



The Virtues and Character Development Project

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

I Thessalonians 5:24

Overview – a background perspective for parents to get started

This article is to provide a basic outline of the perspective needed for those working with the youth, ages 5 to 25. While the leaders who are targeted include parents, teachers, pastors, mentors, and coaches, the directions will specifically indicate parents since the family unit is the central community in which character development occurs during these formative years.

Before continuing with the following information, it is important that you have read the following documents (in this order): *Why Virtues?*, the position statement *Why We Do What We Do*, and *Growth into Human Flourishing*. Each of these are available on *The Virtues and Character Development Project* website.

The *Why Virtues?* article compares the *Tree of Vices* and the *Tree of Virtues*. As you recall, these were produced by the Early Church Fathers as a means to demonstrate the two foundations. The *Tree of Vices* is rooted in disordered loves, which are evident in *self*. The *Tree of Virtues* is rooted in ordered loves, which are anchored in *Christ*. The idea is that individuals continue to practice habits that reinforce the vices or the virtues until they become second nature. What has been found is that, even with the Holy Spirit transforming the person, the longer one remains in the *Tree of Vices*, the harder it becomes to move to the *Tree of Virtues*. As a result, helping people develop the virtues earlier in life will be highly beneficial.

The *Why We Do What We Do* article is a reminder that the life journey that unfolds during virtue formation and character development is leading to Christ-like character. This involves the work of the Holy Spirit and the cooperation of the individual. Assistance from parents can facilitate the transformation so that it occurs more rapidly and becomes more natural. Furthermore, the changes in the individual are learned and lived out in a community. The most foundational community is the family, where parents and children learn and grow together. The principles learned in this setting then can be spread into other communities – church, school, athletic teams, musical groups, and the towns in which one lives.

The 3rd article, *Growth into Human Flourishing*, is a reminder that the whole person is involved in life's journey. The growth that occurs in the life of an individual who has a personal relationship with God has two aspects: spiritual formation and character development. The relationships between these two are often overlooked. Spiritual formation is a focus on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit as the person becomes more mature in the faith. This frequently involves spiritual disciplines, which provide an atmosphere in which God is able to speak to the individual, who hears and responds. One way this is manifested is the fruit of the Spirit, which can be seen in how the person lives. The second aspect is character development. Scripture encourages believers to grow and become more Christ-like. This process also is dependent on the involvement of the Holy Spirit, but the cooperating activity of the person enables growth to occur in ways otherwise not possible. It is the emphasis of this project that individuals will develop life habits that are virtues that lead to godly character. This is not a call to human effort, but a turning toward the purposes of God.

To help with an understanding of the basis of these efforts, mental pictures are used. The first one involves a throne, representing the center of one's life. Surrounding this throne are examples of activities in which someone might engage throughout one's lifetime. The image shown has a throne without anyone occupying it. The question becomes, *who sits on the throne of your life?* If it is you (self), then every decision is based on how you see the relative importance of that activity at the moment. On the other hand, if God is in the center of the throne, then every life-decision is based on one's relationship with God, who sees from an eternal perspective.

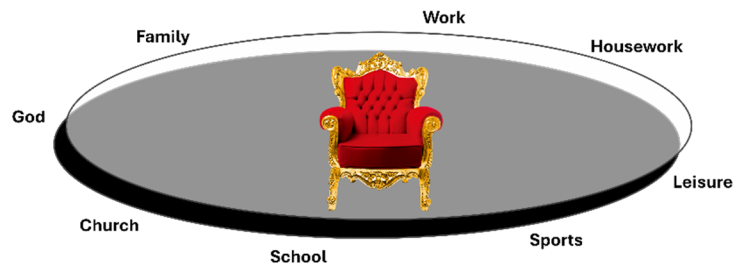


Figure 1 Who is on the throne of your life?

