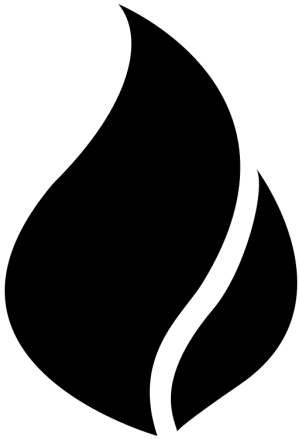


CALLED TO
VIRTUE
AN
INTRODUCTORY
GUIDE

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OUR OBJECTIVE

The study of Christian virtue can contribute to the formation of Christ in the lives of believers. Our church shares the burden of the Apostle Paul for the church, which he expressed in Galatians 4. 19: *“My little children with whom I am in continual travail until Christ be formed in you.”* The objective of this class is that the study of virtue in both the scriptures and the Christian tradition will help contribute to Christ being formed in the lives of believers at Beverly Heights.

This document is an overview. Its aim is to consider both virtue in a general sense as well as the seven Christian virtues. It is also intended to help give focus as to how a life of virtue helps to move a person toward perfection, which is the goal of sanctification and Christian formation—Christ being formed in a person.

1.

VIRTUE IN THE BIBLE

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:3-12)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence (virtue), if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8 ESV)

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1–5 ESV)

**MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO SUPPLEMENT
YOUR FAITH WITH VIRTUE.**

2.

VIRTUE DEFINED

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines virtue first as “*Moral excellence and righteousness; goodness.*” This is probably the most popular misunderstanding of virtue.

Virtue is excellence; so to say that virtue is moral excellence or moral virtue does not adequately define virtue itself. The fourth definition of virtue in the AHD is “*Effective force or power; ability to produce a definite result.*” Now we are getting somewhere. Etymologically the English term virtue is derived from the Latin *virtus* meaning “manly, strength or virile.”

Homer’s use of the term virtue (in the Greek, *aretē*) indicated an excellence primarily in the area of physical strength—that is why Homer’s mythology often championed heroes like Achilles, Odysseus, Hector and so on.

Plato and Aristotle used the term *aretē* in their discussion of skill. Virtue was a quality that allowed a person to function well and perform effectively.

The term *aretē* is found in both the Greek New Testament (Phil. 4:8; II Peter 1:3, 5) and in the Greek version of the Old Testament a.k.a. the Septuagint (LXX) (Hab.3:3; Zech. 6:13).

According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, *aretē* has a strongly religious use with more distinctive Jewish coloring. Virtue approximates to

righteousness, to the extent that the two words become almost equivalents.

VIRTUE IS THE ATTITUDE WHICH THE RIGHTEOUS MUST MAINTAIN IN LIFE AND DEATH.

Virtue is also a skill that accomplishes two things:

1. Virtue perfects a power so that an individual is in shape and
2. It enables the individual to perform an activity with excellence time after time. An individual particularly skilled in an activity is called a virtuoso.

There are three domains in which virtue can be exercised:

- **Art**—Skill in producing objects separate from oneself such as clothes, tools, houses, gardens, etc. Art encompasses anything not originating simply by events in nature or growth in nature.
- **Science**—Skills in learning and knowing the principles and facts in a field of study such as mathematics, astronomy, physics or biology.
- **Ethics** (ethics or moral virtue is the highest domain)—Skill in being a person of a certain kind with regard to values, choices, desires and thus living. Moral virtue constitutes good character.

An example of an artistic virtuoso is Mozart, in science Einstein, in ethics John the Baptist. An interesting question one might consider is:

ARE THERE ANY MODERN DAY MORAL VIRTUOSOS?

In the strictest sense of the term, virtue is a dynamic principle, according to which there is a perfecting and molding of power which leads to a skill performed with excellence, time and time again. Accordingly, the power or energy involved in playing the violin with excellence, time after time results in (artistic) virtuosity. Again, the power or energy involved in making decisions which are right and good, time and time again results in the living of a (morally) virtuous life.

At the heart of what God is doing through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of believers is the remaking of the image of Jesus Christ in us to the end that we may have “everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1.3), in order that we might continually and consistently live lives of excellence for God’s glory.

3.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIRTUE

In the history of western thought seven Christian virtues have been discussed following their identification by Bishop Ambrose in the 4th century. Drawing on the writings of Plato, Aristotle and the Apostle Paul, Ambrose and, later on, Thomas Aquinas, spoke of four “cardinal” (from the Latin for “hinge” thus “pivotal”) virtues (wisdom courage, moderation and justice) and three “theological virtues” (faith, hope, love). Those who have read *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis know that a great deal of his book is dedicated to a discussion of these very things.

Do not assume that the seven Christian virtues is an exhaustive list nor that the Bible places greater emphasis on these over others that are discussed in the Scriptures. Indeed, 2 Peter 1 (referenced earlier) identifies eight virtues, only two of which are included in the classic catalogue of seven Christian virtues. Each of the seven Christian virtues, however, are identified and discussed in the pages of the Old and New Testaments, and they provide us a place to make, not an exhaustive study but a start on what is unquestionably a lifelong work of holy transformation involving the Holy Spirit and the commitment of every believer to grow in the knowledge and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

4.

