

A Review of Henri Nouwen's *Can You Drink the Cup?*

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In *Can You Drink the Cup?* by Henri Nouwen explores three stages of the Christian life using the Eucharistic celebration of the church as an illustrative analogy. With each stage Nouwen discusses a deeper aspect of Christian spirituality. The author's exploration of the spirituality of life goes beyond merely existing to asking the all-important question, "What is the purpose of my life?" It is by holding, lifting, and drinking our cups that we discover, share, and employ our purpose fully to the glory of the God who gives and fills the cup of life.

Nouwen discusses a pericope in the Gospel of Matthew in which the mother of two of his disciples, James and John, asks Jesus to grant the seats at his right and his left in his kingdom to her two sons. Jesus' response to them was a question. "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" Jesus asks (Matthew 20:22). Nouwen describes how this question was very special to him because of a golden, diamond adorned chalice given to him by his uncle for his ordination to the priesthood (Nouwen 1996, 19). Later in his ministry, he is happy to use ordinary glasses in place of his elaborate chalice (17). Jesus' question to these two disciples was instrumental to Nouwen's gaining of "insight" into three aspects of life, "holding, lifting, and drinking (20-21).

In chapters 1-3, Nouwen likens the first aspect of the spiritual life to holding the cup one is about to drink. First, this means that a person must become familiar with his or her own life's purpose and vocation. We must discipline ourselves to contemplate the uniqueness of our own lives so that we can successfully fulfill our own vocations (27-29). Secondly, holding the cup means learning to courageously embrace life's sorrows. When we examine our cups, one of the first things we notice is that each of our lives contains troubles: sickness and disease, pain, and

unfulfilled needs (33-32). To drink this “cup of sorrow” is to share the cup which Jesus drank on behalf of all humanity (35). It is to invite God’s will to take precedence in our lives over our own (38). Finally, Nouwen tells of how he has witnessed great joy in the midst of life’s sufferings. The joy of belonging calms our fear of suffering (44-45), and joy is often hidden deeply within sorrow as a light shimmering in heavy darkness (46). Nouwen concludes that the cup of sorrow and the cup of joy are one and the same cup (51).

Chapters 4-6 speak of lifting the cup, which symbolizes a mutual celebration of life in community. In the same way that groups of people celebrate with one another by having a glass of wine or other drink together, lifting the cup reminds us that we are not meant to live our lives in isolation but with others (56-57). Nouwen reminds us that we are all people of both sorrow and joy, and “a fellowship of mutual care” can be a valuable source of continual joy (57). Letting others know what is in our cups is important because, although each of us is unique, we all need to experience intimacy in a close community of friends (59). In his story about Trevor, Nouwen illustrates that we should be less preoccupied with artificial boundaries which separate rich from poor, sick from healthy, and clergy from laity and more concerned about celebrating our togetherness both as part of God’s creation and as his children (63-69). Our experiences of sorrow become life-giving when we hold them up for all to see (74). They become both an inspiration for others and a record of how we have come to be who we are today (74-75).

Finally, chapters 7-9 refer to drinking the cup of life as “fully appropriating and internalizing our own unique existence, with all its sorrows and joys” (81). Even though we may not be fully content with the lot we have received, we must follow in the example of the Lord and his disciples and drink all the life that God has given to us (82-83). If we seek to avoid life’s sorrows, and consequently its joys as well, our lives will lack authenticity, significance, and

enjoyment (83). Drinking our cup is the inevitable process by which salvation comes and we, after facing all of our disappointments, addictions, and fears, are given new life (87-91). Thus we all need to drink our cups of life “slowly, tasting every mouthful—all the way to the bottom” (93).

Nouwen offers three personal disciplines by which we can fully savor every last ounce of the contents of our cups (93). The first discipline is silence, in which we contemplate and seek to become fully aware of our own identity and personal journey instead of continually seeking to distract our attention from our situations (94-95). The second discipline is speaking about the content of our cups with others (96). A fear of rejection makes this discipline especially difficult because we are all broken and therefore tainted by sin and regrets, but it is our common brokenness that makes it both safe and necessary to share what is in our cups, but with discretion (96-98). Finally, the third discipline is a careful choosing of the actions in which we engage (99). Action is about giving ourselves fully to God and seeking to do everything he has appointed for us to do (100).

The cup to which Jesus refers is a cup of life (104). James and John might have sought political and financial prestige when they agreed to drink the same cup that Jesus drank, but they also wanted to remain in close proximity to Jesus (105). They were part of the believing entourage who knew Jesus’ true identity (106). Yet what they eventually came to know is that drinking the cup of Jesus means learning selflessness, trust, and total dependence on God. Jesus might not offer the specific reward we desire for drinking his cup, but drinking your cup is life-giving because it is a cup of intimacy with the Lord Jesus (107). So then, we must drink both Jesus’ cup and our own cups (111).

Concluding Thoughts

Nouwen's entire analogy of life as holding, lifting, and drink a cup is brilliant. I find it to be more than merely a book about how to live the Christian life. It is a book about how to both truly enter into our own lives and live them to the fullest. More than anything else, I appreciate his story about visiting Trevor at the hospital for lunch. This lesson is valuable for the many who refuse to enjoy life for silly, self-inflicted reasons or because of a hyper concern for one's self above others. Enjoyment comes most often and most readily through community, and the life God has given us comes with a system for producing continual joy. So I think it is safe to say that he wants us to enjoy life. As I drink my cup, I am now equipped by an excellent three-fold description of what that looks like. Thanks to Henri's insight and practical disciplines, I am more willing than ever before to enter into this life God has given me and drink it fully for his glory.

Bibliography

Nouwen, Henri. 1996. *Can You Drink the Cup?* Ave Maria Press: Notre Dame, IN.