

The Christian Virtues

DAVE BAST

What makes a good person? That is not quite the same as asking what makes a person good? A person becomes good by doing good things, but a good person is someone who has mastered the art of living well, and has learned what it means to be a proper human being; so, what qualifications do we use to decide when a person is good? Let's talk about virtue next on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; we are beginning a new series of programs together around the topic of virtue, and especially Christian virtue, which might sound a little bit quaint, or even old fashioned to talk about virtue today; but it has been in the news, it has been on people's minds, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think so, too. It was not too long ago, just a few years ago, Bill Bennett had a best-selling book called *The Book of Virtues*, and that caught on and created a bit of a sensation; I think partly because a lot of people who have sensed, maybe, a moral drift in the country have seized on that idea of virtue – that it might get us back on track, back to maybe where we would be to be a better society.

DAVE BAST

A number of schools today are emphasizing what they call character education; character could maybe be a synonym even for virtue. The idea of, I think St. Augustine defined virtue as the art of living well, which is a beautiful phrase. How do you create the kind of people – how do you grow the kind of people who live good lives – who live well?

I like, too, the idea of becoming the kind of people we ought to be or the kind of people we were meant to be. What is a truly human being? And I think as Christians we would want to say that our model is Jesus Christ; not just our savior and Lord and those fundamental things, but also the model of what a human being was meant to be – sort of the pattern that God had in mind.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, no; absolutely; and I think that is one of the big things that would distinguish, and we will be talking more about that, a Christian point of view from any other point of view; whereas, I think in wider society, and this probably was true in Greek society back in the day, even at the time when Jesus was on earth, that what virtues were, were whatever we commonly agreed on as a society. So, we will find out, we will determine, we will come to an agreement of what character looks like and what virtue is, and once we have come to a consensus on that, then that is what we will promote. Whereas, indeed, we Christians say what we believe is proper character is the character of Christ, and that we put on Christ. The New Testament even talks about it, almost like putting on Christ as though you would put on a sweater, and that is then your model for determining what is goodness and what is the goal of human life and what does true character look like? It comes from beyond ourselves, not what we cook up and agree on together.

DAVE BAST

Yes; some of the things that a Christ-like life produces seem sort of crazy to non-Christians. I mean, self-sacrifice, self-giving, love, those kinds of things. The pagan world of the Bible did talk a lot about virtue. There was a Greek word for it, and by that, they meant something pretty much different from the life that Jesus lived.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is interesting is that, indeed, in the Greek world, in the world in which Jesus lived and worked and did his ministry, if you read ancient Greek texts from Homer or any of the big writers of the time, they talked a lot about excellence – the Greek word was *areté* – but it was excellence; and everybody strove for excellence; and that word was all over the place in the secular Greek world. What is interesting is that it only occurs like three times in the entire New Testament. So, this hugely important word to the larger Greek world hardly ever came up, and the only time it does come up in the New Testament, Paul or Peter would say that excellence is located in God; and that is where you find true excellence. So, it is only by imitation of God – only by gaining conformity to Christ – that you achieve what we would call...

DAVE BAST

What their ideal was of moral excellence or surpassing character – virtue.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

They also had a clearly identified set of qualities or characteristics that created that excellence, and they talked about justice, temperance – you might say moderation – prudence or wisdom, and courage. The Christian take on that is that those are all well and good in their own way, but there is a higher set of virtues that constitute the Christian virtues, and that is really what we want to explore in this series of programs.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And it is the familiar three.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right: Faith, hope, and love. What is interesting there as well is the fact that faith... So, Paul would say these three abide; faith, hope, and love...

DAVE BAST

Yes, 1 Corinthians 13, the famous verse at the end, verse 13.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the very fact that the first one is faith, which we will talk more about that in a future program, but faith is a gift. We say that is a gift of God; and so, for Christians all of the virtues – all of the things that we would call a virtue in a Christian context – flow from a gift, which tells you again, this is not something we generate. It is coming from beyond ourselves. It is rooted in faith and everything flows from there.

DAVE BAST

Well, and the footprint of these three – of these famous three – is all over the New Testament. You see it especially... they were significant to Paul. For example, one of the earliest writings – maybe the earliest book written in the New Testament is 1 Thessalonians. Right at the outset in Chapter 1, verses 2 and 3, Paul says:

²We give thanks to God always for all of you; constantly mentioning you in our prayers. What is it that makes him thankful when he is praying for the Thessalonians and rejoicing in their faith? And he spells it out: ³Remembering before God and Father, your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. So there it is faith, love, and hope; the same three.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, one of the earliest of all writings and already there it is; even before the Gospels were written down, Paul wrote the Thessalonians, and that was foremost in his mind as he, too, had become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

So, we are going to look at each of those in an upcoming program; but after a quick break I want to come back to the idea of what makes these virtues for Christians distinctive from what non-believers might think about?

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Scott, I want to talk a little bit about why Christians should care about virtue. I mean, we tried to spell out a little bit about what that means and what it involves.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As a pastor, one of the things that I often encountered was actually a little bit of confusion on exactly this point, where a lot of people in the Church even sometimes think that we are interested in virtue and in being good and in being moral, and they sometimes invert the order of things by saying: Because that is what makes God love us, and that is what keeps us in good with God.

