

Epiphany 4C: Luke 18:18-23, 1 Cor 13  
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### Recovering Virtue

David Brooks would have understood the dilemma the rich ruler faced in our Gospel this morning. About ten years ago, the New York Times op-ed writer found himself faced with an uncomfortable reality. He looked around at the elite circles he ran in and noticed a divergence between two sets of values, between what he calls “résumé virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” As he explains in his book *The Road to Character*, résumé virtues are the ones you list on a résumé, the skills you bring to the job market that contribute to your external success. Eulogy virtues, by contrast, are the ones that get talked about at your funeral: your personal qualities, your character—whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful, the kind of relationships you had with others.

Now, most of us would say that these eulogy virtues are more important than résumé virtues. But that’s not how we live. As Brooks points out, we have been trained to live for our résumés. We live in a culture that teaches us to promote ourselves and to master the skills and strategies that are required for success. But that gives little encouragement to sympathy, honesty, and compassion, the qualities that make us deep people, people of character, people others want to be around.

It’s fair to say, we are taught to *admire* eulogy virtues, but we’re taught to *pursue* résumé virtues. And we’re rewarded for them. Our marketable skills and talents allow us to get the things we want, that we are taught to want—a life of luxury, fame and hedonic pleasure, the “good life,” as we are told.

But there is another way to live, a way that pushes back on the obsession with worldly success, a way suggested by Brooks’ own words, *the way of virtue*. There’s a long history of this way of thinking, older even than the Gospels, going back to ancient Greece. Classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle insisted that the truly good life is found not in glory or achievement or self-gratification, but comes through fully realizing our human potential, achieving the human ideal, by *becoming virtuous people*, people who do what is right and good. The good life, *they* argue, is one that is focused on developing inner character, on cultivating virtues, those habits of the heart—or better yet of the soul—that dispose us to do the good, that allow us not only to perform good acts, but to give our best to them.

This is the way Jesus invites the rich ruler to follow in our reading. And it is a way that we need to recover today, if we are going to resist the pull of our culture.

But it is precisely because the life of virtue goes against the flow that talking about it can be offensive to some people. Because virtue doesn’t square with the general “anything goes” ethic. It implies that not all behaviors are equal, that there are better and worse ways to live. Such

thinking, we are warned, is repressive, outdated, and irrelevant, and, worse, an obstacle to our pursuit of happiness.

That was the stance taken by the authors of a book series published a few years ago. The books were based a sequence of lectures at the New York Public Library on the "Seven Deadly Sins"—you know, anger, sloth, gluttony, lust, envy, greed, and pride. But the angle the authors took was not your traditional approach. Francine Prose in her volume called *gluttony* a religious sin and a medical compulsion, but concluded that we should celebrate it as an occasion for passion and pleasure. Joseph Epstein, for his part, downgraded *envy* from sin to "poor mental hygiene." Simon Blackburn, a philosopher at Cambridge, complained that *lust* "gets a bad press," and believed that it is "not merely useful but essential." And Eric Michael Dyson wrote that *pride* is not only "the fundamental sin" but also "the crown of the virtues" and even "a stroke of moral genius." The whole series, it seems, was devoted to the "congratulation of vice."

To be fair, these authors weren't trying to be devilish. They were expressing the modern belief that virtue is restrictive and that you exercise freedom through vice. The classical and Christian traditions, by contrast, hold that vice actually destroys freedom. Ask anyone who's seen it—or, worse, lived it—they'll tell you, vice, vicious living leads not to freedom or happiness, but to hardened hearts, gross insensitivity, immodest indulgence, and insatiable desire. Not the kind of life that anyone aspires to.

Virtue calls us out of that confusion, calls us back from the excesses that waste us and ruin society. It seeks to balance our unbalanced engagement in the world. You see, virtue is not about restricting our fun, taking away all pleasures, but rather putting them in the right place, in the right proportion, so that we *can* enjoy them without going overboard. They are intended to make us whole and healthy and mentally strong, not puritanical.

To see what I mean, consider the virtues themselves. Many virtues have been identified in philosophy and theology. But since the classical era, four have been considered as essential, at the root of all others—prudence (or sound judgment), justice (fairness), temperance (moderation or self-restraint), and forbearance (courage and perseverance). St Ambrose in the 4<sup>th</sup> century "baptized" these four virtues, adopting and adapting them as ideals in Christian teaching. He called them "cardinal" virtues, from *cardo*, the Latin word for "hinge," from the Holy Spirit working on us because the moral life "hinged" on them. For, without them—without sound judgement, perseverance, fairness, and self-restraint—it would be really hard to live as a Christian, or to achieve *any* good in life.

Indeed, classical and Christian thinkers agree, these four cardinal virtues are strengths of character that all people should hope to exhibit. They are what the ideal human acts like, what human perfection looks like, the realization of human goodness. What theologians like Ambrose, Thomas Aquinas, and CS Lewis would add is that these virtues are not just perfections of human ability; they are at a deeper level expressions of the fact that we are made in God's image. And so just as God is wise and just, steadfast and even-tempered, so we are created to be too.

