

Virtue Explained

*“Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous
to confirm your call and election,
for if you do this you will never fall;
so there will be richly provided for you an entrance
into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”*

2 Peter 1:10-11

What is virtue? Go ahead and try to come up with a definition—and don’t cheat by looking at the rest of this introduction!

I am willing to bet this was a difficult task for most—not because I think those who do Bible studies are unintelligent, but because I can’t remember the last time I heard a meaningful definition of the term given in everyday circumstances. Most of us mistakenly think that the virtues are academic categories reserved for philosophers and theologians. However, the virtues are the basic stuff of the Christian moral life. The Catechism has defined virtue as “habitual and firm disposition to do good” (no. 1833).

The virtues help us habitually do what is good. They are the building blocks for Christian moral living. Accordingly, the Church has developed a theology of the virtues, building on what the ancients discovered through natural law and what God revealed through divine inspiration.

Catholic tradition recognizes four cardinal virtues that are also known as human, natural, or moral virtues. They

are prudence (wisdom), justice, fortitude (courage), and temperance (self-control).¹ The moral virtues are gained through human efforts, and the natural purpose of the practice of these virtues is a good life. However, as Christians, the goal that we are striving for is not merely a good life here on earth, but rather eternal life in heaven. Therefore, God in His goodness has elevated the natural virtues by His grace (Catechism, no. 1810). The natural virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) practiced in the power of God's grace help us meet not only our natural good but our supernatural end—eternal bliss in heaven with God. As Pope Pius XI explains:

[T]he supernatural order . . . not only does not in the least destroy the natural order, to which pertain the other rights mentioned, but elevates the natural and perfects it, each affording mutual aid to the other, and completing it in a manner proportioned to its respective nature and dignity. The reason is because both come from God, who cannot contradict Himself.²

In addition to the four cardinal virtues, there are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love (charity). These virtues are “theological” because they are gifts that are given to us *by* God at Baptism, and their purpose is to lead us back

¹ The word “cardinal” derives from the Latin *cardo* and means “hinge.” Thus the cardinal virtues are the virtues upon which the other moral virtues hinge. The four cardinal virtues are not the only natural virtues but rather the primary virtues under which all the others are grouped and classified. Some examples of other moral virtues include patience, humility, and gentleness.

² Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Education *Divini Illius Magistri* (December 31, 1929), no. 28.

to God. God is the beginning, end, and motivation of these virtues. Our understanding and practice of them depend upon God's grace. Because these virtues exist in us solely through the goodness of God's grace, the only way for them to increase is by grace. We cannot earn more faith, hope, or love by our good deeds. In order for us to acquire more faith, hope, or love, we must ask God for them in prayer and frequent the sacraments, which are instruments of His grace. Like grace itself, they are pure gifts from the Lord. The only goal of the theological virtues is our supernatural happiness. The virtues are not simply philosophical constructs, but rather the habits and dispositions that help us reach eternal union with God. It is from this vantage point that understanding these virtues becomes an important and exciting task.

1. Virtue is not typically a topic of discussion. What do you think are some modern impressions and misconceptions about virtue? How have you understood the term, and how does that compare with the descriptions given in this introductory lesson?

2. Virtue is a habit of goodness that embraces the entire being of a person. Philosopher Peter Kreeft writes that “[v]irtue is simply health of soul.”³ How is virtue “health of soul”?

³ Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 64.

3. We should love the virtues and the practice of them. According to Wisdom 8:7, what is the work of those who love righteousness? In what way is this work profitable?

4. Our model for virtuous behavior is Jesus. What do the following events and passages reveal to us about the standard of behavior established by Jesus during His life here on earth?

- a. Luke 1:30-35 and 2:4-7
- b. John 4:34
- c. Matthew 22:36-40

How do you think these lessons apply to our own lives?

5. Because the practice of the virtues is the center of the moral life, it is not surprising that the Bible, the handbook of the moral life, is clear on their importance. How do the following passages explain to us the importance of living virtuous lives?

- a. 2 Corinthians 7:1
- b. 1 Thessalonians 5:8-10
- c. 2 Timothy 4:7-8
- d. Titus 2:11-14

“I repeat, it is necessary that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for the virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarfs. And, please God, it will be only a matter of not growing, for you already know that whoever does not increase decreases. I hold that love, where present, cannot possibly be content with remaining always the same.”⁴

Saint Teresa of Avila

6. Unfortunately, virtue is not always practiced. What do the following passages tell us are the consequences of failing to be virtuous?

- a. Matthew 7:21-23
- b. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27
- c. Galatians 6:7-8

7. Read 1 Samuel 17:1-54, the story of David and Goliath.

- a. How did David cultivate virtue in his life? How did this method prove beneficial?

⁴ Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, vol. 2, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1980), 447.

b. What lesson can you take from this story and apply to your life in a practical way?

“Our lives for the most part are made up of little things, and by these our character is to be tested. . . . Little duties carefully discharged; little temptations earnestly resisted with the strength God supplies; little sins crucified; these all together help to form that character which is to be described not as popular or glamorous, but as moral and noble.”⁵

Fulton J. Sheen

8. God has redeemed us through His Son’s blood, and He has given us the grace of adoption to be His beloved children through Baptism. It is our responsibility to respond to this grace. According to Colossians 3:1-10, how are we to cultivate virtue in our lives and appropriately respond to God’s great gift of life?

9. What has been your attitude toward studying the virtues? How do you think this attitude reflects the state of your spiritual life? During the coming week, pray for an increase of

⁵ Most Rev. Fulton J. Sheen, *Way to Inner Peace* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1955), 15-16.

faith, hope, and love, and a desire to grow in the practice of the virtues.

Memory Verse

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