Virtue (chayil)—The Missing Link

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. (Phil. 4:8 KJV) And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge. (2 Peter 1:5, KJV)

Introduction

The Latin root of virtue is the word *vir*, the term for an adult male. From it we get the English word virile, meaning manly. The related word, *virtus*, means “strength.” Thus, the etymology of the word *virtue* points to the idea of being full-grown, mature moral strength. It came to English through a French variant that meant “moral strength; manliness; valor; excellent worth.” We find the word *virtuoso* appearing in the early 1600s, meaning one who is highly skilled in some area of the fine arts. As a violin *virtuoso* is skilled in music so that excellent music becomes part of her, so a virtuous person is someone whose moral excellence is evident because it has become part of who they are. The dictionary definition of virtue is: *virtue* n 1: moral excellence; right action and thinking; morality 2: a particular moral quality regarded as good or meritorious 3: effective power or force 4: chastity.

J. G. Holland wrote: “Reputation and character are widely different things. Character lives in a man, reputation lives outside of him.” We can safely say that reputation is “what others think I am,” whereas character is “who I am.” Character is the inner reality of who we really are. It is a matter of virtue to be sure that our words, actions, and attitudes reflect good character. It is also a matter of virtue to realize that, if I fail to be obedient, I not only need to correct my wrong attitude toward authority, but I also need to apologize to those who witnessed my disobedience. My poor choices demonstrate poor character and this may/could have had a bad influence on others—an action for which I am responsible.

Virtue is the moral excellence a person exhibits by consistently making the right choices, the beauty of the soul. Thus, virtue is the missing link between character and reputation. In short, virtue is the total moral excellence evident in my life as I consistently do what is right. According to 2 Peter 1:5, we need to add to our faith, virtue...

Is there anything about modern culture that really concerns you? Are there social trends in your community that trouble you? Are there problems in the world you wish you could do something about but know you never could fix by yourself? While we may not be able to solve the world’s problems, we do have a moral responsibility for our personal conduct. The influence of our good character is an important contribution we can make to our home, family, job, and community. Virtue is the measure of that influence. As such, my dear sister Amy was the most virtuous woman I have known. As I sat in her funeral I heard many, many voices of strangers (not just friends and family members) come pay tribute to a woman that had spread love to mankind. I was humbled by such outpour!

The Hebrew word translated virtue is chayil. It is found in Ruth 3:11 “And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman.” Thus, Rut was even in the direst of circumstances a virtuous woman. It is also found in Proverbs 12:4 “A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband: but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones.” And it is T“Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.” An eshet chayil, a woman of valor, that is, a virtuous woman is the king’s crown, far above any other measure of value.

Virtue stands above popular permissiveness

Doing what “everyone” knows is right is good. The distinctive mark of virtue, however, is doing right even when popular opinion condones what is wrong. It is standing above popular opinion to uphold what is right, even when wrong is commonly permitted. It is doing what is right, even when popular opinion would permit otherwise. [Insert the pastor’s prayer address to his state’s legislature]
Virtue is upholding moral excellence by doing what is right. People will often test your moral standards in order to see if they are genuine convictions or merely a show. When pressured by people to abandon what is mortally right, respond with self-control. Self-control is “rejecting wrongs desires and doing what is right.” One must be steadfast in virtue, we must do the right thing. Self-control under moral pressure also involves resisting the urge to become angry with those trying to influence you wrongly or to react un-virtuously to their needling.

As children I am sure you have been in situations where you were given an opportunity to do something contrary to what you knew was right. It can be easy for children to succumb to this type of “peer pressure.” Talking with them about specific situations and decisions before they arise can give them the confidence they need to do the right thing in the face of ungodly peer pressure. Help them \textit{a priori} to work out appropriate answers and actions they can respond with when pressured to do wrong.

\textbf{Lead others the right way—Set the precedent}

Virtue is measured by personal character and especially by the moral force one’s character brings upon others. Thus, virtue goes beyond just doing the right thing to setting a precedent for others to follow. When you are about to make a decision, do you ever consider how that decision will set a precedent for others? Do you ever consider how your choice will impact the ethical sensitivity of those around you? Abraham Lincoln is commonly credited with the statement, “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” Our true character will eventually become evident. We should model moral leadership on the job and in our community by setting the proper precedent in our daily decisions.

Calling a nation, a community or an institution to address failures is a serious action. Society needs courageous moral reformers—those who will set the precedent and lead the way—but often there are too many willing to reform others and too few willing to be reformed themselves. Virtue that seeks to reform must be balanced by the character quality of humility. Humility is: acknowledging that everything good I have to offer is the result of others who have invested in my life; and recognizing that there are still many areas in my life that need to be corrected or strengthened. Before calling others to reform, we seek first to “set the precedent” by strengthening our own character.

