

Gladiator Emperor on the Good Life: Love God, Love Man

When asked which commandment was above all others, Christ responded by stating that we are to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In other words, to love God and man was the path to a good life.

Roughly 135 years later, Emperor Marcus Aurelius, probably made famous to modern Americans by his portrayal in the movie *Gladiator*, set about to rid the Roman Empire of those who followed Christ's teachings in what became known as the Fourth Persecution. Under Emperor Aurelius, Christians were tortured, fed to wild beasts, burned at the stake, beaten to death, and beheaded. Several famous saints, such as Felicitas, Justin Martyr, and Polycarp, met their deaths during this period.

Oddly enough though, in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* he seems to share the same outlook as Christ when considering the good life. He, too, believed that to love the gods and to love men were the highest pursuits of man.

In Book V of his *Meditations*, Aurelius writes:

"Soon, very soon, you will be ashes, or a skeleton, and either a name or not even a name. ... And until that time comes, **what is sufficient? Why, what else than to venerate the gods and bless them, and to do good to men**, and to practice tolerance and self-restraint...

You can pass your life in a steady flow of happiness, if you can go by the right way, and think and act in the right way...

Do not be carried along inconsiderately by the appearance of things, but give help to all according to their ability and their fitness."

Aurelius further expands on loving the gods and loving man in Book VI:

“Keep yourself then simple, good, pure, serious, free from affectation, strenuous in all proper acts. Strive to continue to be such as philosophy wished to make you. **Reverence the gods, and help men.** Short is life. There is only one fruit of this earthly life, a pious disposition and social acts.”

He then goes on to use Emperor Antoninus, who succeeded Emperor Hadrian in 138 A.D., as an example of a man who lived the good life:

“Do everything as a disciple of Antoninus. Remember his constancy in every act which was conformable to reason, and his evenness in all things, and his piety, and the serenity of his countenance, and his sweetness, and his disregard of empty fame, and his efforts to understand things; and how he would never let anything pass without having first most carefully examined it and clearly understood it; and how he bore with those who blamed him unjustly without blaming them in return; how he did nothing in a hurry; and how he listened not to false statements, and how exact an examiner of manners and actions he was; and not given to reproach people, nor timid, nor suspicious, nor a sophist; and with how little he was satisfied, such as lodging, bed, dress, food, servants; and how laborious and patient; and how he was able on account of his sparing diet to hold out to the evening, not even requiring to relieve himself by any evacuations except at the usual hour; and his firmness and uniformity in his friendships; and how he tolerated freedom of speech in those who opposed his opinions; and the pleasure that he had when any man showed him better; and how religious he was without superstition. **Imitate all this that you may have a good conscience, when your last hour comes, as he had.**”

What a contrast to our indulgent culture of endless distractions! Mass marketing blankets us with the idea that

happiness is only achieved with the purchase of the latest, greatest thing or experience. We flitter from one moment to another, led by our passions and appetite, not by reason or the counsels of the soul.

If you find yourself unsatisfied with what the current culture celebrates, you're not alone. We haven't been given the tools to understand and seek a good life. It's fascinating to see both Christ and pagan emperors share the belief that to love God and to love man is the path to the good life. Though they lived nearly 2,000 years ago, they were probably on to a truth that we would be wise to heed.