



Running the Race for an Imperishable Crown: The Desire for Glory as an Essential Component of the Christian Virtue of Magnanimity

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*[W]hat is man, that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?*

*Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.*

Psalm 144:3

*[W]e are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with
Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

Romans 8:16-17

*Therefore... let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run
with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our
faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is
seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Hebrews 12:1-2

IN ONE OF HIS BEST-KNOWN ESSAYS, “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis explains that a desire for glory, which is symbolically expressed in Christian scripture “with an

enormous wealth of imagery” including wearing a crown, sitting on a throne, or shining like the sun, initially struck him as not only “puzzling” and “repellent,” but

even immoral and vicious. He adds that his reflexive distaste for glory-seeking is characteristic of most moderns, likely due to the influence of the Stoics and Kant (Kant representing a key figure in the modern rejection of eudaimonism in ethics) in addition to a democratic impulse that no one person is superior to another, given that the acquisition of glory seems to be a zero-sum game in which some win and some lose.¹ Materialism² is surely yet another strong influence: what are we, after all, other than cosmically insignificant hunks of atoms—or, as one author not-so-poetically

expressed, insects on the windshield of time? A desire for glory, on a materialist account, sounds like little more than a Quixotic delusion of grandeur.³

Modern critiques of Aristotle’s “great-souled” or magnanimous man⁴—secular and Christian alike—in almost universally citing his paramount desire for honor or glory as one of his most off-putting attributes, bear out this distaste. And yet, the desire for what Aristotle refers to as the greatest of external goods, honor or glory (*Ethics*, 1123b15-23), while seemingly among the most questionable and antiquated

¹ In her essay “Aquinas’s Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence: A New Measure of Greatness,” Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung articulately expresses this concern: “the magnanimous man’s excellence is... valued at least in part because it supersedes that of others whom he outdoes, despises, and condescends to... the measure of greatness remains inherently comparative, and the standard of comparison is still emphatically horizontal” (218). Interestingly—and this could be an essay all on its own—Aquinas does assert that only some people can be magnanimous and that not all virtuous men are necessarily magnanimous. Yet there is a lesser, nameless version of magnanimity that, in a sense, makes it accessible to all in the same way that not everyone can be magnificent (give great sums of money), but everyone can be liberal (give lesser amounts of money). Furthermore, Aquinas also asserts that “it is possible for one to whom the act of magnanimity is not competent to have the habit of

magnanimity, whereby he is disposed to practice that act if it were competent to him according to his state” (Q129, Article 3). For these reasons, I will be treating magnanimity as a virtue accessible to all Christians, as Josef Pieper does in his work *On Hope*.

² Because physical entities have been discovered which are not material, the term *physicalism* is now favored instead of *materialism*, but I chose to use the latter term because it is more widely recognized.

³ A modern short story which exemplifies this view is Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” in which an old woman with delusions of importance discovers, in the climax of the piece, that she is utterly insignificant. Mansfield referred to the story as her “insect Magnificat.”

⁴ In this paper, I initially use the word “man” when describing Aristotle’s account—in order to accurately represent his views—and then switch to “person” when describing a Christian reimagining of Aristotle’s account.

(classical, Homeric) elements of Aristotle's portrait of a "great-souled man" is actually among the elements that a Christian recasting of Aristotelian magnanimity ought to affirm—in fact, it answers a common and dangerous misconception within the Christian faith.

In this paper, I will first provide **(1a)** a brief account of Aristotle's virtue ethics and **(1b)** a summary of his portrait of the moral virtue of magnanimity (*megalopsychia*) in particular, emphasizing how essential the desire for glory clearly is to his portrait. I will then **(2)** outline two common features of contemporary secular critiques of Aristotle's portrait of the magnanimous man: first, **(2a)** contemporary secular critiques almost universally mistakenly identify the magnanimous man's desire for glory as one of his greatest flaws. Many therefore attempt to explain that desire away, removing it from the portrait of a magnanimous man; this calls into question whether the portrait

