



# Ladder-Ascending Character Meets Ladder-Descending Grace

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**C**haracter. We want character. We want sustained identity, moral sturdiness, internal strength. Buffeted daily by terrorist threats and financial uncertainties while groveling for “likes” on Facebook keeps us in a constant state of anxiety. Death and taxes are beyond our control, and perhaps even our own cravings are out of control. Our inner self feels scattered among the winds of frustrated ambition while being blown to and fro by competing Internet worldviews. Could personal character provide the inner soul with a solid rock on which to stand? Would a soul that pursues moral character be considered heroic?

Daily we live with unconscious boredom, not really loving, not really attached to the moral purposes that give life its worth, observes David Brooks of the *New York Times*. As twenty-first-centurians, we lack the internal criteria by which unshakable commitments are made. We fail to develop the inner constancy to withstand disapproval. We find ourselves doing things that other people approve of, regardless of whether they are right or not. What is needed, says Brooks, is a strategy to build character. With character in our inner life we will be able to manage our external life without falling to pieces.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), Introduction.

*In the twenty-first century, a cultural yearning for strength of moral character seems to be asking for what a ladder-climbing spirituality can deliver. Yet, horizontal spirituality offers something perhaps more valuable than character construction, namely, sinners engaged in neighbor-loving and justice-pursuing.*

Classical Christian spirituality has understood well this human problem. In both Eastern and Western traditions, sin-sick Christian souls have sought to establish character through practicing self-control. In the twenty-first century, however, the very idea of self-control seems as out-of-date as a slide rule. Self-expression is the watchword for the postmodern soul, even if self-expression leads to hollow chaos and personal meaninglessness. Could self-formation help? Could the development of personal character, self-discipline, or moral integrity come to the rescue of the disintegrating soul?

For our ancestors, what we call “character” sits atop a tall ladder, a ladder that connects earth with heaven. On heaven’s doorstep lies the prize, moral self-control. The heroic soul sets out to climb that ladder. Despite missteps, the heroic soul climbs from earth to heaven. Like a right-sized football helmet, ladder-climbing self-discipline fits well the spiritual athletes of the pre-Reformation era.

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*divine forgiveness descends the ladder before the heroic sinner can climb up*

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The Reformers confused our ancestors, however, by telling them that God comes down that ladder to meet the sinner at the bottom rung. This is what grace means: Rom 5:8—“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Divine forgiveness descends the ladder before the heroic sinner can climb up. With divine grace having descended from heaven to earth, what’s a heroic soul to do?

Post-Enlightenment modernity has confused the matter even more. Modern materialism has removed the ladder entirely. “The materialist view claims that there is no heaven, no spiritual world, no God, no soul; nothing but what can be known through the five senses and reason,” charges New Testament scholar Walter Wink. “There is no higher self; we are mere complexes of matter, and when we die we cease to exist except as the chemicals and atoms that once constituted us. Matter is ultimate.”<sup>2</sup> In short, there is no ladder because there is no heaven and there is no soul that will be welcomed by God into heaven. In a materialistic age, what’s a heroic soul to do?

What seems to be left is daily life on the horizontal plane, here on earth rather than heaven. That life could be improved, says Brooks, with strong moral character. Even without a God in heaven or a ladder reaching this God, the strivings for moral self-improvement would be valuable to the individual and, in turn, to the surrounding society.

Lutherans in the Reformation tradition, curiously, seem only mildly concerned with character development but still concerned about the quality of life on the horizontal plane. No ladder climbing for Lutherans! Why? Because faith in the

<sup>2</sup>Walter Wink, “Identifying the Powers,” in *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffrey W. Bailey, and Craig Hovey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 354–368 (356).

God of grace leads to love of neighbor. Like a stream of molasses, the descent of grace down the ladder from heaven spills out over the landscape in the form of sticky, gooey love in the pursuit of justice.

