Charmides, Lysis and Laches

Plato · *c. 390s BC* · *Benjamin Jowett translation*

Three short dialogues show Socrates talking with the young and with their fathers. In the Charmides he asks a beautiful boy about temperance. In the Lysis he talks with two boys about friendship. In the Laches he is called in by two fathers who want to know how to train their sons, and the talk turns to courage. In each, Socrates looks for a definition and finds that his friends cannot yet give one.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What are temperance, friendship and courage, and who is fit to teach them?

In each dialogue, Socrates's companions offer answers, and each answer is tested and set aside. Temperance is not simply quiet or modesty, friendship is not simply likeness or need, and courage is not simply standing firm. The talks end without a final definition, but they show how to ask the question honestly and how a young person can begin to care about being good.

KEY CHARACTERS

Socrates
The questioner in all three dialogues.

Charmides
A modest, handsome youth, the topic of the first talk.

Critias
Charmides's cousin and guardian.

Lysis
A boy of good family.

Menexenus
Lysis's friend and fellow talker.

Hippothales
A young man who is in love with Lysis.

Laches
A general who speaks bluntly.

Nicias
A general who is cautious and learned.

Lysimachus
A father who asks for help.

Melesias
A father, with Lysimachus.

Grades 9–12
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01
The Palaestra of Taureas
CHARMIDES, OPENING

Socrates comes home from the army at Potidaea and goes straight to a wrestling-school to ask the news. Critias introduces his cousin Charmides, famed for his looks and modesty.

- Socrates has just come back from the battle at Potidaea.
- Charmides is said to be wise as well as handsome.
- Socrates suggests a cure for a headache that begins with the soul.
- Temperance, he says, is needed to heal the whole person.

02
What Is Temperance?
CHARMIDES, THE SEARCH

Charmides offers several definitions, and Critias takes over from him. Each is tested.

- Is temperance quietness? Is it modesty?
- Is it doing one's own business?
- Critias says it is knowing oneself.
- Can there be a knowledge of knowledge? The talk ends without a clear answer.

03
A New Wrestling-School
LYSIS, OPENING

Socrates is on his way between the Academy and the Lyceum when he is invited into a new wrestling-school. Hippothales is in love with Lysis and cannot stop talking about him.

- Hippothales writes praise of the boy that Socrates finds poor.
- Socrates offers to show how to talk to a boy.
- Lysis's parents love him but do not let him do what he likes.
- What makes a person worthy of trust?

04
What Is a Friend?
LYSIS, THE SEARCH

Socrates talks with Lysis and his friend Menexenus. They try to say who a friend is.

- Is a friend one who loves or one who is loved?
- Do likes befriend likes, or opposites opposites?
- Perhaps the good is the friend of the not-yet-good.
- They cannot say, and the tutors come to take the boys home.

05
Two Fathers Ask for Advice
LACHES, OPENING

Lysimachus and Melesias are sons of famous men who did little themselves. They ask the generals Laches and Nicias whether their sons should learn fighting in armor.

- The fathers want their sons to be better than they were.
- Laches and Nicias disagree.
- They turn to Socrates to break the tie.
- Socrates asks what the training is for, and whether they understand virtue.

06
What Is Courage?
LACHES, THE SEARCH

Socrates asks Laches what courage is. Laches says it is standing at one's post; then he and Nicias try other definitions.

- Laches says courage is endurance of the soul.
- Socrates asks whether foolish endurance is courage.
- Nicias says it is knowing what is to be feared.
- Socrates says that would make courage the whole of virtue.

Temperance | Friendship | Courage | Teaching the Young | Knowledge of Self | The Good

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Notice that each dialogue begins in an ordinary place, a school or a gathering, not a courtroom or a temple.
2. In each, list the definitions offered and why each is set aside.
3. In the Charmides, ask what Critias adds to the question of temperance.
4. In the Lysis, ask what the boys learn about friendship even though no definition is reached.
5. In the Laches, ask why the fathers' real question about raising sons leads to a question about courage.
6. Ask what it means that the three dialogues end without answers.

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