can be salvaged at all. And yet, second, many of these critiques do also **(2b)** rightly identify two irreconcilable tensions in Aristotle's account, given the magnanimous man's desire for glory. I will then argue **(3)** for what I believe is a correct Christian reimagining of the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity which affirms the magnanimous person's desire for glory, and in doing so, actually succeeds in salvaging Aristotle's portrait. To do so, I will first argue, along with other Christian interpreters, **(3a)** that Aquinas's Christian recasting of the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity readily resolves the two irreconcilable tensions secular commentators often identify in Aristotle's account, but will then **(3b)** outline a common contemporary Christian dismissal—the very same dismissal characterizing secular commentators' perspectives—of the magnanimous person's desire for glory, which, again, would call

into question whether the portrait can be salvaged at all (3c) and reply to that dismissal by citing the authority of Aquinas himself in addition to Christian apologist C.S. Lewis and Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper to affirm the goodness and rightness of a magnanimous Christian's desire for glory.

(1a) Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Aristotle's virtue ethics is a part of the ancient and medieval tradition of *eudaimonism*, in which a human's end (*telos*) and greatest good is happiness (*eudaimonia*). As a human being's end, happiness is desirable in itself and is all a person needs to be perfectly fulfilled. On Aristotle's account, given that rationality is what sets human beings apart and must therefore characterize their function or purpose, happiness is obtained through virtuous activity over the course of one's

life, which is necessarily in accordance with reason.

Human virtue, on Aristotle's account, can be divided into moral virtue (Ethics, Bk. 2) and intellectual virtue (Ethics, Bk. 6).

Because magnanimity is a moral virtue, this summary will focus exclusively on the former. Interestingly, while moral virtue is influenced by reason, it is not merely rational. It is characterized by action which proceeds from emotion and desire. And yet, moral virtue is not emotion, desire, or even action; rather, it is a *state of character* formed by habits which are in turn formed by individual choices.⁵ As individual choices become habits, emotions and desires follow suit: a clear sign of being virtuous is actually taking pleasure in acting virtuously and doing so reflexively, without having to think about it. The more virtuous one is, the easier it is to act virtuously.

⁵ Choice consists in not just voluntary action, which animals and children are capable of, but voluntary

and *deliberate* action, which is guided by the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

Though there are a few moral absolutes (do not steal, do not commit adultery, etc.), most right actions consist in choosing to act according to a virtue which exists as a mean between vices of excess and deficiency. For example, the virtue of courage consists in feeling *the right amount* of fear *at the right time* for *the right reason* (this is a key formulation which applies to each virtue); to be excessively fearful is to be cowardly, and to not feel enough fear is to be foolhardy. Very often, one vice of excess is far more common than another—fear, for example, is more common than foolhardiness—and it can be very difficult to hit the mean; thus, it can be practically best to aim more towards the less common vice in order to better arrive at the mean. Also worth noting is that a mean is relative to each individual: for example, gluttony for the average person is not the same as gluttony for an Olympic athlete, for whom virtue would actually require eating more food than the average

person. The need for discernment—recall the subjectivity of the “the right amount...at the right time...for the right reason...” formulation above—is why the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (phronesis) so essential to moral virtue.

(1b) Aristotle’s Portrait of the Magnanimous Man

The Greek word for the virtue of magnanimity, *megalopsychia*, can also be translated as pride, high-mindedness, dignity, or self-respect. On Aristotle’s account (see *Ethics*, Book IV, Ch. 3), the magnanimous or proud man is concerned with great things: he thinks himself worthy of great things and is accurate in his assessment: he is in fact worthy of them. The vices of excess which correspond to this virtue are therefore *vanity*, which consists in thinking oneself is worthy of great things when one is not, and being “small-souled” or *unduly humble*, which consists in thinking oneself unworthy of the great things one is

in fact worthy of: “being worthy of good things, [the unduly humble] robs himself of what he deserves.” Such people shrink back “even from noble actions and undertakings, deeming themselves unworthy.”⁶

Interestingly, the vice of undue humility, in Aristotle’s view, is a greater flaw than the vice of vanity, “for it is both commoner and worse.” The safer extreme to aim towards is therefore not undue humility, but vanity.

