



# *Virtues: Why and How to Begin*

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## **The nature of virtue**

“A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions. The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.” (Catechism 1803)

The Apostle Paul gives us an eight-step plan for escaping evil desire and sharing the divine nature of God...“make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with devotion, devotion with mutual affection, mutual affection with love” (2 Peter 1:5-7). Sharing the nature of God begins with faith in Jesus Christ and salvation by His death on the cross. We fully share God’s divine nature when we love all people exactly as God loves, because God is love (1 John 4:7-8). For our nature to become the image of God’s nature, virtue is a must. It is so important, it is Paul’s second step in the program.

The Greek word for “virtue” in this text is “arete”, pronounced ah-re-TAH, which means “moral excellence” (Strongs Greek, 703). It refers to living in a way which encompasses the highest moral standards and qualities. Virtue is associated with the character of a person, what is truly in their heart. The English word for “virtue” is derived from the Latin word "virtus", meaning moral strength and integrity. Strength and integrity are the keys to unlocking the power of virtue.

Vices are difficult to stop or even control because they are not of the mind. They reside in the soul, emotions and desire. They are deeply rooted and stronger than human will. Some vices are uncontrolled reactions to some stimulus. When another driver cuts us off, we don’t take time to think about whether or not we will get angry and how we should respond. A response just fires out of the heart like a bullet from a gun.

Trying to overcome a vice is like playing tug-of-war with an elephant. The urge and strength of vice is overpowering and just carries us away. The power of virtue is not in becoming strong enough to resist urges. The power of virtue is in transformation of the heart to remove the urge. Virtue doesn’t provide strength to resist lashing out at someone. Rather, virtue transforms the heart to meekly accept the trespass without the urge to lash out. In other words...Virtue isn’t becoming stronger than the elephant. Virtue removes the elephant.

The goal of virtue is to transform one’s nature into the nature of Jesus, being empowered to approach every situation as Jesus would approach it. Jesus embodied virtue by approaching all people with wisdom, kindness, compassion and mercy. He lived the Beatitudes in meekness, purity and peacemaking for all people, enemies included. He accepted the Father’s will without complaint and forgave everyone who crucified Him from the Sanhedrin to Pilot to the ones who put the nails in His hands and feet. To have the nature of Jesus in our heart means we can also approach every day and every person in the nature of Jesus.

Transformation doesn’t happen overnight. When virtue seems perfected, there will be a fall now and again. When I asked my spiritual director why I couldn’t get to that final perfection in a certain virtue, his response was “It’s God’s way of keeping you from becoming arrogant and believing you no longer need His help.”

## **Where to start**

Some study books on virtue contain over 600 pages. Theologians have listed up to 64 virtues, designating some as “Cardinal virtues” and others as “Theological virtues”. It can be difficult knowing where to start and easy to get



# *Virtues: Why and How to Begin*

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bogged down in theology. The best way to begin a life of virtue is to take a simple approach and adjust it as led by the Holy Spirit. For those just beginning to add virtue to faith, the following virtues are a good place to start:

Humility. Humility is realistically estimating one's ability, talent and humanity. Humility is neither lowliness of mind nor downgrading of self. In simple terms, humility puts other's needs first, accepts help graciously and admits faults willingly. Humility is the gateway to holiness and all other virtues, because humility understands holiness and virtue cannot be obtained without the help of God and others. Overcomes pride.

Fortitude. Fortitude is perseverance in the face of danger, suffering or difficulty. One might call it "stick-to-it-iveness". Fortitude doesn't give up, it finds a way. Fortitude is also a key virtue for holiness and other virtues, because living a holy and virtuous life is certainly not easy. Overcomes sloth/laziness.

Patience. Also known as forbearance or long-suffering, patience is remaining calm and enduring difficult or undesired situations. Patience allows one to respond to others without provocation, stress or reactions such as disrespect and anger. Patience is necessary not only for others but for oneself. There will always be missteps along the path of holiness and virtue. Patience with one's own faults is a virtue because it prevents self-judgement and fuels fortitude. Overcomes wrath/impatience.

Kindness. Another word for kindness is empathy. Kindness is walking a mile in another person's shoes before judging. Kindness is manifested in generosity, acceptance, consideration, rendering assistance and general concern. Kindness is the gateway to love, because it is impossible to love without being kind. Overcomes envy/jealousy.

