

Chapter 1

Men and Virtue

Why Virtue?

Today it is more common to hear about values than virtues. Current thought is that society would be safe, healthy, and happy, if only we could instill proper values into people. Values-based moral education programs exemplify the modern conviction that morality is nothing other than the art of making good choices, which are guided entirely by one's own values. One could critique this approach to morality on philosophical grounds, but my criticism is simple and to the point. The problem is that values fall short when it comes to making men moral. Having good values is a fine thing, but the battle of morality is not so much about *knowing* what is right as it is *doing* what is right. The difference between wanting to do the good and actually doing it is tremendous. Thus, many men who commit adultery know what they are doing is wrong (no need for value clarification), but they are unfaithful despite their values. Right values do not always translate into right action.

Many men want to be good husbands and fathers, but if this wanting is not supplemented by the virtues—the skills for successful moral living—then success will be unlikely. For example, I can value flying, spend countless hours as a passenger, and be the most avid aviation fan around, but that does not enable me to fly a plane. In order to fly, one must have the skills of a pilot. Many people desire to fly a plane, but few have the ability. Similarly, if our moral life is to get off the ground, we must acquire the skills necessary to fly. Values alone will not suffice.

The Heart of the Problem

The reason that knowledge alone is not enough for success in the moral life stems from the fact that we have inherited a wounded nature. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, human nature is fallen from its original perfection. Saint Paul describes just how wounded our nature is:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:14-15, 18-19, 24).

This condition is an effect of original sin (cf. Catechism, no. 1707). Through original sin every individual is born with a human nature that is weak and inclined to commit personal sin (the theological term for this condition is *concupiscence*). The mind struggles with ignorance, the body suffers pain and death, and the passions tend to undermine our ability to know and do the good (cf. Catechism, no. 405). We fall into sin not so much out of ignorance but weakness. It is within this context that we understand the virtues as liberating powers, raising man above his fallen nature to the truth and beauty in which each person becomes the person he was created to be.

The weakness caused by original sin causes us to be inclined toward sin. The power of virtue is that it reverses the inclination toward evil, and by strength of habit inclines us toward the good. For example, we are inclined to lie when the truth will hurt us, but the man who has the virtue of honesty possesses the inclination to tell the truth. Virtues tip the scales of the moral life toward good and away from evil.

How can we do good and live a virtuous life given Saint Paul's account of our fallen nature? Are we bound to sin? No. Saint

Paul gives an answer to the anguished cry, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” when he goes on to give thanks to “God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:25). Paul then explains in Romans 8 how Christ has set us free from the captivity of sin and death. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, our fallen nature is healed, perfected, and elevated.

Thus Saint Paul says that through Baptism we have put on “the new nature” (cf. Col. 3:9-10). The grace and power of Jesus Christ transforms our old nature, referred to by Saint Paul in Romans 7. This means that we can live a virtuous life, thanks to Christ. It is important to note the careful balance between God’s grace and our effort. Apart from God we can do nothing, and apart from our effort God cannot work in our lives. Both God’s grace and our effort are needed.

Consider the analogy of a sailboat. The finest sailboat in the world can’t sail far without its sails. Even with much wind and good weather, if the sails are not up, the boat will not make much headway. The sails signify our effort, namely the virtues. Conversely, if the boat has excellent sails but no wind, it cannot sail. The wind is like God’s grace. We can make all the effort and preparation in the world, but without God’s grace we will not make much progress in the moral life. Similarly, we can receive the sacraments and pray, but God’s grace will not avail much if we do not act. The wind will pass over the ship without much effect because the sails are not up.

This happens to too many Christians. They go to Church and receive the sacraments, but the wind of God’s grace passes by them, as they do not put much effort into following Christ. God may be present in our lives but, unless we cooperate with His action, we will not reach our destination of eternal life. Success in sailing through the troubled waters of the moral life requires us to rely on God and expend much effort at the same time. Loving God with all our strength will raise the sails so that they can catch God’s grace, which will empower us to move across the rough waters of

this world to the tranquil harbor of heaven. This is what the virtues are all about, our cooperation with God and His plan for our lives. Through the virtues, both human and theological, we enable God to fill the sails of our ship and move it in the right direction.