Being concerned with great things, the magnanimous man desires *honor* or glory above all else—“*It is chiefly with honors and dishonors that the magnanimous man is concerned*” (1124a4-5)—as honor is “the greatest of external goods” and is what is “rendere[ed] to the gods.” And yet, because no honor human beings can afford is worthy of him, he is only moderately pleased by honors conferred by the very best of human beings and thinks nothing of the honor

afforded by those who are unworthy. Given that even honor, the greatest of earthly goods, is inadequate for his greatness, no earthly good, including wealth, power, and even good fortune, have the power to move him. He looks down on it all: “nothing to him is great.”

The magnanimous man is necessarily “good in the highest degree” and has “greatness in every virtue”; to suggest that a man could be magnanimous and not good would be an “utter absurdity.” Magnanimity is, in fact, “the crown” of all the virtues and makes all other virtues greater. The magnanimous man, therefore, would never wrong anyone else. He is no coward. He is quick to give and slow to receive. He is honest and forthright, caring more for the truth than the opinion of others. He is no flatterer. He does not bear grudges—rather, he overlooks wrongs—and is not a gossip.

⁶ There is a third possibility: those who think themselves worthy of little who are in fact worthy of little. These individuals are merely *temperate*. As

explained in the first footnote, this third possibility isn’t relevant to the argument that will be advanced in this essay.

He is dignified towards those in high positions, but unassuming towards those in low positions, for an imposing bearing among the humble “is as vulgar as a display of strength against the weak.” He is a man of few deeds, but great deeds. He possesses beautiful and impractical things rather than profitable or useful things, because he is self-sufficient. He is never hurried or flustered and therefore walks with a slow step and speaks with a deep voice and level utterance. Because of the perfect virtue of the magnanimous man, Aristotle asserts that true magnanimity is difficult to achieve and therefore rare.

**(2) Modern Critiques of Aristotle’s
Magnanimous Man
(2a) The Desire for Glory a Fundamental
Flaw?**

In his essay “A Great Philosopher’s Not So Great Account of Great Virtue,” Howard J. Curzer takes a representative critical

stance in asserting that “the modern prejudice against *megalopsychia*” is likely thanks to viewing a desire for honor as essential to it. While critics object to a number of features of Aristotle’s portrait—the magnanimous man looks down on others, doesn’t like to receive help, neglects many ordinary acts of virtue in favor of a few great acts, prefers to own useless things rather than useful things, and so on—many of those features can be satisfactorily explained, and, regardless, it is the magnanimous man’s paramount desire for honor which is the by far his most salient “problematic” feature. In order to explain away this perceived flaw, Curzer suggests that Aristotle is seeking to replace “vestigial, Homeric values of greatness and grandeur” with “the newer value of moderation and the mean,”⁷ and then, in another typical move, proceeds to argue that a desire for honor is

⁷ The ideal of the mean in contrast to Homeric magnificence or greatness was almost certainly influenced by Stoic and Epicurean philosophy.

not essential to Aristotle's magnanimous man, but rather that he only desires honor insofar as it is evidence of his virtue. It is being virtuous and not receiving honor that truly matters to the magnanimous man; receiving honor as a reward of his virtue is a nice but unnecessary cherry on top of the fact of being virtuous.

In support of this claim, Curzer observes that Aristotle is quick to explain that the magnanimous man actually attaches very little importance to human honor: "not even about honor does he care very much" (*Ethics*, 1124a13-17). While it is true that Aristotle is consciously critiquing a common Greek conception of magnanimity, in which a magnanimous man cared so much about the honor afforded by other people that he was characterized by an "intolerance of insults"—an allegedly magnanimous Ajax

or an Achilles could therefore descend in a rage upon their own cities in response to a perceived dishonor or failure to award honor—(Fetter 3-5)⁸ he is clearly not doing away with a desire for honor altogether. It is not that Aristotle's magnanimous man doesn't care for honor at all—after all, as outlined above, "it is chiefly with honors and dishonors that the magnanimous man is concerned" (*Ethics*, 1124a4-5)—but rather that no human honor is worthy of his greatness. This is why he is only "moderately pleased" by "honors that are great and conferred by good men... but honor from casual people and on trifling grounds he will utterly despise" (*Ethics*, 1124a6-12). He doesn't care much about honor, despite honor being the greatest of external goods, only because no honor available to him is worthy of him. To

