



The Virtues and Character Development Project

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

I Thessalonians 5:24

Why Virtues?

When one looks at the culture around us, it is quite evident that something is amiss. The overwhelming tendency among people is a lifestyle that is self-centered, or even selfish. People live primarily for themselves. At the root of this is a lack of character. The question about why this has occurred causes us to consider what can be done to address the problem.

It is important to recognize that everyone has character. However, there is bad character and there is good (or godly) character. While it is not likely that anyone has only one or the other, it is possible to see more of one than the other as life progresses since character is developed as a result of experiences across one's lifetime. It is certainly true that a relationship with Jesus Christ is foundational. Yet, as N.T. Wright points out, that is not the endpoint. Growth in good (or godly) character is essential. This is why virtues are important. So, what is necessary for the development of virtues that lead to godly character?

The Early Church Fathers served as guides for people in the Church. They met with individuals who desired to grow spiritually and gave them direction on how to live as a Christian. By the 4th Century, the Early Church Fathers realized that the problems that were challenging the people were common. Furthermore, they were foundational to other problems. These were identified as the capital vices, meaning the conditions of the heart that led to more sinful living. St. Augustine referred to these as *disordered loves*. (Rebecca DeYoung uses the term *disordered heart*.) He stated that God provides us with love gifts to enable us to live the way He desires. When these are distorted, they become happiness imitators. This means that we take what God provides and make them our source of hope.

To help people understand how these are related, the Early Church Fathers developed a picture that is now known as the *Tree of Vices* and the *Tree of Virtues*. The version used for *The Virtues and Character Development Project* is a slight modification of what was used by the 8th Century. The *Tree of Vices* is rooted in self and gives first to pride (the trunk) and the various vices (the branches). The *Tree of Virtues* is rooted in Christ and gives first to humility (the trunk) and the various virtues (the branches). This mental picture helps with understanding how the Holy Spirit will work in the lives of people to produce virtues and lead to godly character.

Vices and virtues are defined as life habits that become second nature. These contribute to character. So, virtues lead to godly character as the Holy Spirit transforms one's nature. Historically, there are two groups of virtues: cardinal virtues [(prudence (wisdom), temperance (patience), fortitude (courage), and justice)] and theological virtues [(faith, hope, and charity (love))]. To give an example of how these relate, consider *humility*, which is rooted in an understanding of one's position arising due to the investment of others in one's life. This leads to a sense of *gratitude* for what these others have done. Awareness of the need for *generosity* to other individuals who need support in their growth is the outflow, just as one branch comes from the trunk and other branches.

Virtue is needed for each person to become someone with godly character. However, it is important to recognize that virtues and character are lived out in community. One is to live for others, not for self. This is what is missing in the culture. This is why the establishment of habits that are virtues that lead to godly character is essential. This will enable us to accept God's gifts to fulfill our deepest desires for Him. As St. Augustine stated, *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*

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