As a parent, you have an opportunity to significantly influence the character development of your children—not only in your deliberate interaction with them, but also (and often more significantly) in the way they observe your day-to-day living. Think about those things you encourage your child to do or not to do. (E.g., “Don’t eat too much junk food.” “Be sure to get some exercise.” “Be obedient to parents and teachers.” “Show good manners at the table.” “Speak respectfully of others.”) Are you setting a precedent for virtue by how you instruct your children in these areas? Is your own example consistent with your words of instruction to them?

\textbf{Persistence}

One mark of the woman of virtue in Scripture is consistency—consistency that has the power to effect change in times of social deterioration. Moral reform must begin with personal integrity. The consistent washing of the tide against a rocky coast will gradually smooth away the rough edges. The consistent blowing of the wind against a tree will cause the great trunk to bend as it grows. The consistent shining of the sun on an icy pond will slowly melt & warm the water.

The work of social reform depends more on consistency than outspokenness, There is a time to speak out, but only if words are backed by a consistent life. Determine what wise and measured influence you might have on the job, at home, or in the community—then approach it with patience and persistence. Those within your realm of responsibility to direct will not always understand or appreciate your direction. It can be especially difficult if your direction includes moral or ethical leadership as well as technical instruction.

Long-standing or deeply ingrained ethical problems will not be cleared up overnight. Providing careful and gradual transition will prove beneficial. It is vital to exercise moral leadership with patience. Patience is “accepting a difficult situation without giving a deadline to remove it.”
Your Associations Shape Your Life

People influence people. Not only in childhood, but also in adult years, we influence and are influenced by the people we meet, the people we live and work with, and the personalities we follow through the media. Even the lives we read of in books can impact our own hopes, dreams, and character. A virtuous person seeks to be an agent for moral excellence in society. To that end, such an individual chooses his or her associations wisely.

Author and motivational speaker Charles “Tremendous” Jones underscored the necessity of choosing associations wisely with these words: “You will be no different tomorrow than you are today except for two things: the people you meet and the books you read.” The virtue evident in your life is a direct result of the choices you make. Use discernment in the associations, television programs, books, and other influences that you allow to affect you.

A man or woman of virtue is rightly concerned about the people with whom he or she associates. However, virtue should never be snobbish or exclusive. It should be exercised with gentleness. Gentleness is “showing consideration and personal concern for others.” It follows that a gentle person will care for others personally, rather than simply viewing the mass population as a project. Give deliberate effort to identify and spend time with those who will positively influence you, whose character you admire and respect. Additionally, exercise gentleness toward all, interacting amiably with the people whose paths intersect yours.

Life is not lived Alone

Human beings are social entities. We constantly influence and are influenced by one another. Sometimes the influence is intentional, but most influence is unconsciously exerted and unconsciously received. Virtue has to do with the moral influence that your life exerts upon others. Open a piano and shout into it, and some of the strings will begin to vibrate. Strike a tuning fork and hold it next to another fork of the same frequency, and the second fork will start to vibrate. Hang two pendulum clocks beside each other and eventually both pendulums will swing in sync. This is the law of sympathetic vibration: objects of the same frequency tend to vibrate in sympathy with one another when placed in close proximity.

Objects of different frequencies will sometimes affect one another as well. This is called forced vibration. Just as the vibration of one object can affect other nearby objects, so the character of one person can influence the character of those nearby. An individual’s words, actions, and attitudes can exert a real influence on others. That is why children tend to become like their parents. Even those who try desperately to be different often grow up to make similar mistakes or develop character traits similar to those of their parents.

Virtues and vices are communicated from one person to another by conscious example and also by unconscious influence. We tend to become like the people with whom we spend our time. That is the nature of human relationships. Virtue is the quality of one who stands upright in the face of immoral influences. Instead of falling into sympathetic or forced vibration with immoral influences, the man or woman of virtue seeks to do the right thing and urge others to as well.

Moral or ethical standards establish a “higher line” for measuring business performance. Yet the pressure of the bottom line is frequently felt more keenly than that higher line. Ignore neither. A good business decision takes into consideration both ethical and financial soundness. Helping others to see the importance of both in a decision requires the balancing character quality of persuasiveness. Persuasiveness is “guiding vital truths around another’s mental roadblocks.” Use tact and creativity when urging others to do right. Rather than lecturing, inspire virtue with proper persuasiveness.

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1 Adapted from Virtue, Series 2, No. 16, Character Training Institute, 2001