

VIRTUES THAT MATTER

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CHRISTIAN KINDNESS AS AN ANTIDOTE
TO CULTURAL CRUDENESS

WILLIAM G. COVINGTON JR.



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*Virtues That Matter:
Christian Kindness as an Antidote to Cultural Crudeness*

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PREFACE

Stewardship is important to the Christian life because although we are saved by grace, we will give an account of how we used the resources given to us in this life. The parables of Jesus make this reality clear. Rewards are based on how one made use of what one was given.

We're also told in the New Testament that motives matter. Some works are wood, hay, and stubble and will not survive the fiery test on that day. This can be contrasted with good works done out of pure motives intended to please God. Self-examination helps tweak the why of works. Motivations need perpetual monitoring so that the potential rewards of the afterlife aren't sacrificed for the self-recognition in this life. God's rewards are vastly superior to human attention.

It's probably with mixed motives that a lot of Christian work is done. When one sings, speaks, or writes, positive feedback assures one that a positive difference has been made. If that is the sole motivation for the work then the reward has been received in full. But if one is seeking to use one's gifts as a faithful steward to God, then perhaps some of the reward will remain and stand the fire of that day.

Virtues can be considered works. They do not necessarily result in direct payoffs that can be measured, but they do have consequences that would not otherwise be created. This book draws attention to some core Christian virtues and ends each chapter with a self-examination reflection exercise that aids one in applying what has been discussed to one's own life. To use John Maxwell's term, it's a book that helps one better become a "values added" person to the lives of other people. In so doing, the quality of the giver's life is enhanced.

Many people have been used by God to make my life better than it would otherwise be. Primarily my parents and brother, Gary. Part of this

book was written as Gary was in the process of departing this life and going to the other side. He knew what was inevitable and had been taught God's ways from infancy. I asked him numerous times if everything was all right between him and God and he answered in the affirmative. We prayed on a regular basis. He knew the Way, the Truth, and the Life—Jesus, the only mediator between God and man.

Numerous other people helped me in so many ways it isn't possible to acknowledge them all. Due the limitations of memory some would be embarrassingly be left off the list and I would realize my mistake after this book had gone to press. First and foremost I thank Jesus Christ and dedicate all my work to Him because without Him none of it would be possible. One of the maximum joys of life is doing meaningful work and He has granted that privilege to me.

CHAPTER 1

PURSUING VIRTUE

“Finally brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

—Philippians 4:8

*“Content not thyself that thou art virtuous in general:
for one link being wanting, the chain is defective.”*

—William Penn

Sometimes words are commonly used but the connection between how they're stated in everyday conversation no longer matches the literal definition. Connotative meanings refer to what people think words mean which can be contrasted with denotative meanings, which are those found in the dictionary. I questioned whether I actually knew what the word “virtue” meant when I began to ponder a theme for this book.

I know how the word is used in everyday conversation, but does it match the dictionary definition? Dictionary.com provided the answer. The way the term is commonly used is close to its literal meaning. It can be defined as “moral excellence; goodness; righteousness” or “conformity of one’s life and conduct to moral and ethical principles; uprightness; rectitude.” There are other definitions, but these serve to show that the way people speak of virtue aligns with its true meaning.

In living the abundant life Jesus came to give, virtuous living is built upon the principles that enhance a person’s interaction with others. The

principles, when reinforced help an individual think thoughts that lead to health and well-being and enable him to make a positive impact on other people, lifting them up to a higher quality of life in the process. Godly principles expand a person's perception beyond selfish thinking to a concern for the welfare of others.

The virtues discussed in this book are not exhaustive. There are others. In fact when I started writing this book I didn't know what the topic would be or which direction it would take. Creativity is open-ended and when one prays for God to direct one's efforts the human vessel isn't always sure which direction a project will take as it unfolds whether the project is a sermon, a song, or a book. Even secular writers talk about the open-endedness of the creative process.

Preparation is found on the other side of the continuum. Unless one has something of worth to say, there is no point in the final project. When a writer fills himself full of material from myriad other sources, he becomes so full of something worth sharing he feels he has to express it in some form. Being a voracious reader, I constantly fill myself with content worth sharing. I try to always credit where I've found material by citing my sources. Some ideas are such that an original source can't always be identified.