In what follows we will explicate the Lutheran repudiation of ladder-climbing spirituality. Lutherans repudiate spiritual ladder climbing because it allegedly relies on self-justification, merit, or earning one's salvation in denial of God's gracious gift in Jesus Christ. We will then turn to a prime example of ladder climbing, the spiritual directive of John Climacus's *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Here we will see clearly that the heroic soul does not achieve salvation through self-achievement or merit but, rather, through self-renunciation and humble self-reconstruction. Character construction becomes a byproduct of ladder climbing. Finally, we will look at the Lutherans who are standing at the ladder's bottom, asking themselves what to do now that God has done everything through the descent of grace. What the Lutherans decide is to activate St. Paul's message, "faith active in love" (Gal 5:1), as a prompt for pursuing justice here on earth. Though speaking for St. Paul rather than the Lutherans, former Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, gets it right: "The call of the gospel is for the church to *implement* the victory of God in the world *through suffering love*. The cross is not just an example to be followed; it is an achievement to be worked out, put into practice."<sup>3</sup>

#### GOD'S GRACE DESCENDING THE LADDER

Reformation Lutherans ask this question: If justification by faith is the therapy, what is the disease? Lutherans can easily tag the problem with terms such as "merit" or "works righteousness" or "pride" or even "earning one's salvation." Certainly that was the problem in the sixteenth century when the Reformation raised the flags of *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*.

The opposite of justification by God's grace through faith is clear: it is self-justification. It is the attempt to storm the gates of heaven on our own power. It is the demand that the gates of pearl be opened to welcome us because we're just, righteous, godly. Like the Tower of Babel in Gen 11, through self-justification we construct a ladder that leads from earth to heaven.

It is this self-justifying mind-set against which the Reformers aimed their gospel of grace. To climb the ladder on our own rather than accept a gift from our gracious God descending the ladder is worse than being ungrateful. It's blasphemous, because it fails to acknowledge that God is gracious.

Traditional ladder theology, allegedly, represents our generic human propensity for a self-justifying spirituality. We deceive ourselves into believing that we can arrest from God what God wants to give freely. We deceive ourselves into striving to earn what could be ours as a gift. This deception turns on the articulation of what we believe we ought to be. I refer to this pattern of self-deceit as *self-justification*.

<sup>3</sup>N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006) 98.



*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a twelfth-century icon at at Mount Sinai. Monks, led by John Climacus, are ascending the ladder to Jesus (see note 7).

We might try to say it more precisely: self-justification refers to justification apart from faith in the God who graciously justifies us.

According to the late Gerhard Forde's employment of the ladder metaphor, the heroic soul likes to climb ladders.<sup>4</sup> Not actual ladders, to be sure. Rather, figurative ladders—ladders of merit—which take us above the mundane to the celestial realm of glory. The climbing soul climbs the ladder without falling. Forde follows St. Paul, Augustine, and Luther when reminding us that God comes down the ladder in Christ. So, if we climb the ladder to the gates of heaven, we'll end up looking for the divine in the wrong place.

Still, a good day for the heroic soul is one where the spiritual pinnacle seems within reach. The steps we've already taken have been successful. We feel that our transformation is already underway. Others recognize the change in us. The world around us is looking different, looking sacred. Joy seems to be peeking through the gloom. We have gained the confidence that we are on the right path.

Our spiritual achievement would be undercut if it could be obtained by grace. We would not need to budget our money to buy a new car if someone would give us the car for free. If what we want is an intimate relationship with God and God gives it to us freely without strings attached, this removes the sense of achievement. If the God of grace makes it too easy, we'd prefer something else with greater difficulty. At least this is what the heroic soul feels on a good day. Steven Paulson paints the picture we typically paint for ourselves:

