



The Virtues and Character Development Project

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

I Thessalonians 5:24

BOOK REVIEW

Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life

Michael Austin and R. Douglas Geivett

In I Corinthians 13:13, St. Paul refers to three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. He shows that love brings a multitude of virtues into proper relationship with each other. Editors Michael Austin and R. Douglas Geivett use these theological virtues as the primary divisions in ***Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life*** to reflect on how these virtues are connected to each other. Within each primary division (*Faith*, *Hope*, and *Love*), various authors discuss specific virtues that are associated with each theological virtue. In the first section on *Faith*, the virtues covered are *Faith*, *Open-mindedness*, *Wisdom*, and *Zeal*. *These are virtues that govern our knowledge, practices, and the types of actions that are grounded by these practices.* In the second section on *Hope*, the virtues explored are *Hope*, *Contentment*, and *Courage*. *These virtues pertain to personal expectations and aspirations.* Finally, the section on *Love* includes the virtues of *Love*, *Compassion*, *Forgiveness*, and *Humility*. *These are virtues that bear most directly on our relationships with one another.* Each chapter includes a description of a single virtue, a philosophical exploration of the virtue, a Christian perspective on the virtue, some practical advice with respect to Christian spiritual formation and exemplification of the virtue in everyday life, and several reflection questions suitable for individual or group study. This collection of essays is intended to provide readers with an understanding of what it means to develop virtues as part of the process of forming godly character, i.e., to be Christlike in one's character. Not every virtue on the list is specifically identified in Scripture; however, the discussion shows why these are essential in the life of every believer. *Virtues are conducive to flourishing and the abundant life because God designed us to function best when possessing and exemplifying the virtues. They reflect the perfect character of God.*

The first section (*Faith*) begins with a chapter on *faith*. Paul Moser discusses that *faith is not merely faith that God exists*. Instead, it involves a rational entrustment of oneself to God, which is a means to friendship with God, that results in loving obedience to His will. The outcome of trusting God is transformation of one's heart by the Holy Spirit, enabling a person to become more like Christ. So, faith in God is actually trusting in God, which becomes one's belief in God, enabling us to entrust oneself to God. *It is ongoing, not static; it is life-involving, not just mind-involving... Faith in God, at its heart, includes one's obediently receiving, and volitionally committing oneself to God and what God graciously offers for the sake of reconciled fellowship with God.* Faith is deeply connected to obedience in all areas of one's life.

Jason Baehr's chapter on *open-mindedness* shows that this virtue *enables a person to be able and willing to transcend some default cognitive standpoint in order to take up or consider a different cognitive standpoint*. This arises from a deep desire to know the truth. *Open-mindedness is essentially a willingness to set aside or loosen one's grip on a particular belief in order to give a fair or impartial hearing to arguments or evidence against this belief.* When one is open-minded, that person is able and willing to discuss the ideas of others. Therefore, Baehr reminds readers that the company one keeps will impact one's values.

James Spiegel, in his chapter on *wisdom*, points out that *wisdom* is a countercultural virtue. It involves a transformation of the mind and the heart. He informs readers that there are two Greek words for wisdom: *phronesis* (which is practical wisdom) and *sophia* (which is speculative or theoretical wisdom). *Phronesis*, a higher-order virtue governing the whole range of moral and intellectual virtues, enables one to integrate other virtues and resolve conflicts. Thus, wisdom is connected with *integrity* and *faithfulness*. Spiegel also points out that the things to which we choose to expose ourselves influence our attitudes and beliefs. *Doing what is good can improve our ability to know, understand, and recognize what is true.*

While many people hold a view that *zeal* ought to be avoided, David Horner and David Turner show that *it is essential to life in Christ and is in fact an excellence of character* when one pursues the good. It