The virtuous life is critical because it is the path by which we reach the final purpose of life, eternal happiness. Every person is created for happiness, but final and complete happiness comes only after a life directed to the good that lies beyond our immediate needs or wants. Virtue should not be considered burdensome, but rather as liberating and as the path to personal happiness. Indeed, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that substantial happiness and human flourishing could only be grasped through the virtues.

Virtues as Skills

To be a morally good person takes more than wishing to be good or having the right values. Rather, it takes a rock-solid character that has the strength to *will* what is right, not just *value* what is good. The will is that spiritual power of the soul by which we choose to do something. The strength to will the right thing is what is meant by the term virtue. “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (Catechism, no. 1803). A virtue is a *good, habitual action of the will*, and not only is a virtue an action that is habitual, it is an action that is done with *promptness* and, in a certain sense, *pleasure*. For example, to truly have the virtue of honesty, it is not enough to tell the truth repeatedly, but to tell the truth repeatedly with ease and promptitude.

From another perspective, a virtue can be understood as the balance between opposing extremes. For example, courage is the virtue between cowardliness and rashness. Cowardice is to let fear overrun one’s reason, while rashness is to be dull to all fear and act foolishly. In contrast, courage moderates fear and keeps it under the control of reason, avoiding the two extremes of caving into fear or being so numb to it as to act imprudently. The vices of

cowardice and rashness lack the balance of the virtue of courage. As we examine the virtues, we shall briefly look at their opposing vices. It is important to realize that, just as the good habits we call virtues give us freedom and strength to do good, the bad habits we call vices take our freedom from us and incline us toward evil.

Virtues, as has already been stated, strengthen the will and dispose it to right action. Think of your will as a muscle. Just as an athlete strengthens and trains his muscles, be it a basketball player practicing a 3-point shot or a golfer working on his swing, we too must develop, strengthen, and train our wills to live virtuously. Just as Michael Jordan has developed the habit of making basketball shots, the virtuous person habitually, and with similar ease, does what is good. In the moral life, it is by practicing a virtue that we train and strengthen our wills and ultimately acquire the virtue. Similarly, just as muscles that are not exercised become flabby and weak, so too do our wills become weak if we are not exercising them by the practice of virtue.

Virtues are the necessary skills required to navigate our life through this world. They are the qualities that enable us to make life's journey successful. If I wanted to sail across the sea, it would take more than just desire. I cannot wish myself across the stormy seas, no matter how much I value sailing, ships, or safety. If I attempt the high seas without seamanship, all the values and desire in the world will be utterly worthless. Likewise, one can desire to be a good man, even a holy man, but without the virtues his moral life will be shipwrecked.

The Parable of the Twenty-Dollar Bill

The inner nature and workings of virtue can be hard to understand, so let's look at this story as an example.

Two men, each at different times, notice a twenty-dollar bill that is unattended at a co-worker's desk. The first man recognizes that he is alone in the office and that he could easily pocket the

money without anyone's notice. He is strongly tempted to pocket the twenty-dollar bill. After great agony and hesitation, the man decides not to take the twenty. Later, another man comes through the office and sees the twenty-dollar bill, but he does not even consider stealing it and goes on to finish his errand at the copy room. Which man is virtuous?

Despite the fact that neither one sinned, only one exhibited virtue. The fact that it took the first man time and effort not to take the money illustrates that, despite his just act, he lacks the virtue of justice. One might ask how we can say the first man fails to have the virtue of justice when he did what was just? Because, as we discussed above, a virtue is more than one act, it is more than repeated action, it is a *disposition* to do the good with ease, promptitude, and joy. The first man's struggle illustrates his lack of virtue. He lacks the habitual disposition to give others their just due with ease. A virtue is more than doing the right thing, it is the power to do the right thing with the right attitude, with ease and joy. Thus the second man's act done with ease and lack of struggle displays the inherent power of virtue.

Despite the fact that our nature starts out weakened and inclined to sin because of concupiscence, it can be transformed by God's grace and the virtues (cf. Catechism, nos. 1264, 1266). The two men in the parable above illustrate this contrast. The first was inclined to take the money, but the virtuous man is inclined in the direction of doing the good. The inclination to do the good, which is a hallmark of virtue, demonstrates how the virtues give our nature a new bent. That is, the virtues transform our weakened nature and give it a new strength and the habitual disposition to will what is right.