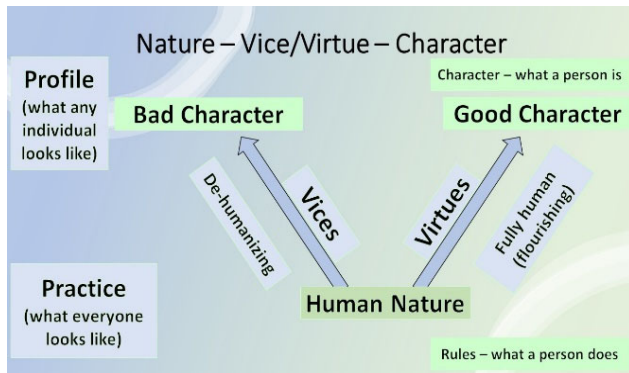


Figure 2 Human Nature

The second diagram is a comparison of two ways one's human nature is lived out. The arrow arising to the left shows how vices are de-humanizing and lead to bad character. The arrow arising to the right shows how virtues enable one to flourish (to be fully human), and lead to good character. It also reminds us that, while each of us is human, being made in the image of God (called *practice* – what every human basically looks like), that appearance differs from person to person. (This difference is called one's *profile*.) Imagine you are

looking at a garden. You are able to recognize a flower from a leaf. However, not every flower is identical. So it is with people. Just because someone is a human does not mean that every human will be identical in appearance. This is how it is with virtue formation and character development. The basic aspects of each virtue will be the same. However, how that appears in a specific person may differ, even significantly, from someone else. So, if there are two children in a family, both of whom have the virtue of gratitude, it is not likely that the two children will display gratitude in the same manner. This will be essential to understand when working with children to develop the various virtues.

If the differences in the appearance of virtue are true, then the character that forms in the individual also will be unique. Even though two individuals are manifesting godly character, it probably will be very different. This is one component of the variation in the ways God created each person.

One final diagram that has been developed is the logo for this project – the bonsai tree. It is quite likely that you read about this on the website already. However, it is being mentioned here as a reminder of the importance of the life journey that is involved in virtue formation and character development. The bonsai tree needs a good root system, proper nutrients, light, and water to grow. It also must be shaped throughout its lifetime. Similarly, each person needs to be anchored in Christ and receive guidance from individuals who are helping shape the person into ever-increasing Christ-likeness. Every life event influences one's character.



Figure 3 Project logo: the bonsai tree

With this background information in mind, we need to be reminded the definitions of vices, virtues, and character. The vices and virtues are defined as life habits that become second nature. Virtues and vices are concerned with the condition of our hearts. We know that God gives us what we need. It is His gift to us. When our love (or heart) is disordered, the result is a vice that distorts our view of what God has given to us. This changes our focus from God (the Giver) to what was given (the gift). Now, these gifts become a form of self-reliance. We learn to depend on what we have been given instead of relying on the One who longs to continue giving to His children. As was shown in Figure 2 *Human Nature*, this marred dependency becomes the various life habits that are vices lead to bad character. On the other hand, virtues are life habits that focus on who God is and a reliance on Him, ultimately leading to godly character. The nature within an individual that enables that person to live out the actions in society is one's character. As has been expressed, someone might have bad character, or one might have good character. In reality, most people have a combination of both. It is for this reason, the transforming work of the Holy Spirit become a life-long process. Therefore, it is important that the formation of virtues continues.

As parents work with their children, giving explanations regarding the *why* for virtue and the activity will be necessary. It also will be important to explain how these apply to one's life and to the community. For a person to fully embrace the need for virtues and character in one's life, their purpose must be explained. Without this explanation, the virtues usually fail to become second nature. As a result, they do not last throughout one's lifetime. It is important to know that virtues focus on human life, i.e., how someone lives. They are not a means to enable success in a career. This means the activities provided through *The Virtues and Character Development Project* are not intended for *virtue signaling*. Webster's dictionary states that *Virtue signaling is when someone publicly expresses opinions or takes actions primarily to appear morally upright, rather than genuinely being committed to the cause. An example is someone sharing a post online about donating to a charity, without actually donating or taking further action to support the cause* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtue%20signaling>). This is why the goal of these resources is not about **looking** virtuous, but rather **being** virtuous.

Next, it is important to remember that all virtue development is located in community. That means it must be expressed within a community. So, the focus ought to be on the common good, and not on what the individual gains. It is good for a person to have the virtues and good character. However, if it has no impact on the people in the community, it is better than having bad character, but it is not sufficient. Virtue formation is not a focus on an individual gaining a competitive advantage over others, but on being able to positively impact one's community, whether that is the family, society, the nation, or the world. This is the purpose of godly character. Virtues must be put into action in the community. An example of this is given in Luke 10:25-37. Here, a Samaritan had compassion, but he also acted to help the injured man. It was not enough for the Samaritan to have compassion; he must act on that. Virtues must be put into action in the community. That is why each virtue being developed should also have a service component where the community is served in some manner.

