be alienated from our flesh or from the community, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God."

Study Questions

1. Have you observed these temptations – loss of trust in God, despair, impatience, pride, and avarice – manifest in the dying process in specific ways? Are there other temptations?
2. Discuss how a congregation can form members' imagination and habits so they are prepared to die well and faithfully. Which church practices inculcate virtues for dying well?
3. Discuss Joel Shuman's qualification of the idea that there is an "art" to dying: "In spite of our best efforts to domesticate it, death remains wild and often untamable, and the best-lived lives sometimes end in less than desirable deaths. This is not a dismissal of the need for Christians to prepare for life's end, but a gentle reminder that our futures, including and perhaps especially our deaths, should be commended to the sovereignty of God, who remains faithful even when we lose faith in the midst of dying" (*Death*, 78).

Departing Hymn: "When Life Well Lived Is at an End" (verses 1, 3, and 4)

† Christopher P. Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 9.

The Virtues for Dying Well

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the temptations that we face in the process of dying and the corresponding virtues for dying well that are identified in the *Ars Moriendi* literature.
2. To understand Jesus as our model for faithfulness in the process of dying.
3. To consider how your congregation can prepare members to die faithfully and well.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Death (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “When Life Well Lived Is at an End” locate the familiar tune KINGSFOLD on pp. 50-51 of *Death*, in your church’s hymnal, or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

The medicalization of the process of dying today often leads to lingering, lonely, and dehumanizing death, Brett McCarty and Allen Verhey note. “Ask typical Americans how they would prefer to die and they are likely to say quickly, painlessly, and in their sleep—that is, if they have even given much thought to their own death. For many, Christian or not, the thought of dying under the fluorescent lights of a sterile ICU, hooked up to countless machines, is the stuff of nightmares. ... So we try to avoid the process of dying altogether, preferring either an unconscious demise or, as some recent polls indicate, a quick and controlled death through physician-assisted suicide. If we are honest with ourselves, however, we recognize that this escapist impulse does not serve us very well. A good death, if any death can truly be called good, occurs when one dies at peace with others and with God, and this peace is hard to find in the modern ICU or in sudden deaths.”

For Christian insight on when and how we can prepare for death, McCarty and Verhey revisit the *Ars Moriendi* (“art of dying”) literature of the 15th to 17th centuries. While its authors were certainly familiar with lingering, dehumanizing death as the “Great Plague” or “Black Death” spread across Europe during their day, they did not turn to sudden death or suicide as a preferred option.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members prepare to die faithfully and well.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Hebrews 2:10-18 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study and the next, “Loving Our Last Enemy,” focus on the Christian “art of dying.” In this one, Brett McCarty and Allen Verhey draw inspiration from the *Ars Moriendi* literature; in the next study, Todd Buras drafts further ideas for a contemporary art of dying from recent Christian reflections on death and dying. Joel Shuman’s review, “Dying Well,” points to additional contemporary Christian contributions to this theme. The process of our dying is something we (and our community of friends and loved ones) manage to some extent. These authors agree there is an “art” – a skill requiring lifelong cultivation – to managing the process of our dying well and faithfully, not by ourselves, but with the aid of a Christian community.

Study Questions

1. Assign five groups to brainstorm the specific manifestations of one of the temptations. Ask them to consider how the assigned temptation may be related to the other four. For instance, avaricious hording to ward off the indignities of the dying process (such as dependence on the care of others) may follow upon the temptations to not trust God, despair, or impatience.

Which temptation seems to be most common in our culture? Which one is most pressing to the group members? Does this depend on one’s age, proximity to death, the type of death one faces, and so on? It may seem odd that anyone would be tempted by pride during the process of dying, but the tradition is alive to the myriad ways that we can take inordinate personal credit for any accomplishment, including our spiritual preparation for death. For some people pride may manifest as thinking one is too good to receive care from other people of certain social status, ethnicities, or personal backgrounds.

Do members think there are other important temptations in the process of dying that do not fit well beneath one of these five headings?

2. You might ask the five groups to continue thinking about their assigned temptation, but now focus on church practices that inculcate the virtue(s) that respond to that temptation.

Brett McCarty and Allen Verhey suggest the “straightforward” practice of visiting the sick and dying can be a “political witness that disrupts the cruel collusion of the privatization of death and religious belief” in modern culture. “Gathering together as the body of Christ...both in the church building and around the bedside of the dying” reminds us that we depend upon God and one another. These practices counteract pride and induce serenity. Community practices of prayer, reading Scripture, confession, praise, petition, and lament form habits of faith, hope, and patient love. McCarty and Verhey mention other practices: “we continue to faithfully prepare to die through the practices of mourning and comforting, the practice of funerals, and the practice of remembering the saints. These gathered communities learn to proclaim Christ as Lord in all aspects of living and dying, and this may mean offering workshops at church about the writing of advanced directives for health care. This proclamation will certainly involve lifelong catechesis concerning death and dying, with continued moral discourse and communal discernment concerning the ways people die and care for the dying. In all these ways, we open ourselves up to the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us what it means to live and die faithfully as people claimed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

3. The term “art” might suggest that we can master the process of dying to make it a palatable and good thing, a production of ours for which we may be proud. Joel Shuman wants to correct this Pollyannaish view. Death is an evil that is ultimately beyond our control, and we are forced at some time to face it.

A better understanding of “art” in this context is that we must do some work – we must study, observe, and finally experience the process of dying – in order to hone the virtues that help us resist some of death’s spiritual damage. Yet ultimately the virtues for dying well are gracious gifts inculcated by God through the Church.

Perhaps Shuman is also giving us a gentle warning that we should not “press” those who are dying to also worry about being virtuous examples for us.

Departing Hymn

“When Life Well Lived Is at an End” is on p. 49 of *Death*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.