Temperance. Temperance is "all things in moderation". Temperance is usually thought of in terms of food and pleasure, but is much more. Temperance includes self-restraint of emotions, self-control of thoughts, modesty of clothing and modesty of words. Temperance is a sister virtue to generosity, as the two virtues work together to bring restraint and balance to life. Overcomes gluttony.

Generosity. Also known as charity, generosity emphasizes the needs of others above one's own needs. Generosity is usually thought of in terms of money and food, but is much more. Generosity includes freely giving of one's time and talents in addition to treasures. The virtue of generosity is sacrificial. Generosity is giving someone your coat when you only have one. Generosity is skipping a meal and giving the value of the meal to the poor. The virtue of generosity is not giving from abundance nor giving with the expectation of getting something in return, including recognition from being considered a generous person. Overcomes greed.

Purity. Purity is freedom from spiritual and moral defilement. Purity regarding sexual relations is called chastity, but purity must be seen as more than sexual restraint. Purity of mind means keeping clean thoughts and dwelling only on good things concerning others. Purity of heart means having only wholesome desires, which reduces the temptation to sin. Overcomes lust/impurity.

## **Virtue and the command to love**

Here is where two and two are put together. Our ultimate goal should be to share in the divine nature of God. God's divine nature is love, unconditional love for all people. Paul defines love as it pertains to God in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not self-seeking (humility), love bears all things (fortitude), love is not quick-tempered (temperance). Five of the seven virtues which overcome deadly sins are directly listed in the definition of love. Two plus two equals...virtue is required to love others as Jesus commands in John 13:34. Without



# *Virtues: Why and How to Begin*

Jesus alive in our heart and the Holy Spirit working virtuously in our life, nobody is capable of true and complete love. This is why all Christians should diligently seek virtue.

## **The way to virtue**

God's nature is what we seek, which implies God's nature is not inherent in human nature. This means God's nature can't be obtained by human effort alone. It takes more than practice and trying to develop good habits. God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit are required to transform human nature into God's nature. This doesn't mean human effort is to be downplayed. One can't presume on God to zap them without any effort. Christians need to seek grace and cooperate with the Holy Spirit through prayer, spiritual discipline and obedience to God's Word. Here is an approach to seeking virtue.

Determine spiritual needs. An examination of conscience is the best place to start. However, the examination of conscience should look beyond the acts of sin to determine the vice at the root of sin. Most examinations of conscience focus only on the sin itself. A focus on sin tends to lead to confessing sin, doing penance and then trying to avoid the act of sin. This can result in confessing the same sins over and over without making spiritual progress.

Confessing a sinful act without confessing the root vice is like pulling a weed out of the ground but not killing the root. The weed will always return. For example, lack of regularly attending Mass can be caused by pride (I don't need Mass to worship God) or sloth (I have better things in life to do). To overcome the sin, one must deal with the specific elephant (vice) tugging one away from mass. It doesn't work to just say "I'll do better or try harder."

During an examination of conscience, identify the vice at the root of each sin. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, confess the vice and ask the priest for "ad-vice" on overcoming it. It makes the sacrament more effective.

The following elephants, known as the Seven Deadly Sins, do a lot of tugging towards sin. They aren't specifically listed in Scripture as a group of seven. However, they are identified throughout Scripture from the Ten Commandments to the Gospels and Epistles. Scripture explicitly teaches each one is spiritually destructive and capable of separating us from God. A specific virtue is needed to overcome each specific vice.

1. **Pride.** An inflated sense of self-importance and self-perfection. Elevation of personal importance or status above others. Pride filters out faults and evil in one's own heart while finding fault in others. It elevates one's personal importance or status while believing others aren't as good. Pride tends to be overly self-sufficient and reject help from others, including God. Pride takes gratuitous pleasure in one's own accomplishments while minimizing the accomplishments of others. Overcome with humility.
2. **Sloth.** Spiritual or moral laziness. Apathy or indifference to one's responsibilities to God and to others. Sloth elevates personal recreation, pleasure and relaxation above spiritual needs. It disregards service to the Church and to others. It disregards putting effort into work and quality of work. Overcome with fortitude.
3. **Wrath.** Uncontrolled anger or rage. Anger isn't the sin. "Be angry, yet do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger." (Ephesians 4:26) Righteous anger leads to prayer and forgiveness. Wrath leads to vengeful feelings, harsh words, condemnation of others or destructive actions towards others or their property. Wrath will not forgive and refuses to seek reconciliation. Wrath can be rooted in pride, fear and selfishness. Overcome with patience.