The activities are intended to facilitate the formation of habits that become second nature. This means they must be repeated regularly over time. Otherwise, they remain as activities that must be completed, being nothing more than work to be done, as if it were on a check list. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that the virtues are the center of living (a balance), with the vices are the result when one goes to either extreme (too much or too little). Image the following example. A wooden board is lying on the floor. It is 4 feet long, 2 inches high, and 4

inches wide. At the beginning, the board is turned so the 2-inch portion is on the top. You are asked to walk on the board from one end to the other, the entire 4 feet, touching only the top. You will find that it is likely that you will fall off easily. Next, the board is rotated so the 4-inch side is now up. You now walk along the 4-inch side from one end to the other. It is likely that it is a little easier, but you still probably fall off. Now, the board is switched to one that is 2 inches by 6 inches, then one that is 2 inches by 8 inches, and finally, one that is 2 inches by 10 inches. Each time, the surface on which you are walking is wider. Most likely, you will find yourself being able to walk across the board without falling. However, if someone were alongside you and gently pushed you as you moved across each condition, remaining on the top would be challenging. Even now, it would be less likely that you would fall as the board was wider.

In a sense, this is what happens as the virtues form within a person. The habit of remaining in balance while walking becomes stronger when the road on which you are traveling is wider. Even if someone were to push you, as you continue in the virtue, you are less likely to turn to a vice.

Now, imagine what it would be like during the development of the balanced walking if someone were alongside you to keep you steady instead of pushing you. You would find yourself growing more consistent as you moved forward. This is the role of the parents in working with the child, serving as one who provides the support needed to develop the virtues that will withstand the pressures of daily living.

One final example focuses on the importance of small steps that are continued for a long time. In the early years of space exploration, scientists made extensive studies and calculations regarding the forces needed to get a rocket into space, then into orbit around Earth, then to return to Earth. This was expanded when the travel left Earth, went to the moon, entered orbit here, landed, and returned to Earth, eventually safely landing. The calculations showed that a very small error in the distances at the various points would have very significant impact on the outcome. In fact, with the distances involved, a tiny error in leaving Earth orbit might lead to missing the moon by such a great distance that return to Earth safely might not be possible.

In a similar way, the tiny steps taken in the daily habits associated with the formation of virtues cumulate into a life that has godly character. Failure to take the right steps would show why the vices leads to bad character. They are the accumulation of small steps that, over time, lead to great distances from the target.

Research in the Social Sciences on the nature of habits has revealed helpful information that may contribute to the efforts of parents and their children. It is commonly known that habits take time to develop, generally needing at least 3 weeks of daily use and some needing up to 8 weeks. (This is one reason that the activities in this project are intended to be used for at least 2 months.) In addition, the effectiveness of the routine involved in habit formation is dependent on the environmental conditions in which they are being completed. One key aspect is the ability of the individual to focus on the task. If there are too many distractions, which might be as few as one in some instances, the desired result of the habit forming does not occur. So, when parents and children are working on the various activities, it is important to identify any factors in the environment that might be distracting. For instance, having a phone nearby might cause someone to keep checking to see if messages have arrived. This reduces one's focus on the task, leading to poor habit formation. Many other examples could be given.

In addition, habit formation is dependent on purpose. If the individual knows *why* the task is being completed, it is much more likely that the activity will be done well and the habit

become more ingrained. This is one reason it was stated earlier that the purpose of the virtues and character development ought to be explained to the children. The effectiveness will be enhanced, yielding a better habit, which will be a virtue that is more likely to become second nature.

Finally, the activities that are being shared are intended to be examples for parents. They are expected to work in many communities. However, that might not be the case for you. So, use the following recommendation: ***adapt, don't adopt***. This means that you are to use these examples as ideas that will enable you to develop activities that will work in your setting. Your setting is unique. Therefore, what you need also will be unique. Find the components that will enable success in your community and ignore the others. It might be helpful to start using a few of these activities, but you ought to feel free to develop those that fit your needs. (If you have suggestions for other activities, please send them to us. We will share them with the others who will be using these resources.)

It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit will work in the lives of all the leaders and the children who engage in virtue formation. May He richly bless you in all you do. His character will impact your community in your lifetime, in the lifetime of your children, and the lifetime of their children, generation after generation.