⁸ Aristotle explicitly points out this issue in his *Posterior Analytics*, an often overlooked text on the subject of his portrait of a magnanimous man: "if Alcibiades is great-souled, and Achilles and Ajax, what one thing do they all have? Intolerance of

insults..." He notes that an intolerance of insults and an indifference to bad fortune, both of which are typically attributed to the magnanimous man, are contrary to one another (PA, 97b16-25 qtd. in Fetter).

remove the desire for honor from the portrait of the magnanimous man, which is so essential to it, is to call into question whether the portrait can be salvaged.

(2b) Two Irreconcilable Tensions: A Desire for Glory Can't Be Satisfied, and It's Impossible to Be Magnanimous

While Curzer's argument is flawed, what he *has* rightly put his finger on is a strange paradox in Aristotle's portrait: if honor matters most of all to the magnanimous man and he never receives the honor his greatness deserves, which even the best human beings are incapable of giving, then he is doomed never to find ultimate fulfillment or satisfaction. Mary M. Keys summarizes this problem well: "How this person at the presumed pinnacle of ethical virtue is to achieve the happiness (*eudaimonia*) that is the human *telos* remains at best an open question, an unsolved riddle. Aristotle thrice describes the *great-souled* man as 'he to whom

nothing is great'" (41). Surely the magnanimous man, who possesses the "crown of the virtues" which makes all virtues greater "and is not found without them" (*Ethics*, 1124a 1-3) cannot fail to fulfill his purpose, obtaining happiness.

The fact that the magnanimous man possesses all the virtues points to a further irreconcilable issue in Aristotle's portrait: it is not merely, as Aristotle asserts, "hard" to be such a person (*Ethics*, 1124a 3)—someone who is "good in the highest degree" and possesses "perfect virtue" (*Ethics*, 1123b 28-29, 1124a 8), it's impossible. Further, as W.F.R. Hardie colorfully points out, even if there were a person who somehow managed to become perfectly good, for them to assume that their goodness was all their own doing, omitting the role of nature and fortune, would be to "[fall] into fatuity below the level of common sense..." (74), rendering them vain, "fools and ignorant of themselves"

(*Ethics*, 1125a 29), rather than magnanimous, for, as Aristotle explains, it is essential to the virtue of magnanimity to have an accurate estimate of one's own worth. There are, evidently, two glaring flaws in Aristotle's portrait of the magnanimous man.

(3) A Christian Recasting of Aristotelian Magnanimity

(3a) Flaws in Aristotle's Portrait Readily Addressed

A Christian recasting of Aristotelian magnanimity readily addresses these flaws. As Keys explains in reference to Aquinas's reimagining of Aristotelian magnanimity in his *Summa Theologica*, the first concern is addressed by introducing the idea of transcendence: the magnanimous person views human honor as insufficient because "man cannot sufficiently honor virtue which deserves to be honored by God" (*Summa*, II, II, Q129, Article 2). In contrast to the honor afforded by human beings, "That which we receive from God is not vain but true glory:

it is this glory that is promised as a reward for good works..." (*Summa*, II, II, Q 132, Article 1). The magnanimous person can hope for and obtain the honor he or she deserves by seeking it from God. Fulfillment of his or her end—the attainment of happiness (*eudaimonia*)—is possible.

Speaking of desert, a Christian viewpoint also addresses the second issue: while no human being can be truly magnanimous under his or her own power, it is possible to be accounted perfectly righteous or virtuous as a gift of God's grace and therefore made worthy of all the inheritance bestowed upon Christ (we are made co-heirs with Christ): "magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God" (*Summa*, II, II, Q129, Article 3). God makes us worthy of great things and it is therefore fitting that we view ourselves as such.