Catherine Marshall reminds us that the ultimate Teacher is the Holy Spirit. He can use any human instrument He wants at any time he desires. She notes "for us to attempt any church work, any ministry or witnessing solely through man's devices, talents, and organizational machinery alone is as effective as trying to drive a car with water in the gasoline." The discussion of the virtues in this book come from God's Word, the Bible. The Holy Spirit, as the Author of that Book is the One Who provides meaning. Teaching is a gift mentioned in the New Testament but again, people are fallible, while He is the One Who can be reached for spiritual insight that He alone can provide.

As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, actions grow out of thoughts. Good thoughts produce desirable actions. Negative thoughts result in consequences no one wants. Dr. Caroline Leaf explains in her

book, *Switch on Your Brain* that thoughts are not intangible, as is often assumed, but they have physical substance. She writes “as you think, you choose, and as you choose, you cause genetic expression to happen in your brain. This means you make proteins, and these proteins form your thoughts. Thoughts are real, physical things that occur mental real estate.”

That adds a dimension not widely known, i.e., that the physical substance created internally by thinking the right thoughts can change what goes on in the brain of the person thinking desirable thoughts. This isn't a quick cause/effect occurrence, it's a sustained process as Dr. Leaf explains in her book. It's a disciplined approach that takes commitment over an extended period of time. Her study uses a Scriptural approach in seeking to ascertain how certain principles have physical manifestations when they're applied to real people in real-world settings.

We're influenced by culture by the fact that we're regularly exposed to certain behaviors which grow out of assumptions that are often accepted and never questioned. Some of the virtues discussed in this book are counterintuitive to popular culture. God's ways are higher than man's ways just as the heavens are higher than the earth.

One resource everyone has is time. Loving God and loving people necessitates an evaluation of the stewardship of time. Relationships require time commitments. A good alternative could be a distraction from the best option, that is, the good is less than the best. A time-investment decision could be made to do a good work, while the best option would be to spend time with God In prayer or in being with someone in need instead of doing something that is a good deed but not the most effective use of one's time. Setting priorities is a stewardship decision where wisdom is needed.

Self-Control and Virtue Development

A liberating fact is that a person does not have to be the victim of whatever thoughts happen to pass through one's mind. It's the

prerogative of each individual to control his own mind. Not only can thoughts be selective, they can be reinforced through intentional repetition. Reinforcement has been used in education for centuries. One of the classical canons of ancient writers of rhetoric was memory, i.e., content would be memorized for posterity.

Even the identifying label “self-control” places the control on the individual instead of some other source. Just because persuasive influences try to convince a person otherwise, the truth is each person can control his own thoughts. In thinking of the reality from which the virtues in this book come, the realization is that the fickle instant gratification of a culture steeped in entertainment is not enduring when compared with what has worked for centuries. Self-control is mentally disciplining one’s mind to process thoughts as they come, take the good and reject the bad.

Passive acceptance of the convenient is the enemy of self-selection in processing thoughts. The rewards that come from active engagement are worth the pursuit, however. Such a choice enables one to create his own future instead of merely receive whatever is disseminated to the unthinking masses. While most people will unlikely opt for the best choice, that can be an actual encouragement to the one who does. It’s a recognition that a person is not willing to accept mediocrity, but wanting to make a mark, leave a legacy, make a difference, have something to show for one’s existence. It’s a sign of wise stewardship.

Writing decades ago, Dr. Henry C. Link noted “I venture to say that at the bottom of most fears, both mild and severe, will be found an overactive mind and an underactive body.” The inference is strong. Action negates worry. That is not to oversimplify complex psychological problems or offer an unrealistic solution to medical conditions that need treatment from qualified professionals, it is merely to make a point about an essential truth, that inactivity can have detrimental effects. Dr. Link goes on to add “we generate fears while we sit; we overcome them by action. Fear is nature’s warning sign to get busy.”

Satisfaction comes from the follow-through that grows out of wise thought-selection. Passive non-thinkers have no results to show for their time. They're takers, not givers. Creative givers produce products, sometimes tangible, sometimes intangible, that add to the quality of life of other people. Even a small contribution, like a smile or a word of encouragement adds something that would not otherwise exist. Doing a little good is better than not doing anything.

Jesus met the needs of people and His will is for us to be like Him. As the body of Christ, His desire is to work in us, then through us. Working in us has to do with our thought life, while working through us refers to the way we help other people with their needs based upon thinking the way we should.