The picture is always a form of the same dream, that of a journey or passage from "here" to "there." In its basic religious form, "here" is below and "there" is above. I learn this dream of a spiritual journey through human custom, certainly, but also by what we call "nature"—that humans are unique creatures on a mission, pilgrims seeking to return home. In other words, I am forced to do this. I have a compulsion from deep within me to justify my existence by saying, "What I am is not me, but what I will be." Any such journey has a goal that I call my destination, or a destiny called "home"—the place where I really belong. So I cast myself as an orphan or displaced person who doesn't really belong in this zoological world of copulating and dying hordes of ants and bees. Home is then a target that can be construed ontologically or morally—that the goal is to become what I was meant to be, or that God desires that I do what the law demands in order to fit into his grand scheme.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Gerhard Forde made vivid use of the ladder image in one of his earlier books, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972). Not every soul heroically tries to climb the ladder, however. This means that theologians might cut a little slack when designating pride as foremost on the list of sins. "Sin as pride, as an overextending self, works diagnostically when the situation involves and focuses upon those who are relatively powerful (who are predominately males within Western cultures). But when the situation involves the relatively less powerful and the vulnerable (at the time, predominately women, but also many others within less powerful cultural, social, economic, and political groups), then not only does sin focused as pride miss the mark, but sin as pride can also be—and has been—used dangerously against the less powerful and the vulnerable." Gary Simpson, "Thinking with Luther about Jesus (aka Sweet Lips)," *Word & World* 32/4 (Fall 2012) 364–372 (367). Simpson's concern has to do with the role of sin in the lives of women. For our purposes here, it suffices to say that pride in the form of ladder climbing characterizes some, though perhaps not all, human behavior.

<sup>5</sup>Steven D. Paulson, "My Sinful Self: The Self as Enemy," *Word & World* 28/1 (Winter 2008) 66–74 (68).

Is there any grace in this picture? Oh, yes, the ladder-climbing soul feels a hint of grace. Those in pursuit of high-minded spiritual goals feel that the world is fundamentally graced by an all-pervasive love, which in fact is the case. This all-pervasive grace is a blessing, and the climbing soul recognizes it. Yet, the climbing souls among us still want to affirm that we must work our way up the ladder so that we can claim spiritual victory for ourselves. The Christian gospel—the gospel that says God comes down the ladder to meet us at the bottom—makes no sense to the heroic soul. Such a gospel would have to be forsaken to clear the ladder for our climbing. Paulson adds, “My self is sinful as it *defeats my preacher*, so I am left all alone in justifying myself.”<sup>6</sup>

Well, this is what the ladder looks like to Protestant Reformers, especially Lutherans. But I ask: Is the ascent of the ladder necessarily a form of self-justification that denies divine grace? Might the pursuit of moral character include more than self-deception and self-achievement? Let’s take a look at a classic example, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

#### THE HEROIC SOUL CLIMBING THE LADDER TO CHARACTER

In the twenty-first century, some Eastern Orthodox Christians find they can climb the same ladder from earth to heaven originally set up by ancient eremitic hermits or anchorites living alone in the desert, Sketes submitting to a spiritual father while living near monastery grounds, and monks living in monasteries and obeying their abbots. Can a refurbished asceticism provide character development for us today?

Archimandrite Vassilios Papavassiliou, a priest in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain, has customized the classic spiritual practice and teaching of the seventh-century monk St. John Climacus. Having lived at the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, Climacus erected one of the most influential spiritual ladders in the history of Christendom, aptly titled: *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. The Climacus ladder consists of thirty steps that take the monk from earth to heaven. Getting to heaven requires leaving earth behind through self-renunciation. Self-renunciation leads to detachment, and detachment leads to what we understand to be moral character. Character befits a monk.

A monk is he who strictly controls his nature and unceasingly watches over his senses. A monk is he who keeps his body in chastity, his mouth pure and his mind illumined. A monk is a mourning soul that both asleep and awake is unceasingly occupied with the remembrance of death. Withdrawal from the world is voluntary hatred of vaunted material things and denial of nature for the attainment of what is above nature.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>7</sup>Quotes taken from John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Archimandrite Lazarus Moore (New York: Harper, 1959) 1–2, <http://www.prudencetrue.com/images/TheLadderofDivineAscent.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2016).

