

The Virtuous Life

Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live.

In today's reading, the writer of Ephesians is in an advice-giving mood.

Since about the middle of chapter 4,

the writer has been describing the "new life"

which is to be lived by the one who is clothed in Christ.

Today's passage offers us three admonitions

which paint a picture of this new life in Christ

a picture that stands in sharp contrast with the former way of life before Christ.

The passage is introduced with this warning to *be careful how you live*,

and then the three sharp contrasts are as follows:

live *not as* unwise, *but as* wise;

not as foolish, *but as* one who understands the Lord's will;

and *do not* be drunk with wine, *but* be filled with the Spirit.

(Sounds like the lecture of a nervous parent

whose teenage child has just gotten into trouble!)

But, this passage is not all of the same tone.

Notice, with the mention of the Spirit in verse 18,

the stern mood of the passage changes

as the writer lets loose into a more cheerful and lively tone

as he describes the life of the community filled with the Spirit.

Perhaps it is because this description of the Spirit-filled community follows so closely

the image of drunkenness and debauchery,

that I imagine a gathering of early Christians in Ephesus, sitting around a table,

inebriated with the Holy Spirit, reveling in their newfound faith,

singing songs and making all sorts of loud merriment

(such as might disturb the neighbors),

in a sort of Pentecostal drunkenness,
not drunk with wine, but with the Spirit of God.

Inebriated, cheerful reveling, noisy merriment, Pentecostal drunkenness!
Not exactly the image you had in mind when you saw the title, “The Virtuous Life”!
But the progression of this letter to the Ephesians, and particularly of this passage,
illuminates for us a *Christian conception of virtue*
which culminates in these verses
and which stands somewhat in contrast
to other more common conceptions of a virtuous life.

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So then, what is the Christian understanding of a virtuous life?
In thinking about what it means to live a virtuous life
a good place to start might be to think about one or two people you know
whom you would consider to be virtuous.
Who are your heroes or heroines in your life? Your role models of virtue?
And what make them seem virtuous?

Whom we choose as our role models of virtue
tells us a lot about the society and culture that has shaped us,
and a look through history shows us how differently various societies
have defined the virtuous life.

In ancient Greece, some of the great virtues were **Justice, Courage, and Loyalty**.
Justice, which was often proven or vindicated through the outcome of a battle
or, when weapons were periodically put aside, in the great Olympic games.
Courage, which was needed to sustain the household and defend the city-state.
And Loyalty, which compelled a person to sacrifice everything
for the sake of the family or the city-state.

It is important that, in ancient Greece, all of these attributes were considered virtues because they enabled a person to serve the greater good of the community, either the family, or the city-state.

Move forward many centuries to medieval times; the common list of virtues includes qualities like prudence & temperance (restraint). The four cardinal virtues become **justice, prudence, temperance, and courage**. These virtues were not uniquely Christian, nor even theological, but, again, they were qualities which helped a person to contribute to the good life of the community, to pursue the common good.

What Christianity introduced into the picture were the theological virtues, such as **faith, hope and love**.

The task of the Christian life was to discern how to relate these theological virtues, such as faith, hope, and love, to the cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, temperance, and courage.

For example, does the love of God in the Christian community

permit believers to take each other to court in the pursuit of justice?

Or, does the Christian hope in God's ultimate vindication of Christ's peaceful life

permit Christians to fight as soldiers in violent defense of the community's well-being?

So the virtuous life becomes rather tricky.

Indeed, as we study the requirements of virtue, it becomes apparent that

there are crucial conflicts in which different virtues make incompatible claims.

Sophocles, author of Greek tragedy, based his plots in the tragic human situation,

in which the main character is forced to recognize

the obligation of two competing virtue-claims;

for example, both love and justice.

The tragedy lies in the hard truth that

to choose one virtue-claim does not exempt me

from the authority of the claim I choose to go against,

making me guilty regardless of the path I choose.

The human situation is a Catch 22, often presenting a choice between
the lesser of two evils.

From a Christian point of view, it is the fallenness of human nature – or sin –
that gets us into this tragic predicament.

God did not create life to be this way.

In God's perfect order, the virtues are a unity.

But in our sinful condition, it becomes impossible for us to live
a purely virtuous life.