An Overlapping of the Virtues

Living a virtuous life is holistic. While a teacher might point to a specific virtue and isolate it from another, in talking about it, in the practical application of daily living there is overlap. A gentle person is kind, a humble person is thankful, one who has love is patient. It would not be logical for one to desire only limited number of virtues.

Faith, hope, and other virtues lead to a worldview, a frame through which life is perceived. There is no competition between the prioritizing of one virtue over another. Each compliments the others. Wisdom has many facets. Different situations require different virtues, the one most appropriate at the time.

Spiritual sensitivity is dynamically expressed as a person draws on the internal truths that have been implanted by thinking virtuous thoughts over time. Maturity and experience help in applying virtue as needed when situations arise. Default thinking would likely lead to doing what is convenient, i.e., becoming angry instead of showing mercy and being patient. Hope would be linked in in that the mature person showing mercy would have his hope in God, assured that ultimately things will turn out as they should.

Living a life that is an expression of the virtues that have endured for centuries sets a tone. Since the self-centeredness which dominates contemporary culture is contrary to a virtuous life, it is likely to be noticed. People learn by example and when such a person is noticed there is a teachable moment. Virtuous principles don't originate in a vacuum. Principles don't govern the world, God does. He created the principles. The teachable opportunity presents a chance to point the seeker to the Source from which the virtues come, the One who created things seen and unseen.

God is concerned with the whole person, thoughts and actions. A person of integrity whose thoughts match his actions will be a living lesson for an inquirer wanting to know "what makes such a person tick." It is natural to respond to difficulties in an expected way, it is an anomaly to respond supernaturally in a spiritually mature way. When the virtues are worked within they will be observed without.

Such behavioral displays are not for the purpose of drawing attention to self. In fact, a humble person would not seek attention. The truth goes beyond self, as the attention is focused on the One Who enables a person to live the virtues in everyday life, the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would speak of Him, so the focus is on Jesus.

Biblically literate readers will recognize a lot of the virtues discussed in this book are found in Galatians 5:22–23. The fruit of the spirit includes many of the topics this book will explore. Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance are all listed in the King James Version. This isn't a study on the fruit of the spirit per se, but the theme is closely linked.

Conclusion

Pursuing virtues described in the Bible is one of the most fulfilling goals one could undertake. It is a choice that enhances the quality of life for the one making the pursuit as well as people who are touched by his life. For

example, a patient person shows tolerance which is a wiser choice than frustration and anger.

Choosing virtue-based living is a matter of self-control. It doesn't just happen. It's a decision that has desirable outcomes. It's not for the faint-hearted or weak-willed. It is for people who desire to live above the level of the predictable in the swamp of boring mediocrity. A person making such a choice is consciously distinguishing himself from the crowd, creating a future that will leave a legacy worth the effort, making a difference for his generation and others who might follow.

Virtues are holistic and overlap. They reinforce each other. As they are planted deeper in the mind and lived out consistently they become more firmly established. The abundant, fruitful mindset grows more expansive as the virtues grow in one's mind and the actions flow outward. Patience, love, joy, fulfillment, contentment, and related thoughts become apparent.

Exploring the virtues discussed in this book feed the kind of thoughts that lead to proper thinking, It's proper because it's the way the One who created the mind knows best how it works and what thoughts should fill it. Circumstances will challenge that truth, they have throughout the centuries. Truth stands. Falsehoods fail.

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7. What is the most important point of this chapter to you personally and why?

CHAPTER 2

WHY HUMILITY IS AN ADMIRABLE GOAL

*“Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly,
than to divide the spoil with the proud.”*

—Proverbs 16:19

*“True humility does not know that it is humble. If it did,
it would be proud from the contemplation of so fine a virtue.”*

—Martin Luther

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (see James 4:6), therefore it is beneficial for one to cultivate an attitude of humility. Undeserved favor from God holds the potential for unlimited possibilities. A wise person seeks to discover what pleases God and align with that reality. So how does the process of being humble work? Where does it start and how is it sustained?

Since humility is an attitude, it starts with an awareness that it is a commendable goal. Knowing what one wants to attain is necessary to focus on the desired outcome. Because contemporary culture values pride rather than humility, it takes effort to work against the fallacy that is constantly reinforced that pride, rather than humility is to be pursued.

Attitude is at the essence of putting the right thoughts in one’s mind that lead to a spirit of humility. What is in one’s heart will be manifested in the give and take of life. Pride occurs by default, humility takes discipline. Commitment to the goal will enable a person to stay with it in spite of temporary setbacks.