What is natural must be brought under control, says John Climacus. To bring our nature under control, we must renounce the world. This is what monks do. What about laypeople? It applies to laypeople as well, according to Papavassiliou. “Every Christian is called to the life of renunciation,” he says.<sup>8</sup>

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Renunciation has less to do with geography and more to do with attitude of mind. According to Step 2:7 in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the person “who has come to hate the world has escaped sorrow. But he who has an attachment to anything visible is not yet delivered from grief. For how is it possible not to be sad at the loss of something we love?” The detached self cuts the self off from loving relationships in order to protect it from disappointment, heartache, and grief. The dis-attachment of the Christian monk resembles that of the Buddhist monk, who fears attachment will delude him into believing in a false self instead of facing the reality of the non-self (Pāli: *anatta*; Sanskrit: *anātman*). Whether in the Christian or Buddhist setting, renunciation requires just the opposite of self-affirmation or self-expression. If character means self-control, it leaves a person with either a loveless self or a non-self.

Christian self-control is not an end in itself. The end is relationship with God. God is the goal. In order to reach this goal, the heroic soul struggles to replace pride or vainglory with humility or meekness.

Step 22:45. It often happens that when a worm becomes fully grown it gets wings and rises up on high. So too when vainglory increases it gives birth to pride, the origin and consummation of all evils. 23:1. Pride is denial of God, an invention of the devil, the despising of men, the mother of condemnation, the offspring of praise, a sign of sterility, flight from divine assistance, the precursor of madness, the herald of falls, a foothold for satanic possession, source of anger, door of hypocrisy, the support of demons, the guardian of sins, the patron of unsympathy, the rejection of compassion, a bitter inquisitor, an inhuman judge, an opponent of God, a root of blasphemy. 23:2. The beginning of pride is the consummation of vainglory; the middle is the humiliation of our neighbor, the shameless parade of our labors, complacency in the heart, hatred of exposure; and the end is denial of God’s help, the extolling of one’s own exertions, fiendish character.

To get a step up on our pride, we must climb the ladder rungs to humility, to meekness.

Step 25:26. Humility is a divine shelter to prevent us from seeing our achieve-

<sup>8</sup>Vassilios Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven: The Ladder of Divine Ascent for All Walks of Life* (Chesterton IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2013) 19.

ments. Humility is an abyss of self-abasement, inaccessible to any thief. Humility is a strong tower against the face of the enemy.... Meekness is an immovable state of soul which remains unaffected whether in evil report or in good report, in dishonor or in praise.

In the heroic soul a war takes place between pride and humility. "Pride is ultimately the worship of our own selves," Papavassiliou tells his lay readers.<sup>9</sup> "Pride,...being the opposite of humility, can render salvation impossible.... This is why it is so important to acknowledge our pride, to have enough humility to fight it, and to struggle to acquire greater humility."<sup>10</sup> Devout Christians in every walk of life can carry themselves with humility, with what we respect as personal character.

Should we describe the ladder climber as a heroic soul? I believe it would be appropriate. "Whether the hero be ridiculous or sublime, Greek or barbarian, gentile or Jew, his journey varies little in essential plan," writes Joseph Campbell. "Popular tales represent the heroic action as physical; the higher religions show the deed to be moral."<sup>11</sup> The heroic soul is the climbing soul on the way to the top of the spiritual ladder.

Having acknowledged this, it should still be clear that these steps up the ladder of divine ascent in no way support the idea of brute self-achievement, self-deserving, or self-aggrandizement. No merit is attached to these steps. Although the concept of the self at work here is complex and nuanced, it is safe to say that salvation is not earned by self-achievement but rather received through self-renunciation. Humility makes the spiritual ladder climber ready to receive the gifts of divine grace.

Here is a conclusion I suggest we draw: it would be too simplistic to divide competing spiritualities into two camps—the ladder-ascending versus the ladder-descending—while ascribing reliance on grace to only the latter ladder. St. Mark the Ascetic is just as grateful for divine grace as any Protestant Reformer might be: "Thus the kingdom of heaven is not a reward for works, but a gift of grace prepared by the Master for his faithful servants."<sup>12</sup> Climbing a ladder to heaven and leaving the self behind on earth does not constitute a form of self-centeredness or self-achievement even if it produces self-control.