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It is this recognition of the fallenness of human beings into a sinful condition
that brings us back in a roundabout way to the message of the letter to the Ephesians.

To live a truly virtuous life, in a Christian sense, requires us to see the big picture
which the writer of Ephesians goes to great lengths to portray for us.

Every understanding of the virtues is linked to some big picture,
some common, overarching story
about who human beings are, and what is good for human life.

The virtues are those qualities in a person
which enable him or her to live the good human life
as it is defined by that overarching story.

The Christian faith, and particularly the book of Ephesians,
provides a particular overarching story that makes sense of human history.

In the sermon a few weeks ago,
we explored the first chapter of the book of Ephesians
in which the writer puts our ordinary, individual lives,
and the life of our ordinary, local, Christian congregation,
into the big picture of God's grand plan for the salvation of the universe.

The writer of Ephesians would have us understand that our lives are caught up in
the mystery of God's will and God's good pleasure
set forth in Christ...as a plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

This is about as big a picture as one could imagine.

God, at work in Christ and in the church, to reconcile the universe to God's self.

And it is within this grand, overarching story about the universe

that Christians can begin to understand what it means to live a virtuous life.

In the Christian understanding, the first step in living a truly virtuous life
is to recognize that it is *God* who is at work to reconcile the universe
and that, without the work of God, no human being *is able* to live
a truly virtuous life.

Because of our fallen, broken, tragic condition,

the virtues have fallen into disunity, making competing claims on our lives.

Because of our fallen, broken, tragic condition,

even when we are living at our best, we fall short of the requirements of virtue.

John Calvin was fond of pointing out that even our best, most faithful, most loving acts
are corrupted by sin, by impure motives, and are insufficient to redeem us.

But hear the good news!, says Ephesians:

despite our fallen, broken, sinful, tragic condition

it is God's good pleasure to reconcile us to God's self in Jesus Christ!

Once we are able to see our total inability to be truly good people, truly virtuous people

we can begin to see our deep need of God,

our deep dependence upon God's grace to save us from our tragic predicament.

God's grand overarching story of the salvation of the universe

provides us a coherent understanding of our lives –

in this story our lives begin to make sense again,

and we find our proper orientation as human beings.

And our proper orientation as human beings within God's story is this:

to know that we depend on God to save us

not only from our vices, which are many,

but from our many failed attempts to be the good people we were created to be.

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So then, if this is our story, what does the virtuous Christian life look like?

And what, if any, is the greatest Christian virtue?

Well, this could be debated

depending on which passage of scripture we're reading at the time.

But, here in today's reading, one is inclined to say

that the greatest virtue within the Christian story

is Gratitude.

For once we find ourselves filled with the Spirit of the God who saves us,

we are moved to pour our hearts out in grateful praise

singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves

making melody to the Lord in our hearts,

giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything

in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Gratitude.

Cicero called it "the greatest of the virtues," the parent of all the others."

Seneca said the lack of it was "an abomination."

Gratitude is a first cousin of "grateful" and "gracious"

In the Greek New Testament, the word for "gratitude," *eucharisteo*,

has embedded in it the word for "grace," or *charis*,

suggesting that the natural response of one who has received God's grace,

is to return that grace through thanksgiving, and grateful praise.

And so this passage in Ephesians which begins with stern injunctions and admonitions
to live a virtuous life,

spills out into the unreserved, uninhibited, Spirit-inebriated worship of God
as the One who alone can make us into who we ought to be.

For the Christian, the virtuous life begins right here in worship.

Nothing serves the common good of our community more than when we gather
right here in this central event of our week,

in our gathering together as a community of faith,

as we seek to remember the story that makes sense of our lives.

Here we do not have to hide from

the brokenness, and fragmentation, and disunity
which plagues our human lives.

Here we know that *the days are evil*,

but we do not have to mask our tragic reality by pain-killing, alcoholic drunkenness,

rather we acknowledge our broken condition together

in the presence of the One who alone can save us and make us whole.

When the Spirit enables us to see this truth about ourselves,

we find our hearts drawn into deep thankfulness

which overtakes us and changes our lives in ways we cannot explain.

It is this kind of dependent, worshipful, grateful relationship with God,

which is the beginning of all true wisdom.

Gratitude to God is the starting point for the virtuous Christian life.

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!