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avoids sloth (a lacking, an unwillingness to do what God directs) and fanaticism (an excess, acting not in proportion to the value or importance of the end that is sought). The authors show that both God and Jesus are zealous and that believers are to be likewise. For example, *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord* (Romans 12:11). *The biblical picture of zeal is a disposition to rational, fervent, and diligent pursuit of what is good, motivated by and expressed in love.*

The second section (*Hope*) begins with a chapter on *hope* by William C. Mattison, who reminds readers that *hope is not merely a feeling, nor is it merely wishing that something be true, but that Christian hope is an excellence of character directed towards God, made possible by grace, and fulfilled in our complete happiness in union with God.* Since this is completed in the next life, hope is fixed on both this life and the next one. Christian hope is rooted in God – who He is, what He has done, and what He will do. *Christian hope is a virtue, directed toward God's very self, and made possible only by the grace of God.* *Hope* gives fortitude to believers. How this life is lived impacts one's understanding of hope, and vice versa.

Contentment is elusive, as Steve Porter writes, even for the Christian. It is defined as *an inner attitude or frame of mind, either occurrent at a point in time or prone to arise at any given point in time, of tranquil acceptance or peaceful repose towards some specific situation.* Yet, *Christian contentment goes beyond being satisfied in or with our circumstances.* The great good of *contentment in all circumstances* is possible only through satisfaction in a supernatural good that would outweigh dissatisfaction in all else. *Confidence in the constance and loving presence of God in our lives is a central component of contentment.*

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung concludes this section with a chapter on *courage* from a Christian perspective. She shows that it is not primarily concerned with the battlefield or with any form of aggressive action, but that *Christians ought to seek and practice a form of courage that imitates the courage of Christ, where love is central and powerful enough to move us to sacrifice everything for what is good, even our very lives.* Therefore, *courage must point beyond itself to love as its source and to love's end as its goal.*

The third section (*Love*) begins with a chapter on *love*. Here, Charles Taliaferro discusses how *loving another person involves affirmation of her value, as well as taking pleasure in her very existence. Love is not mere emotion, but it does include a disposition to take pleasure in the well-being of the beloved.* This is modeled in the relationships between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. *When we exhibit the virtue of love, we are imaging what God is like for all to see.* Loving someone requires seeking the good or well-being of that person. *You can love a person less than you should, but you cannot love a person more than you should.* Practicing love may be participatory love, *agapē* love, or redeeming love.

Michael W. Austin, in his chapter on *compassion*, states that *seeking to be like Christ means seeking to acquire the virtue of compassion. Compassion is not merely a virtue called for in our treatment of the poor, sick, and suffering.* It is lived out in how we treat those around us. There are 3 elements involved in *compassion* – belief, emotion, and action. Desmond Tutu stated, *Compassion is not just feeling with someone, but seeking to change the situation.* This causes *compassion* to be connected to justice, mercy, and faithfulness as we live our lives in Christ.

Forgiveness, as presented by R. Douglas Geivett, is a virtue where we *emulate the forgiveness of God in our dealings with one another.* This is essential since forgiveness is central to Christianity. By walking readers through Matthew 18:14-19, he expresses concern regarding the church's neglect of the specific teachings of Jesus on this virtue. There is a call to forgive, even when it is hard to do so. The goal of forgiveness is reconciliation, between God and people and between people.

In the final chapter, Andrew Pinsent brings attention to *humility*. Whereas most other moral and religious traditions place little emphasis on *humility*, he shows that the Christian worldview places this virtue at the foundation of the life of the believer. *Humility involves having a sense of God's majesty and of the gift of participating in the divine nature, and it disposes us to receive friendship with God as a gift given out of love.* Therefore, *Christian humility is essential for both the attainment and the enjoyment of heaven.* It is a tendency for people to seek to become like God using their own abilities. Humility is an avenue to enter into relationship with God and to receive His gifts as gifts.

In conclusion, this collection of essays on various virtues provides readers with insights that will be invaluable in learning what the virtues are, why they are important in the life of a believer, and some suggestions regarding how one might see them developed in one's life. This book is highly recommended.