THE END OF VIRTUE

With regard to morals specifically, virtues are habits and skills for choosing and doing what is right in situation after situation, time after time. Virtue seeks God and good, godly character.

Professor of Philosophy at Geneva College, Dr. Byron Bitar wrote,

“The end of Christ’s ministry was not and is not that humans be forgiven of their sins. It would be a nightmare to forgive humans and leave them with immoral character. Forgiveness was and is only a means. The end is the transformation of bad character to good character, the nurture of moral virtues in the lives of humans, the perfection of human powers and abilities in holy habits and skills. The ultimate bond with God is good character, the love of holiness in God, self and others. In the end there is no friendship with God, no intimacy with God, without holy character. In the end, there is no place in the kingdom of God for people of evil character... Virtue is absolutely crucial to a Christian life, since it is the end, in a sense, of salvation. It is what God wants in and from humans. God is glorified by us primarily as we become perfected, by growing in God’s virtue and holiness. It is our primary and everlasting bond with God and each other.”

Jonathan Edwards, in his small treatise *The True Nature of Virtue*, taught that true nature of virtue is a union of the heart with God and expression of godly character or virtue.

Edwards wrote,

“But there is another and higher beauty in true virtue, and in all truly virtuous dispositions and exercises, than what consists in any uniformity or similarity of various things (i.e. artistic or scientific virtue); viz. the union of heart to being in general, or to God, the being of beings, which appears in those virtues; and of which those virtues when true, are the various expressions or effects...It is virtuous to love true virtue, as that denotes an agreement of the heart with virtue.”

Virtue acquisition and the expression of virtue are rightly understood to be within the theological domains of both justification and sanctification.

A LIFE OF VIRTUE IS AVAILABLE BECAUSE OF GOD’S GRACIOUS ACTION TOWARD US SO THAT WE MIGHT PURSUE GOD AND REFLECT HIS HOLY CHARACTER.

A life of virtue is in keeping with the process of Christ being formed within God’s people—to seek God and partake in His divine nature and reflect His goodness and holiness.

5.

A OVERVIEW OF EACH VIRTUE

THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

Wisdom

The knowledge of the value of things, what is good and bad, what is worth possessing and avoiding, what perfects and what corrupts. Wisdom possesses a proper scale of value and champions God as highest. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Prov. 1:7

Courage

The fear of the right things, such as doing evil, and a lack of fear in doing what is right, such as pursuing what is proper even in the face of danger.

Moderation

Regulates good feelings and good activities so a person does not get too much or too little, but rather just the right amount. It is a regulation of action, experience and possessions.

Justice

Respect for the rights of others (both humans in general and God in particular), giving them what is due them. Justice orders an individual’s relations with others so others are respected and honored.

THE THREE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

Faith

Belief in God, God's word and God's promises even though at present God is unseen in God's being. The contents of faith are truths about God known through revelation, both general and special.

Hope

An expectation, anticipation and confidence of possessing God, coming to see God and directly experiencing God in the life to come.

Love

The desire for the good for others, for oneself and for God. Love desires to be with God, to live with God and directly experience God. Love is a master virtue and provides fundamental moral direction for the other virtues.

**VIRTUE - EVEN ATTEMPTED VIRTUE -
BRINGS LIGHT; INDULGENCE BRINGS
FOG.—C.S. LEWIS**

6.

THE POSSESSION AND CULTIVATION OF VIRTUE

There are three general ways in which virtue comes to be possessed by humans.

1. Some virtues are possessed **innately**; people are just born with them. Mozart was born with an innate skill in music, Pascal in mathematics.
2. Most virtues are acquired by training or **practice**. A person must be instructed, nurtured, and encouraged to practice and develop their powers into skills.
3. Finally, some virtues are **supernaturally** infused into the life of a person by God. Virtues such as faith or humility and skills such as leadership or artistry suddenly arise in a person due to God's action. The fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23 is virtue manifest in a person's life.

There are several ways in which virtue, particularly moral virtue, can be nurtured within a human's soul.

- **Models**—Parents who display love, kindness, patience, humility and forgiveness to each other can attract their children to those traits. (Parents can also be models for vice.)

- **Stories**—Heroes of stories can be imitated, and stories expose moral dilemmas, tragedies and triumphs of life, engendering thoughtfulness and hope. (Stories can also nurture vice.)
- **Praise and reward, discipline and punishment**—Humans tend to pursue what they are honored for and are motivated by positive feedback. Conversely, discipline and pain can inhibit wrong action and cultivate repentance. In this regard, law is a means of cultivating virtue (consider the OT Law).
- **Study**—Examination and reflection of virtue and ethics brings insights into what is right and wrong and helps a person to champion what is good.
- **A personal relationship with God**—A relationship with God is the greatest way in which virtue is nurtured in a person's soul. God is the ultimate source of moral virtue. Moral virtue in humans goes back to its existence in God. Through Jesus Christ, God forgives the immorality and sin of humans who repent and accept Jesus Christ. God breaks the bondage of those enslaved to sin and vice and infuses virtue. Finally, God nurtures virtue in the souls of those who seek Him through scripture, prayer and meditation, worship, instruction and exhortation (sermons), the sacraments and through His bonds of friendship.

**IF THERE IS ANY EXCELLENCE
(VIRTUE)...THINK ABOUT THESE
THINGS.**



THE PARRHESIANS

THE TRUTH IS BOLD