DAVE BAST

Or even, that is how you are saved.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it may not have gotten you saved, but it keeps you saved. And so, when I preached and counseled with people, I was again and again reminded of that great... You know, C. S. Lewis always had a way with a phrase, and Lewis always said: We tend to think that God loves us because we are good. We forget the truth of the Bible. God makes us good because he loves us. In Christ, he transformed us, and our goodness flows from that; so, we do not have to make God love us, he already does. He already did; while we were yet sinners, Jesus came, and the transformation of our character flows completely from that grace.

DAVE BAST

Which is so radically different from the way a non-Christian would approach this whole subject, because they would want to talk about having self-respect, maybe, or loving yourself or striving to be the kind of person you know really are deep down, and it is all on you and it is all moral effort. And the Gospel comes with 180 degrees shift on that.

Here is a great passage, in fact, that I want to look at in more detail from Ephesians Chapter 4. Paul begins in verse 1:

As a prisoner for the Lord, (which is kind of poignant in and of itself; I mean, it lends a little bit of weight to what he is going to say: Hey, look; remember where I am. I am living this truth of the Gospel and I am suffering for it; I am paying the price, but here is what I want to tell you.) I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. And then he goes on to talk about what that means a little bit later: ¹⁷So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their

thinking. So, there is a critique of that pagan idea of virtue and excellence; and then just a couple of verses later: ²²You were taught with regard to your former way of life to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, ²³and to be made new in the attitude of your minds ²⁴to put on your new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. So, that is the idea you were getting at of putting off the old and putting Jesus on like a set of clothes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, exactly, yes; and that is just so Paul. One of the things that we sometimes... at the seminary where I teach now, and teach preaching, we always save the epistles of Paul for last. We wait until they are seniors and they are experienced, because they can be a little bit difficult to preach because Paul has a lot of imperatives – a lot of commands – a lot of telling you what to do; and that, of course, could lead to almost a legalism, like it is all up to you. So you always have to remember with the New Testament and with Paul that nobody believed in grace more than Paul, because Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted the Church, he knew how he got saved. So, he is always telling people: Salvation is not about you; it is not about you; it is all about Jesus; it is all about grace; it is not about you; and yet, once Paul lays that foundation of grace, he always comes back and says: Now, let's talk about you. Let's talk about how you behave. So, it is not about you, but you had better get with the program and put on Christ and let him shine through your life. So, it is so important to always have that frame of grace – that it is all grace, but grace has implications.

DAVE BAST

And the reason he is always hammering away at this is because it is so hard to remember that order: Grace first and then gratitude and response – indicative and then imperative, which is kind of the technical way we talk about that. First he describes the facts: What Christ has done; what God has done in Christ to save us; and then come the commands: Okay, as a result... And that makes all the difference in the world to keep that order as opposed to first do this and then God will accept you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; right; and that is the challenge of the Christian life because grace is invisible. We believe it; we sing it: Amazing grace – but we cannot see it. Oh, but if I volunteer at a soup kitchen, I can see that; and that is more real to me, and so surely... You know, after a while you start paying more attention to what you do than what Christ did, and you forget it is a response, and instead it becomes sort of what you think is attracting God's attention to your life in the first place. So, that is the balancing act that all of us face. I know it is difficult for me to keep that in balance, but I think that is what Paul is always saying. It is not about you, and yet it is about you as a result of what Jesus did.

DAVE BAST

Okay, so let's assume we have that straight – that we have the order right and we are emphasizing grace; but now we do come to these commands, and the question is, why should we care? You know, you can go off the rails on the other side; you can fall off the opposite side of the cliff, so people end up saying: What in the world? It does not really matter. And so, Paul says no, and he starts by talking about your calling: You need to lead a life that is worthy of your *calling* as Christians; you need to live up to this name. I love that idea. It is really about duty, in a way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but not grim duty, right? It is duty in the sense that when you fall in love with somebody and you get married to that person, you have a duty to love them and treat them well and give them a kiss when you get home from work; but if giving your spouse a kiss becomes a grim duty, then your marriage is in trouble; but when you are in love, it flows naturally. You delight in it.

DAVE BAST

Right; but let's follow that analogy a little bit further; when you get married, you now have a new role – you have a new name. You are now called a wife or you are called a husband; and that is a calling, literally. You are called by a new name and you have a new way that you have to live in order to live up to that. It is like

being president. We expect a certain level of decorum and behavior from the president because he is called to a special office; well, our calling is to be Christians; we bear the new name of Christ. We need to live up to that. That is why virtue matters.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; you know, in our Reformed tradition, the Heidelberg Catechism says: Why are you called a Christian? That is such a common thing now, but the Catechism stops us and says: Do not just use that term loosely. Why are you called a Christian? The answer is: Because you share Christ's anointing. You are a little Christ. You are supposed to look like Christ. You are supposed to act like Christ. Not to get you saved, but because you have been saved, and now lean into that identity.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is another reason as well, why we ought to pursue virtue as Christians, and I want to get to that; but first we need to take a short break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with my co-host today, Scott Hoezee, and we are talking about the idea of virtue as Christians, the pursuit of Christ-likeness, living the good life – the truly good life – which is the life that Jesus himself lived among us; and this really presents quite a contrast with the normal sort of typical person's idea of becoming good or great or building character.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; typically, we think... a lot of people think character is sort of like building up points throughout your life; the more points you build up the better you are and someday you will hit the magic number and you will now be good – you will be a good person; whereas, right, Christianity says: Grace already made us good, and now we are just living it out. It is just flowing through us like electricity. It is just flowing right through us and out into the world.