(3b) An Apparent Objection: A Desire for Glory Should Not Be Affirmed

And yet, while addressing one problem, this answer—that it is only by God’s grace that we are made truly magnanimous—introduces yet another problem, which calls into question the morality of a human desire for glory: surely if any good we do is entirely thanks to God, it must be wrong to hope for or desire honor or glory for ourselves, when any glory should belong entirely to God. Because “a man has not from himself the thing in which he excels... on this count honor is due principally, not to him but to God” (*Summa*, II, II, Q 131, Article 1). What does any of us have that we have not received (1 Cor. 4:7)? Moreover, isn’t it wrong, mercenary, to love God for anything he can give us rather than loving him for himself? Perhaps a desire for glory and recognition from God is repellent and immoral after all.

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, a Christian philosopher, appears to hold this common and understandable viewpoint. In her article

“Aquinas’s Virtues of Acknowledge Dependence,” after identifying “our fundamental relationship of dependence on God” as “the key transformative feature of Aquinas’s account of... magnanimity,” and therefore a Christian account of magnanimity, she then makes the very same move as Curzer, emphasizing the magnanimous person’s desire to be virtuous and downplaying his desire to see that virtue rewarded. In her view, the magnanimous person “attempts and achieves great things because they are appropriate expressions of the excellence that he has, not because he craves affirmation from others or desires glory.” In other words, he “‘does not regard honor as the greatest good,’ but rather the virtue which makes one genuinely worthy of it” (217). Like Curzer, she subtly separates the idea of being virtuous from the idea of being rewarded—from the realization of one’s own good, as if fulfillment of one’s

own nature and reward were not the natural outgrowth and end of virtuous behavior.

(3c) Reply to Objection: Why a Desire for Glory Ought to be Affirmed

Initially, it is unclear whether or not Aquinas affirms a Christian's desire for the glory that is promised by God in heaven, particularly given that in his account of the virtue of magnanimity, he asserts that *honor* is not the due reward of virtue that God will give to the magnanimous—and, for that matter, all the virtuous—but rather *happiness* (*eudaimonia*). Aquinas describes honor as the paltry best that humans can offer as a reward of virtue in contrast to the eternal *happiness* God offers as a reward (*Summa*, II, II, Q 131, Article 1). This “final and perfect” happiness, as he explains much earlier in the *Summa*, is realized in the *beatific vision*, which “can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence” in which God unites himself with our intellects. The reason for this is the very

same function argument made by Aristotle: perfect happiness consists in the perfection of that capacity which sets human beings apart and therefore defines their function—rationality (*Summa*, II, I, Q3, Article 8).

And yet, in the supplement to the *Summa* (Q 96, Article 1), Aquinas acknowledges that the beatific vision, a Christian's essential reward or “crown” (*aurea*), does not actually encapsulate all the rewards or “crowns” (*aureoles*) to be received by Christians in heaven. First, the glorification of the body is not directly part of the beatific vision and yet is part of the essential reward, and second, there are also “accidental” rewards distinct from the essential reward. While the end of all meritorious acts is the essential reward, different virtuous acts belong to different genera based on “the habit eliciting [the act] and from [the act's] proximate end”: “accordingly it must be said that an ‘aureole’ denotes something added to the ‘aurea,’ a kind of joy... in the works one

has done... this joy is distinct from being united to God.” Aquinas, as quoted above, cites honor as one such reward that God promises to Christians for their good works (*Summa*, II, II, Q 132, Article 1).

C.S. Lewis makes further sense of the apparent contradiction between the essential reward (union with God) and accidental rewards (honor, etc.) when, recognizing the metaphorical nature of all the promises made concerning heaven, he explains that the promise of future honor or glory is a one salient promise among a handful of varied promises which, “[do] not mean anything other than God will be our ultimate bliss” (35). Such promises are authoritative images provided by God for us to, so to speak, lean into them in order that we might obtain the best, most accurate image accessible to us of that future happiness (33-35).⁹ In this way, to hope that God will give us glory and

honor is an essential ingredient in hoping for the perfect happiness (eudaimonia) which is our ultimate end (telos).