But that divine imprint on humanity goes further. In our second reading, from 1 Corinthians, Paul identifies three other virtues—faith, hope, and love (or charity). These are what the church

calls “theological virtues,” because they are directed specifically towards God. The theological virtues sit above the cardinal virtues, “crowning” them, as it were. Because we are not merely mortal beings, but are made for communion with God. And so faith, hope, and charity are ways in which we realize our potential for godliness, our capacity for union with God.

I fear, at this point, that I’ve already lost a lot of you. To some, this virtue talk may seem overly abstract and academic. For others, it probably seems a bit discouraging. The life of virtue just seems like a lot of work, another list of things we know we should be doing but can’t seem to manage. But the reason I’m arguing for recovering the language of virtue is not so as to heap more weight on your shoulders, but to paint a picture, to cast a vision of what is possible, what we are capable of, what we should be striving for, to offer another way to look at the Christian life, one which replaces the usual frameworks of legalism, on the one hand, and vague sentimentalism, on the other, with a focus on how God is making us fit for his service. Indeed, this talk of virtue is intended to open us up to another way God is working in the world: God working on us, in us, bringing out the best in us, making us people who are able to share, to participate in God’s life and mission.

How does that work? How do we work with God to become virtuous people? Briefly, there are three things we need. We need grace, power, and practice.

The virtuous life is first and foremost *built on grace*, on the sure confidence that we have been saved by Jesus Christ and that he has done everything we need to make us right with God. It’s out of this awareness, out of *gratitude* for what God has done in Christ, that the life of virtue is founded. This is important because if we try to build a virtuous life *not* on grace, it’s naturally going to be built on ourselves. Without Christ’s righteousness, his securing our place with God, without that as the thing we stand on, we’re naturally going to have to stand on our own righteousness, our own efforts to justify ourselves, to prove ourselves worthy. This was what the rich ruler was trying to do in our Gospel lesson. He thought he had to earn his place, to buy it through his efforts. The problem is, if that is our approach, our motivation will not be gratitude, but pride, fear or obligation. It’ll be because we want to promote ourselves, or because we are afraid we’ll be found wanting, or because it’s expected of us. In the end though that kind of life is hollow, like a dead tree. It may look alive and pretty on the outside but inside it’s dead.

So, the virtuous life needs to be founded on grace, but it also needs to be *fueled by power*. We need to be freed by grace to live a virtuous life, but we also need power to carry that out. And that power cannot come from us, within us; it has to come from outside us, from God from the Holy Spirit working on us. The virtuous life, trying to be good, is not something we can do under our own power. If we try that, we will quickly run out of steam. But under the Spirit’s power, which we actively invite into our lives, *that* will keep us going and carry us through.

Lastly, *practice*. We can’t get around the fact that the virtuous life involves effort. The priority of grace, Jesus’ securing our place with God, doesn’t mean there’s nothing for us to do. Grace is opposed to *earning*, but not opposed to *effort*. It’s opposed to our earning our righteousness, to working so that God will reward us. But it’s not opposed to effort. Indeed, grace naturally leads to work, because we want the good that comes through virtue, we want to become the kind of people who do good, who are good. And so we work at it, we practice virtue, so that we are able

to do the good better, so that it will become easier, second nature to us. You look at a professional musician or athlete and what they do looks easy. And *to them* it is, because they've been practicing those skills for years. The same is true for virtue. Virtuous people make virtue look easy. But that's because they have been practicing for years.

I'll tell you a story about a friend of mine that illustrates this point. My friend Bill lived for a short time with a dozen or so people in an old farmhouse. One day, the boyfriend of one of the other residents got in Bill's face. His girlfriend had carelessly spraypainted Bill's cooler during a renovation project and the woman's boyfriend didn't like that Bill had got onto her about it. The boyfriend started yelling at Bill, trying to get him to fight. Bill stood his ground but didn't take a swing at him, as much as he wanted to. Later, another of the residents came up to Bill. She couldn't believe Bill didn't just punch the guy, for the way he was talking. She said it was a real testament to his character, to his Christian faith. Bill, though, didn't think he'd done anything special. He really didn't know, he says, how to be any different. That's because, I'll tell you, he'd been practicing virtue, in this case fortitude and self-restraint, all his life.

This is small example, but the same holds true for bigger, more heroic Christian deeds—things like diving into freezing water to saving a drowning victim, being a missionary in a hostile country, hiding Jews during the Holocaust, risking one's reputation even livelihood by standing up for the truth, dying for the faith. We hear Christians doing these things and we're amazed by them and wonder how they can do such feats. The answer is, they have spent years practicing, practicing virtue, working with God to develop the necessary habits and dispositions, so that when called upon, they do what seems to us amazing, but to them is natural.

That is the promise of the virtuous life—to become our best selves, to be better than we ever thought we could be, so that we can give our best to God and join in God's redemptive work in the world. Thanks be to God!