## *Virtues: Why and How to Begin*

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4. Envy. Also known as jealousy. Envy is desire for another person's possessions, talents, relationships or status. Spiritual envy, which is jealousy over another person's spiritual gifts or ministry, can be a problem as well. Envy can lead to resenting others for something they have which we do not. It breeds contempt and bitterness. Overcome with kindness.
5. Gluttony. Over-indulgence and over-consumption. Gluttony is often associated to food, but can also relate to any pleasure or self-satisfaction. God created life to enjoy, but gluttony overvalues pleasure and self-satisfaction at the expense of stewardship and discipline. Gluttony turns devotion away from God and towards the thing most enjoyed in life. Overcome with temperance.
6. Greed. Excessive desire for material possessions, wealth or status. Greed can lead to exploitation of others, stealing, dishonesty and neglecting the needs of others. Greed puts faith in wealth and possessions instead of God. Overcome with generosity.
7. Lust. Intense and uncontrolled sexual desire, where the focus is on self-gratification rather than honoring God's gift. Lust begins in the heart and is first manifested by the eyes. Inability to maintain custody of one's visual desires can lead to uncontrollable physical desire. Overcome with purity.

Receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The basis, purpose and effects of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are too numerous to include here. An important concept, however, is mortal sin breaks the relationship with God and becomes a barrier to receiving God's grace. "Your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). "As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear says the LORD" (Zechariah 7:13).

Reconciliation gives the soul a clean slate and restores the relationship with God. Graces received from the sacrament give strength for the ensuing battle. The Sacrament of Reconciliation should be received regularly. If mortal sin is present, it is a good idea to receive the Sacrament as often as one commits mortal sin until all mortal sin is purged. One of the many benefits of frequent Reconciliation is it becomes a deterrent to sin, if one has a regular confessor (and one should). When approached correctly and with the right attitudes, the Sacrament of Reconciliation will produce better and quicker results in the spiritual life.

Begin each day with prayer. Let God know at the beginning of each day you desire Him, seek His will and need His help. It is good to be very specific, not that God needs to hear it. We do. The following prayer to the Holy Spirit is a good example (author unknown):

Holy Spirit, beloved of my soul, I adore you. I love you.  
Enlighten me, guide me, strengthen me, console me.  
Tell me what I ought to do and command me to do it.  
I promise to submit to You and abide to everything you ask of me.  
I promise to accept everything You allow to happen to me. Show me Your Holy will.  
Spirit of wisdom and understanding, enlighten my mind.  
Spirit of right judgement and courage, guide me to fulfill my Baptismal vows.  
Spirit of knowledge and reverence, help me to be just and merciful to others.  
May I respect the life and dignity of all people.  
Spirit of God, spark my faith, hope and love into new action this day.  
Fill my life with wonder and awe in Your presence which penetrates all creation.



# *Virtues: Why and How to Begin*

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Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Amen.

Cultivate virtuous habits. Take action. Practice the virtues opposed to the vices and make conscious choices. If greed or gluttony is the issue, practice daily mortification, fasting or abstinence. If sloth is the issue, volunteer for service to the church. And so on.

End each day with reflection. At the end of each day, it is good to reflect on the events of the day. Was it a victory or defeat? If it was a defeat, what circumstances or attitudes led to defeat? Are there particular environments or people leading to weakest moments? Does something in life need to change? Read verses in Scripture where our Lord was virtuous and victorious. Maybe read a book about a Saint who had to overcome the same sins.

Accountability and support. Seek out a mentor or spiritual director for accountability and advice. Nothing overcomes pride better than asking for help and confessing one's faults. Where changing habits is too difficult to overcome even with prayer, it may be necessary to seek medical assistance or professional counseling.

Patience and perseverance. Be realistic. God isn't going to flip a switch nor will one's humanity completely go away. Don't get discouraged and don't give up. There may be failures, but focus on progress. Rejoice and give thanks to God for small victories along the way.

Keep a clean mind. "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). When thoughts start turning to judgement of others, seeking pleasure through sin, fear and such, start to pray and cast out the thoughts. Be renewed in mind first (Romans 12:2).