A Bold New Blueprint

The acquisition of virtues is not easy. To be virtuous is an achievement. One cannot become a sailor in a day. Anything that requires skill, be it piloting a plane, playing a piano, or

becoming a professional athlete, takes arduous effort. So too does the moral life. One cannot be a man of God, that is, truly virtuous, without constant effort and the grace of God.

The virtues give us a blueprint for being a man. Indeed, the very term *virtue* comes from the Latin word for man, *vir*. For the ancients, to be manly was to be virtuous. The term “virtue” in Latin (*virtus*) signifies power, strength, and ability. Thus the virtues are habits that give us the power to act in a manly way, with strength sufficient to do what is right. Without virtues we will neither be godly nor manly.

Men are made through the iron furnace of virtue. This profound insight is true, even if few recognize it. What makes a man is not how much money he makes or what kind of car he drives, but the character that he has forged through the practice of virtue. There is profound insight in the saying, “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” Virtues are the building blocks of character, and without them our moral lives will eventually collapse under the pressures of the world and we will fall short of our proper destiny.

Just Do It

Virtues are essential to living well and, even more, to living the Christian life well. Saint Peter exhorted the early Christians about the vital role of the virtues saying, “[M]ake every effort to supplement your faith with virtue” (2 Pet. 1:5). A few verses later, he admonishes us that practicing the virtues will keep us from being “ineffective or unfruitful” in following Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:8). In other words, our lives will only be as effective, meaningful, and fruitful as we are virtuous. No wonder Saint Peter admonishes us to “make every effort” to obtain virtue.

The saints and many biblical characters are strong witnesses of the virtuous life. As we examine each of the virtues, we will give an example of how that virtue is embodied by one of the

saints. Sacred Scripture and the lives of the saints offer us many examples of the nobility and goodness of the virtuous life. The saints provide us with heroic models to imitate. Thus Saint Paul writes, “Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us” (Phil. 3:17). More is caught than taught, and by reading the lives of the saints we may catch the inspiration and desire to live the wonderful life of virtue.

In the following chapters, we shall first look at the four cardinal virtues, followed by the three theological virtues, explaining them and considering how to grow in them. Justice, courage, temperance, and prudence are those natural virtues which are fundamental and essential for all the other human virtues. They are called *cardinal* virtues, from the Latin word *cardo*, which means “hinge,” because the entire moral life hinges upon these four virtues. In short, they are the cornerstone for the moral life (cf. Catechism, no. 1805). The theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are those supernatural powers infused into the soul enabling the soul to participate in God’s very life (cf. Catechism, no. 1813). We shall see how the virtues are skills that will empower us to navigate life’s journey successfully.

We must make a firm resolution to grow in virtue. Saint Thomas Aquinas, one of the most brilliant men who ever lived, was once asked the secret to being a saint. He immediately replied with a two-word answer that has now become a marketing proverb: “Will it.” And it is the virtues, along with God’s grace, that empower us to do what we know is right, to *just do it*.

Questions

1. a. What is the practical difference between virtues and values?

b. Why are values alone insufficient for morality?

2. Read Romans 7:14-24. In this passage, Saint Paul says we are enslaved to sin. Do you agree with him? Do you find it easy to avoid sin, or do you find yourself doing the very thing you do not want to do? Rate yourself on the scale below.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Trapped in sin ————— *Easy to avoid sin*

3. In the very next verses (Rom. 7:25, 8:2), God gives us the only solution to our sin problem. The heart of the problem is our own broken hearts. Read Ezekiel 36:24-28. How will God's response go right to the "heart" of the problem?

4. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-13. Why is a Bible study a good way to develop a vision for the virtues?

5. Saint Paul compares our lives to an athletic competition. Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and 2 Timothy 4:7-8. How is life like a competition?

6. How is it different?

7. List the three qualities a good action must have in order to be truly virtuous (see p. 14).

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

8. In Galatians 6:7-10, how does Saint Paul warn us that our actions will have consequences?

9. Read Genesis 27-29. Note how or what Jacob reaps from his earlier actions. How does Jacob's deception of his father, who was physically blind, come back to Jacob when he is unable to see? How is Jacob's marriage affected by his usurpation of his brother's birthright?

10. Are you ready to become the man God has made you to be? If not, what do you think is holding you back?

11. How can you begin to make better choices in your life?

12. Are there specific ways in which you have reaped what you have sown?

Memory Verse

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17