It would be a mistake to permit the knowledge that the glory God will give us, as expressed in putting a crown on our heads, seating us on thrones, etc. is “only” a set of images to cause us to step away or detach from them as if they were unreal. One of the best ways to understand God as he wants us to understand him is, for example, to lean into the most common image he has chosen to describe himself—“father”—and think of the very best qualities of our own fathers or of fathers we know. That’s the very reason God chose to call himself our “father.” Lewis, leaning into the image of glory provided in scripture, elaborates on it: “glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response,

⁹ Interestingly, Lewis points out that the even idea of “being with Christ,” on its own, offers us an incomplete, insufficient image of our future happiness, because when we imagine “being with

Christ” almost certainly picture being in physical proximity to Christ, having a conversation with him, etc. (33-5)

acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things” (41).

Downplaying a desire for God to glorify us—a desire for our own ultimate happiness—though a common and understandable move for Christians to make, given the very the real danger of pride, vainglory, and ambition,¹⁰ is also harmful and unscriptural. Scripture of course has much to say about self-denial and humility, epitomized by the command to Christians to “take up your cross daily” in imitation of Christ. But it would be a grave error to forget that even Christ, the “founder and perfecter” of the Christian faith suffered and endured the cross “*for the joy set before him*” (Heb. 12:1-2). Directly following the most well-known expression of the incredible model of humility that Christ sets in Philippians 2—his *kenosis* or self-emptying—Paul continues, “Therefore God

has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9).

This tendency to dismiss a desire for reward from God as “mercenary” is pervasive enough that both C.S. Lewis and Josef Pieper directly address it. Pieper explains the problem with such a viewpoint, even asserting that its origin is, ironically enough, *pride*:

“The assumption that the existence of a ‘concupiscent’ love of God that is referred ... to oneself, and hence ... no more than an ‘interested’ and ‘mercenary’ love unworthy of the truly perfect Christian (as though man could possibly be ‘disinterested’ in the fulfillment of his own nature in God—for what else is ‘heaven’ all about?) belongs, it would seem, to the inevitable temptations to pride by which even the strongest souls are endangered.” (32-3)

And this “desire-for-reward-as-mercenary” stance is hardly a new issue. Pieper also references a declaration made by The Council of Trent: “If anyone says that the

¹⁰ Aquinas defines vainglory as a desire for glory for something not worthy of glory, glory given by someone unworthy, or glory not desired for a due end (God’s glory or the welfare of our neighbor). He

similarly defines ambition as an inordinate desire for honor—inordinate when not referred to God or to the profit of others.

faithful ought not to expect and hope for eternal happiness from God for the sake of his mercy and the merits of Christ... let him be anathema” (qtd. in Pieper 33). He explains that the imperfect love in which one hopes for good for oneself “is the not-to-be-undervalued precursor of the perfect love of friendship (*caritas*) by which God is affirmed for his own sake” (32). At root, the origin of the idea that is wrong to hope for one’s own good and even one’s own glory very likely lies in the modern rejection of the eudaimonism—a rejection which divorced acting virtuously from a desire for the fulfillment or realization of one’s own good, one’s ultimate happiness—which lay at the heart of both Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s ethics.

Conclusion

It is ironic that the modern era, the beginning of which was defined by a “turn to the subject” or the self has rendered human beings, far from the center of the

universe, as might be expected, so dreadfully small and insignificant. Josef Pieper identifies *acedia* (sloth, indifference, torpor, inertia) as a hallmark of our current secular age, and explains that this is the case because it “seeks, in its despair, to shake off the obligations of that *nobility of being* that is conferred by Christianity, and so, in its despair, to *deny its true self*.” (emphasis added, 59). When we fail to obey God’s commands (i.e. to cultivate virtue), we fail to fulfill our nature and therefore to attain happiness. We fall into despair. Pieper goes on to explain that, accordingly, despair is “destroyed... only by that clear-sighted magnanimity that courageously expects and has confidence in the greatness of its own nature and by the grace-filled impetus of the hope of eternal life” (60). Obedience to God’s commands (i.e. the cultivation of virtue), cannot and should not be divorced from the hope of the fulfillment of our own nature and the attainment of happiness. An

inextricable part of our future hope is to one day hear from God, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:23).

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