



The Virtues and Character Development Project

The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

I Thessalonians 5:24

BOOK REVIEW

After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters

N. T. Wright

In his book, *After Your Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, N. T. Wright points out that many Christians focus on life as if it were a river with two banks. On the bank where we are presently living, we focus on entering into a personal relationship with God through what Jesus did on the Cross, then following many rules for Christian behavior. On the opposite bank is the ultimate end, our final salvation in heaven. However, Wright asks, what comes between the two? His answer is, a bridge that involves pursuing virtue and leads to godly character wherein we become the human beings that God intended for us to be. This is a transformation through the Holy Spirit that enables a Christian to live out of a new nature. It becomes a way to think about what to do and how to do it.

Jesus said, *Follow me*. This tells us what you should do and how you should do it. This is a transformation of character. The journey involves virtue formation, leading to Christian character, which is radically different from the way of the world; it is a claim that this makes sense of all human life in a way that nothing else does.

Virtue is the result of thousands of small choices to do what is good and right. While this does not come naturally, it eventually comes second nature. This will move the person from merely knowing the rules or discovering who you are to a person who has developed Christian virtue, leading to life that is truly human. Wright explores how to become genuine human beings, reflecting the God in whose image we are made, and doing so in worship and mission. This means, the way a person thinks and acts is consistent, regardless of circumstances. He points out that Christian character is more than good character; it involves becoming more genuinely human.

Wright discusses the difference between the ancient view of virtue, as presented by Aristotle, and the Christian view. The latter leads to a fully flourishing human being. This is a long, steady process that includes a spiritual dimension that was missing. This becomes the very road on which one travels to the goal of flourishing. If one stops practicing the virtues, the problems that were overcome will return. This is why it is imperative to continue to live a virtuous life. This is not simply following rules, but being transformed within. Living by rules is an external behavior. The call to the Christian is to be transformed in response to the overwhelming grace of God.

Throughout the 19th Century and the 20th Century, people claimed *you ought to be true to who you are*. Wright points out this essentially is a matter of personal preference or taste. It is in contrast to the hard road of self-denial of which Jesus spoke when He called for people to take up their cross to follow him. The New Testament's vision of a genuinely *good* human life is a life of *character formed by God's promised future*, as a life within that future-shaped character *lived within the ongoing story of God's people*.

The life of a Christian involves serving as rulers and priests in God's kingdom here and now. This goal is achieved through the kingdom-establishing work of Jesus and the Spirit where *Christians are living in the present, anticipating this ultimate reality through the Spirit-led, habit-forming, truly human practice of faith, hope, and love, sustaining Christians in their calling to worship God and reflect His glory into the world*. Here we come to understand that *Christian virtue is not about you, but*

about God and God's kingdom. This is why we are to serve as rules and priests to reflect God into the world and reflect the world back to God. We are to *stand at the interface between God and His creation, bringing God's wise and generous order to the world and giving articulate voice to creation's glad and grateful praise to its maker* through worshiping and reigning (I Peter 2:5, 9). To live this way, holiness is necessary; *people must learn to live as God's free people.* This is more than Aristotle's happiness, but Jesus' blessedness. His Beatitudes are not rules, but virtues of the heart. This is why Jesus called, *Follow me.* It will lead to an authenticity where perfection is a character formed by overflowing generous love. *Jesus was inviting His followers to enter, an upside-down world, an inside-out world, a world where all things people normally assume about human flourishing, including human virtue, are set aside and a new order is established.* This all comes about by grace when one's heart is cleansed.

Jesus revealed a new way of being human, which requires transformation of one's mind (Romans 12:2). While the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in this, decisions by the individual are necessary. Just as getting dressed in the morning requires a choice of what to wear, so too are the choices one makes in becoming virtuous. Virtue formation is hard work, but it requires the mind-renewing work through the Holy Spirit and the Christian community.

The Early Church showed Jesus' new way of living in a way that was so revolutionary that people thought Christians were out of their minds. The ancient Greeks taught that one must possess all the virtues since each one enabled keeping the others in place. This fits with a Christian view of virtues. For example, the fruit of the Spirit are growing in the Christian; all become evident, not just one or two aspects. *Christian virtue, including the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit, is both the gift of God and the result of the person of faith making conscious decisions to cultivate this way of life and these habits of heart and mind.* Faith, hope, and love are gifts from God that point away from us and toward those around us.

Wright turns his attention to the Christian community in its role as a *royal priesthood* – how this gets lived out in the community and in the world, what it means to demonstrate a new way of being human. He claims this vocation shapes the church's two primary tasks: worship and mission. An example of the challenge that is faced is given in comparing the excitement of striking a match. This gives a short, bright moment of thrill. However, it passes quickly. When the Church seeks a similar excitement in worship, it fails to draw the world into worship. On the other hand, lighting a candle is less exciting, but it is far more long-lasting and has a much greater impact. Corporate worship is a form of corporate virtue when God can dwell. Together, the Church blends the individual contributions into an appeal to the conscience of the world. This gives people the opportunity to be genuinely human where they can flourish. This is evident in humility, charity, patience, and chastity, which were not common before Jesus' day.

Five elements are stated as necessary for living the holy life: Scripture, Stories, Examples, Community, and Practices. These are described as a circle for virtuous living. Each contributes to the growth within the body of Christ. The focus on the Christian community is especially important as it refers to the Church across time and space. For example, the eucharist is a sacrament that is practiced by all Christians around the world since Jesus instituted it. So, when taking the bread and wine, each person ought to reflect on the Body of Christ in three ways: past (from the initial time until now), present (every Christian around the world), and future (when we all will partake in heaven).

Wright concludes by reminding us that our role is to be fully human by developing Christian character. We are to live that out in a community, locally, globally, and across time through worshipping God and working for His kingdom. We continue this process until it *becomes a habit of the heart, a second nature thing.*