As a byproduct of this ladder climbing, the faithful disciple gains what we today understand as self-control. Despite the doctrine of self-renunciation at work here, the ladder climber constitutes himself or herself as a self, as a soul, as a person with an interior structure that holds firm. Character is the value-added spin-off of holiness.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 173.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 177.

<sup>11</sup>Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2008) 30.

<sup>12</sup>St. Hesychios, "On Watchfulness and Holiness," *The Philokalia*, compiled by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber & Faber, 1979–1995) 79.

In the contemporary context where we cry out for strength of character, as David Brooks asserts, we may ask: Might a retrieval of ladder-climbing spirituality fill this yearning? If our basic cultural need is for moral character, then the answer would be in the affirmative. As a good steward of its heritage, the church could offer character construction through spiritual discipline.

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How might a Reformation Lutheran who begins with a ladder-descending understanding of divine grace consider this matter? Before character, the Lutheran seems to be concerned much more with love serving the needs of social justice.

#### WHAT DO WE DO AFTER THE DESCENT OF GRACE?

While some monks and laypeople are busy climbing Climacus's ladder, the Lutherans are hanging out at the ladder's lowest step thanking God for the descent of grace. After saying thank you to God, what comes next?

Today's reformers in the Lutheran tradition emphasize the passivity of Christian faith in the reception of divine grace. "When I hear the gospel that I have been accepted and adopted by God for the sake of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit," writes Oswald Bayer, "I am radically passive. I receive that which is given to me as a 'categorical gift.'"<sup>13</sup>

Passive reception in faith has been trumpeted by Forde. To the age-old question, What shall I do to be saved? Forde offered his radical answer: "Nothing! Just be still; shut up and listen for once in your life to what God the Almighty, creator and redeemer, is saying to his world and to you in the death and resurrection of his Son! Listen and believe!"—that is, shut up and listen to the divine word and believe it results in a faith that is aware of God's grace. "The faith by which one is justified is not an active verb of which the Old Adam or Eve is the subject; it is a state-of-being verb. Faith is the state of being grasped by the unconditional claim and promise of the God who calls into being that which is from that which is not."<sup>14</sup> Our salvation is not what we attain at the top of the ladder. Rather, our salvation is delivered to us by Christ at the ladder's bottom. That's all there is to say about it!

This leaves us with a picture of Reformation Protestants standing around the ladder's bottom with hands in their pockets. If God has done everything in Christ, then there's nothing for us to do. Right?

In practice, Lutherans do not actually stand around at the ladder's bottom with hands in their pockets. Lutherans turn from passive acceptance of divine grace toward active engagement. This engagement is not with the self, however,

<sup>13</sup>Oswald Bayer, "With Luther in the Present," *Lutheran Quarterly* XXI:1 (Spring 2007) 11.

<sup>14</sup>Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith—A Matter of Death and Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982) 22.

but with the neighbor. Rather than climbing vertically up the ladder, Reformation Lutherans engage the neighbor horizontally on the ground, so to speak.

The Lutheran motto is St. Paul's "faith active in love" (Gal 5:1). Faith active in love leads to horizontal spirituality. Horizontal spirituality consists primarily of *Nächstenliebe*, love directed toward the neighbor. A Christian "should be guided in all his [or her] works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he [or she] may serve and benefit others in all that he [or she] does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of [the] neighbor," writes Martin Luther.<sup>15</sup> Philipp Melancthon adds that the human response to the descent of grace is love for God, and love for God leads to love of neighbor. "Therefore, love for God is a fruit of faith. Out of love for God is born love for our neighbor also, when we desire to serve God in all his creatures." The neighbor includes our friends, to be sure; but our enemies also. "Christ commands that we love strangers and enemies just as we love our friends (Matt 5:44), and Paul does the same (Rom 12:13; 17)."<sup>16</sup> Cynthia Moe-Lobeda restates the horizontal commitment to love in contemporary medium:

