

Virtue: Do we still need it?

The results were what I was expecting. Last week I gave my students the task of defining the word *virtue*, and as I have come to learn, this is a nearly impossible task—at least for people under the age of twenty. I first found this out teaching overseas. I had the opportunity to teach Asian students about Roman Civilization. As part of this task, I believe it necessary to discuss Roman concepts of virtue and its correlation to Republican government. If all goes according to plan, we read and talk about Livy, Seneca, and Cicero. I get to tell Livy's story of Horatius Cocles' heroic death as an example of the ultimate Roman virtue, courage. But even if students are inspired by this display of courage, I still find it is difficult for students to discuss a particularly Roman view of virtue if they don't already have a concept of their own.

I have now taught this lesson in four different schools in three different continents and the results are the same—the word *virtue* is foreign to most high school students. I'm not surprised that it's a topic students don't have conversations about. I am disappointed, however, that it is something so seldom spoken about by their teachers, parents, and pastors, that I have to explain the word in the same way I would explain "transubstantiation" or "conciliarism." While I don't want to overstate a semantic issue, I seriously doubt that we can expect people to develop virtue if they never hear the word spoken.

We can't afford to take the word *virtue* out of our vocabulary. Doing so would starve our already scrawny ethical lexicon. As an educator, I often experience the tension between communicating in language that young people understand and using terminology that they *need to* understand. I usually tend to err on the side of being understood, but this can only go so far. Virtue has no true synonyms. It denotes something

different than goodness or integrity. It is not superior to holiness, but it does mean something different. It is a word that harkens back to pre-Christian classical civilization. It takes us back to Aristotle and Cicero. It is a term that was not merely baptized by the Christian gospel, but one that was fulfilled by the Christ in much the same way as was the Mosaic Law.

After an amazing statement about the sufficiency of God's power to give us EVERYTHING we need to participate in God's divine nature. The Apostle Peter adds, "For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue..." (2 Peter 1:5). One may ask, if I have saving faith, why would I need to add virtue? The tendency of many is to ignore verses 5-9 and to focus on God's work in verses 3-4. This is probably why I am surrounded by young people who know about faith, but can't even define virtue enough to add it to their faith. On the other hand, I'm told it is the tendency of some churches to focus only on the ethical side and ignore those verses about "divine power." This passage makes it clear that the Christian life is fueled only by the power of God. It also makes it clear that it goes beyond initial faith. It takes us to virtue and beyond.

Words are always more than their definitions, but we have to start somewhere. In most places, *virtue* is defined as moral excellence or a characteristic that displays moral excellence. Some Bible translations, such as the NIV, replace the word *virtue* with *goodness*. There are, however, many reasons *virtue* is different than *goodness*. When the ancients spoke of virtue they had in mind something that took discipline. It was explicitly something that didn't come naturally. Lying to get out of a difficult situation comes naturally; honesty fights against this nature. Cowardice is instinctual; courage is learned. Roman literature is littered with discussions of virtue. It is from their word that we get ours. And it is from their word for man, "vir" that they developed their word for

virtue. For the Roman's having virtue was something that was linked to maturity, adulthood, and even manliness. A child can be good. It takes a real man to be virtuous.

Leaving Roman patriarchal language behind, how does one become a "real" man or woman? The answer is education. Peter's call to virtue is a call to a quality that is learned. It is a challenge to learn patience like we would learn to play the piano. It's a call to develop humility (not a Roman virtue) like we would develop our jump shot. It's a call to put the work in. It's a call to discipline. If we are not teaching our children to develop virtue, we are not educating them. At best we are making "workers" out of them, but we are not making citizens out of them.

It seems like articles come out daily documenting the trouble young people (18 to 25 year-olds) are experiencing becoming adults. Working, paying bills, cooking, and doing laundry are considered insurmountable challenges. Apparently, "adulthood" is just too hard. This should come as no surprise. We tried to create a world where everything is easy. And we have raised a generation to do only what comes easy to them, what comes naturally. Our society has no ethical answer to the argument "this is what comes naturally to me." This is not just true of the young; it is increasingly true of their parents. We now live in a world that needs virtue more than ever.

American society in 2016 has produced two political candidates whose entire lives have been dedicated to self-promotion at the expense of virtue. When it comes to an issue that really matters, the issue of virtue, Trump and Clinton are twins. They are not only a reflection of the things we value politically, but more importantly what we don't value. Their lack of virtue reflects our own.

The early Romans, like early Americans, believed that virtue was the foundation of a Republican form of government. If citizens are to have a say in government, these citizens must

possess the virtue to elect leaders that will look after more than their own interest. When the Republic devolved into an Empire, critics believed this was because of the loss of virtue in society. As our Republic devolves, we too can trace this tragedy back to the day where parents, pastors, and teachers decided it wasn't really that important that kids know the word *virtue*.