



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

LIVING CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*: We have a clear image of the perfect body but “no longer any image of a perfect soul, and hence do not long to have one”.

What basis do we use for doing right or wrong?

Rules: Very important especially when we are starting out.

Weaknesses:

- rules don't cover every instance that we meet;
- people feel they are treated like children if they are told simply what the rule is – and obey it!!
- what if the rule is morally wrong? (“I was only obeying orders...”)

Utilitarianism: thinking about the consequences to others can be very important in helping us to decide what to do in certain circumstances.

Weaknesses:

- are we able to stand back and think through the consequences of our actions sufficiently dispassionately?
- are we allowed, say, to ignore the sign telling us not to walk across the grass if it happens to be green and healthy?
- can we join in a crime (which is going to be committed anyway) if our joining in will have no worse consequences and might even lessen the damage?

Virtue ethics is about *who* we are as much as *what* we do. It does not seek to side step rules, nor does it ignore the consequences of our actions. But it puts the emphasis on developing our moral intuition so that we do what is right without needing to refer to the rule book or to calculate whether someone will be hurt by our actions. It is like having learned to speak a language naturally without thinking about vocabulary and grammar. We

live virtuously by *developing a virtuous character* which involves training, like learning a language or a musical instrument. It takes effort and application to build up that moral intuition.

Virtue demands a model or ideal

Any ethical system requires a starting point – otherwise why shouldn't we kill, rob, rape? Virtue ethics start with the ideal person, and that can vary between different societies. Virtue ethics was first described by the Greek philosopher Aristotle who thought of the ideal man (and it was a man!) as a kind of hero figure whose flourishing was built up by practising the virtues of courage, justice, temperance and prudence. Christianity took over the list and added the 'theological virtues' of faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13) to make the 'Seven Virtues'. And beyond that list they also added virtues such as humility and forgiveness.

Aristotle's model figure is like a Hollywood hero, only less grumpy. The Christian ideal with love, humility and forgiveness would not have made much sense to him.

Christian virtue means modelling one's character on the character of Jesus

Christ ... left you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 1 Peter 2.21-23.

This was the conscious approach of the first Christians, sometimes as in the quote above explicitly referring to Jesus, and not just his commandments but also the example of the way in which he lived.

But when we talk about modelling our character on Jesus, it is more truthful to speak of allowing him to model us by his Holy Spirit.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

We are invited to love because we know God's love for us, to forgive because we have been forgiven, to live the life of the children of God who share in the victory of Christ.

Growing in Christ's love

Tom Wright in *Virtue Reborn* talks about the 'virtuous circle' by which we develop our Christian character. *We can start anywhere on the circle*, perhaps by being impressed by the example of one person. And Wright emphasises that private and public prayer run through the whole circle.



But if we start with *scripture*, that is where we learn about the figure of Jesus and the whole story of God. By regular reading we make that story our own story – even the weaknesses and failures can find parallels in our life! We are looking not just for rules but also for *stories* and *examples*. They go beyond rules to feed our imagination and motivation. The Bible is full of stories and examples, but there are also many in

Christian history and in our own lives and experience. Very often we are fired most of all by people we have met.

Community: we are not alone. Christians around us, in church, those we meet or hear about, are our companions in the journey, and we learn from their wisdom and are carried by their encouragement. And we carry them more than we might realise.

All these things feed into our *practice*, opening our eyes to possibilities, pricking our conscience, inspiring our vision – all going beyond mere rule keeping to an authentic way of life.

And in the light of what we have absorbed and begun to live, we read scripture with eyes opened that bit more, sensitised to what we have missed previously. Scripture remains our anchor, but we read it anew.

Rules broken or values more deeply understood?

An important part of virtue ethics is that it is less legalistic than a rule based system. In the emphasis on character it gives us room to allow for slips and failures while recognising a person's overall goodness. And the imitation of the person of Jesus lifts us above rules and, sometimes, to change the rules! For most of Christian history slavery was allowed and

justified by appeal to the Bible, and the New Testament is indeed very accepting of slavery, setting out guidelines for how slaves and owners should behave. It was an appeal *beyond* the rules to the first principles of Christianity and Christ's equal love for all that made slavery abhorrent to nineteenth century people. That is only the most obvious and famous example of many. Another one is the equality of women. Authentic insights into the character of Jesus which inform our lives come through much debate and difference within the Christian community. They are not about throwing away the rule book. Very often they are about sensitising ourselves to do better than the old rules – just as Jesus did when he talked about the commandment not to murder, 'but I say to you, do not call anyone a fool'.

From rules to values: some famous passages.

1 Corinthians 13: Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Romans 12.9-21: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Galatians 5.22: The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. There is no law against such things.

Philippians 4.8-9: Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things ... and the God of peace will be with you.