The centerpiece of Christian moral agency is the crucified and living Christ dwelling in and gradually transforming the community of believers, the form of Jesus Christ taking form in and among those with faith. Christians as objects of Christ's love become subjects of that love.... The indwelling Christ, mediated by practices of the Christian community transforms the faithful toward a manner of life that actively loves neighbor.<sup>17</sup>

Passively, justification-by-faith is a gift from divine grace received by the sinner. Actively, the justified sinner spontaneously pursues a life of neighbor love, being transformed from a selfish self into a self-giving self. Gilbert Meilaender sums it up for contemporary ethicists: "Faith must be active in love, and love, in turn, must seek justice for the neighbor."<sup>18</sup>

Might we be able to reconcile ladder climbing to moral character with horizontal neighbor love if we reconnect justification with sanctification? The life of love links justification with sanctification, obviously. Even though we can distinguish them, we cannot separate them. "Justification and sanctification differ insofar as Paul develops the idea of justification in the context of conversion and the genesis of faith, while, when speaking about sanctification, he directs his attention to leading a Christian life."<sup>19</sup> Having acknowledged this, still the Lutherans add a

<sup>15</sup>Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 31:365.

<sup>16</sup>Philip Melancthon, *Loci Communes*, in *Library of Christian Classics XIX* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1969) 147.

<sup>17</sup>Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 74.

<sup>18</sup>Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness: Basic Themes in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991) 147.

<sup>19</sup>*The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification: An Ecumenical Follow-Up to the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,"* presented by a task force from the Lutheran World Federation, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the World Methodist Council (New York: Paulist, 2012) 75.

slight cynical accent, distinguishing between sanctification for the lover and authentic love aimed at the beloved. Love, by Christian definition, is not self-serving, not character-building, not self-sanctifying. Love orients itself to the needs of the neighbor, not the lover. Jesus' own self-sacrifice and even self-emptying (kenosis in Phil 2) becomes the model for the follower of Jesus. If this is the nature of love, then a true disciple ought not march on a path toward self-improvement, self-sanctification, self-perfection. A selfless orientation in love contradicts a purposeful attempt to make oneself holy. Although Lutherans use the word sanctification, they don't mean it. What Lutherans emphasize is love of neighbor for the sake of the neighbor, not for their own purification or moral self-improvement.

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In sum, Lutheran spirituality consists of vertical gratitude combined with horizontal loving. In the words of Kristin Johnston Largen, "Justification is the work of God through and through, and humans can neither contribute nor add to what God has done in Jesus Christ. All that is left is the joyful response by the believer, and the life of love, inspired by faith."<sup>20</sup>

Rather than a heroic soul who makes it all the way to the heavenly top of the ladder, Lutheran spirituality applauds a robust or grace-filled soul exploding with faith, hope, and love here on earth. The robust soul is a sinner who is inspired by Christ to love the neighbor through pursuing social justice.

This does not require a denigration of every ladder-climbing spirituality with the accusation that the heroic soul only imports selfishness hypocritically into heavenly pursuit. Ladder ascending need not be merit based. At least in the case of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* in both its classical and contemporary forms, salvation is not the product of merit. I am grateful that this ladder ascending fosters an internal passion for self-control that makes the soul receptive to divine grace. Concomitant with salvation is the construction of a soul with character, with moral strength that includes self-renunciation expressed as humility. Ladder-climbing spirituality produces—almost as a by-product—the kind of virtuous character David Brooks believes contemporary society badly needs.

Be that as it may, the horizontal direction of Lutheran spirituality provides an incumbent complement to the Christian life with or without individual character building. Sinners responding to God's grace are empowered by the very love of Christ himself to love others. Forgiven sinners make for humble lovers and zealous

<sup>20</sup>Kristin Johnston Largen, *Finding God among Our Neighbors: An Interfaith Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 212.

warriors on behalf of justice for both society and the planet. Whether ascending or descending the ladder, horizontal neighbor loving belongs to both God's incarnation in Christ and to daily Christian living. ⊕

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