



“Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children” (Ephesians 5:1).

Moral Excellence

Central Truth: The virtuous Christian displays courage and firmness.

L238. Date: December 1990. **Text:** Ephesians 5:1-10; Philippians 2:12-16.

Topic: Morality; Virtue.

“Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue” (II Peter 1:5).

Faith is essential, but it is not alone. The Christian life begins with faith and continues in faith until faith is swallowed up with sight. But out of the seedbed of faith grow the unique qualities which mark the true believer.

The first quality to be added to faith is “*virtue*.” That term occurs five times in the New Testament, once in Paul's writing and four times in Peter's. (The term translated “*virtue*” in Mark 5:30 is the word for “power.”) It is a unique Christian quality.

Virtue is listed next to faith, second in line, because it is the fruit of faith and is the prerequisite to the other virtues listed in II Peter 1:5-7. It is a grace greatly needed today. Each Christian should give “*all diligence*” (make it his whole concern, make every effort, do his level best, and try his hardest) to develop virtue in his lifestyle.

The Christian in whom virtue is prominent will live honorably, serve faithfully, and be a good testimony for God.

I. VIRTUE DEFINED

Virtue suggests general moral excellence, right action and right thinking, and goodness of character. We use the word to refer to chastity (as a virtuous woman), manly strength, or excellence in general. It is an honorable term. To call a person virtuous is to compliment him very highly.

The Greek term which is used in the New Testament and translated by the English “*virtue*” indicates eminence, moral goodness, and sometimes is

translated “praise.” It refers to the manly strength of character by which praise arises.

The term occurs only in Philippians 4:8; I Peter 2:9; and II Peter 1:3, 5. The King James Version translates it “*praise*” in I Peter 2:9 and “*virtue*” in the other references. The terms are related in that one who is virtuous is worthy of praise because of the honorable lifestyle which virtue produces.

II. VIRTUE DESCRIBED (Ephesians 5:1-7)

How would one recognize the presence of virtue in the life of another? Ephesians 5:1-7 gives three guidelines by which a virtuous person would live.

A. Virtue involves following God. “*Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children*” (verse 1). But that raises the question, “What does it mean to follow God?”

To follow God means to imitate God, to conform to His example, to copy Him as a child copies his earthly father. That is no burden, for it is a father-child relationship that exists between God and the Christian. Both father and child are pleased as the lesser mimics the greater. Such an imitation of God shows moral strength and excites praise.

B. Virtue involves living in love. “*Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us*” (verse 2).

Remember that divine love is more than a feeling of tender emotion. It is a commitment to help the other person, whatever the cost may be to oneself. It is a life of selfless service to anyone in any need.

Love so marks the nature of God and His ministry to us that we believe the Bible's testimony, “*God is love*” (I John 4:16). The love of God is spread in the heart of every Christian by the Holy Spirit. It is natural that the Christian life be marked by love. What greater testimony can one give than to show the love of God himself? Virtue involves living in love. To live in love means God's love will mark every word and deed and govern every attitude. That is praiseworthy, isn't it?

C. Virtue involves living in holiness (verses 3-7). God gives a discussion of holiness in those verses. It can be divided into three parts to make its meaning clear.

1. Be aware of the enemies of holiness (verses 3.6), They are listed as sexual impurity and debauchery, ruthless greed, shamelessness, indecency, foul talk, and coarse jokes. The people who do those things are unchaste, impure, greedy, and profligate, with no part in the kingdom of God. They express themselves in empty words and groundless arguments which lead astray one who listens.

All those things are contrary to holiness. A virtuous person will not be involved in that lifestyle.

2. Be warned of the judgment coming upon unholiness (verse 6). The wrath of God is His settled and determined opposition to sin. He will surely act against the people and the lifestyle described above. *"The judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things"* (Romans 2:2). What a dread day that will be when strict justice is meted out against them, when every person is rewarded according to his works.

3. Be separate as a person of holiness (verse 7). Do not even associate with people who live that way. If you become partners with them, you will regret it deeply in time to come. It is your separation (but not with a sense of snobbish superiority) from them which identifies you as one of God's dear children. Be holy, for Jesus' sake!

III. VIRTUE EXPLAINED (Ephesians 5:8-10)

How does one become virtuous? From where does it arise? Ephesians 5:8-10 suggests three things in answer to those questions.

A. The foundation of virtue is conversion to Christ. *"Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord"* (verse 8). It is that change, being translated from the realm of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son, which enables us to be a virtuous people. In Christ, we are new creations from whom the old ways of sin are passed away and the new things of holiness are present. We come to Christ by faith, and then we grow up in Christ by the development of moral virtue.

B. The fruit of virtue is the work of the Holy Spirit. The effect of His work in us is *"all goodness and righteousness and truth"* (verse 9). The list of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23) consists of things that are virtuous and praiseworthy. A life of virtue is the natural consequence of the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer and living the life of God in him.

C. The witness of virtue is in approving what God approves. The Christian learns by personal experience what God approves (verse 10). His life then becomes a living testimony that is well pleasing to the Lord. He who chooses to live contrary to God's principles of holiness testifies that he does not know God. To live for Him is to witness for Him.

IV. VIRTUE DEMONSTRATED (Philippians 2:12-16)

A. Virtue is demonstrated by personal discipline. The believer follows up his initial act of saving faith by living his new life in Christ with

reverence toward God and distrust of self (verse 12). He is not only content to trust Jesus as Savior, but he also submits to Him as Lord.

B. Virtue is demonstrated by submission to God. God puts the desire in one's heart and the power in his spirit to do and be all that He commands (verse 13). Following through with God is a proof that one is committed to a life of virtue.

C. Virtue is demonstrated by a spirit of peace (verse 14). Disputings, murmurings, arguing, and faultfinding are forsaken once and for all. As a peacemaker, the Christian is recognized as one of God's dear children.

D. Virtue is demonstrated by honorable conduct (verse 15). One lives in such a way that no blame can be lodged against him. He shows himself to be without blemish as a child of God. He shines as a light in the world even though he lives in a warped and diseased world. He testifies by what he is, what he does, and what he says.

E. Virtue is demonstrated by a consistent witness (verse 16). The virtuous person holds fast to the Word of Life, the Christian gospel. He holds that message out to others. And He rejoices in the blessings it brings.

A personal project — With pen and paper make a list of things you can do this week to cultivate virtue in your life. Recognize its value and do not be content unless you can see evidence of your adding virtue to faith day by day. It is well worth the cost to be a person of virtue.

Questions for discussion

1. What is virtue?
2. How is virtue related to faith?
3. How does Ephesians 5:1 express virtue?
4. How is love an expression of virtue?
5. What are the enemies of virtue stated in Ephesians 5:3-6?
6. Why is conversion to Christ essential to a virtuous life?
7. Why is personal discipline essential to a virtuous life?
8. How can you demonstrate virtue in your home life?
9. How can you demonstrate virtue in your business dealings?
10. What one thing will you commit yourself to do this week as an expression of virtue?