DAVE BAST

And it is very much a “do it yourself” project, too, for the secular person. I was browsing online recently and I saw a story in *USA Today* by somebody who wrote what he called The Ten Commandments for Atheists, and it was interesting. I mean, even atheists are concerned about character.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

About being a good person. Everybody cares about this deep down; unless, maybe, you are a sociopath or a psychopath or something; but it was all about doing what you do to please yourself because you respect yourself; it is a self-help project.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; located right in this world, and as we are on our way to becoming good; but also, I think the idea that I will be rewarded if I am good, or I will influence people or something; but the idea is that there will be a short-term, worldly gain...

DAVE BAST

Yes; or I will feel good about myself; and you know, the interesting thing was, a lot of those commandments had to do with loving others, which was so striking to me because I wanted to say: Why? Why should you care about loving others or helping others or serving others? I mean, it was very Christ-like in that sense, but there was no grounding for it; there was no reason; and I could imagine somebody else saying: I don't feel like doing that. I feel like being strong and bold and sort of a superman, and just looking out for myself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and I think that is why in the Christian frame and in the Christian context of gratitude and of grace and of living out the new identity that by grace God has given us in Jesus, that is what leads us, indeed, to know why loving others is the right thing to do, because that is how we got saved – Jesus sacrificing himself – and so, the virtues... when you read the passage from Ephesians earlier, and Paul points out: I am a prisoner – indeed, that was Paul’s way of saying: By the way, living out Christian character... this is where it can wind you up, in jail, because look what happened to Jesus; look who Jesus was; and so, the virtues to which Jesus leads us sometimes look countercultural.

DAVE BAST

And sometimes even irrational.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, exactly.

DAVE BAST

There is a great passage from G. K. Chesterton in his little book called *Heretics*, where he points out that really deep down when you look at those Christian virtues of faith, hope and love, they really only become virtues when they do not make sense... in a way, they do not make sense. So, he says: Hope is only really hope when the situation is hopeless. I mean, if you are not in a hopeless situation, well then, you are just sort of expecting a normal, natural outcome. It is only when things are dire that hope becomes heroic; and love is only love when it is offered to the unworthy – to those who really do not deserve it – because if you are giving people what they deserve, that is justice; that is a pagan virtue again. And now we are back into rational... make sense. So, there is something that kind of goes over and above about the Christian life as a life of virtue and character.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that, I think, is also again: Where do we get our virtue from? Where does it come from? Where does it flow from? Well, not based upon agreed ideals that we have... we took a vote and everybody said: Yes, that is a virtue, so... No, our virtues flow right out of the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God, as scripture reminds us, is not the kingdom of this world, and in fact, a lot of the ways of God’s kingdom look upside down and backward. So, the world pays attention to Tom Cruise and J. Lo and the celebrities. We pay attention to the people Jesus paid attention to, and got in trouble sometimes for hanging out with, and that is the nameless, the voiceless, the outcasts...

DAVE BAST

The people on the margins.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, exactly.

DAVE BAST

But I want to come back to this question of why, and motivation. I mean, if it is hard like this; if it is even, you know, kind of upside down and can lead us into some pain and suffering like it did for Paul, why? Yes, we talked about duty and a duty that is actually a delight and living up to our name and all that... walking in a manner worthy of our calling as Christians; but I think there is a deeper wellspring that we see in the New Testament, too; and that is simply gratitude.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A life-changing gratitude, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes; and we begin to... words start to fail us here, but the sense of what God in Christ has done for me on that personal level. Paul was always talking that way, wasn't he?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, yes; and because he, Paul himself, came to meet Jesus in a very tangible way. Paul hated the name of Jesus when he was Saul, right? He was determined to blot the name of Jesus out, but then he met the real Jesus, and saw the beauty of the cross, and Paul was so overwhelmed with the beauty of grace that he never wanted to stop looking at it, and never wanted to stop – never wanted to take his eyes off it; and therefore, never, never could find enough words to say thank you. Thank you, thank you. Gratitude: Your entire life becomes a gargantuan thank you card to God because you have seen something of such overwhelming beauty, you will never get over it.

DAVE BAST

One of my first memory verses as an adult: Galatians 2:20: I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God – and here it is – who loved me and gave himself for me. That is the gratitude that is the wellspring of Paul's striving to live a life of virtue.

Well, that is it for today. Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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