

Lessons in Love

A new article in the series on human love. "We must respect and seek the truth if we are to love wisely."

08/26/2016

Self mastery for what?

Perhaps the most insightful definition of adolescence comes from Plutarch who wrote, *'For intelligent people the passage from childhood to adulthood is not an abandonment of rules, but a change of ruler.'*^[1] He emphasizes that maturity is marked

by a knowledge of right and wrong and self-mastery. With the same vision of autonomy, the former Roman slave Epictetus wrote, '*No man is free who is not master of himself.*' There is profound truth in these insights. In the light of Christ's teachings, Professor David Isaacs in *Character Building* is able to add an important extra ingredient: '*Self-knowledge leads to self-mastery which leads to self-giving.*'[2]

This is true for our own characters, and also in parenting. We must raise children so they run their lives with their own convictions, reaching the point of being able to give of themselves in love. For this reason Jim Stenson says, '*Children grow up when they are capable of looking after others and want to.*' We must not raise children simply so they conform to what is expected of them. This is to defraud them.

We are created for loving relationships that will flourish if we make habitually wise choices and are habitually generous.

At the heart of human flourishing

‘Happiness is the reward of virtue,’^[3] wrote Aristotle in his *Nichomachean Ethics* some 2400 years ago. Good habits, he insisted, are a necessity for abiding peace of heart. Philosopher Rosalind Hursthouse sums up this fundamental moral principle of both Aristotle and Aquinas: ‘A virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for eudaimonia, to flourish and live well.’^[4] In Western society for over 2000 years there has been broad agreement that it is the good habits of sound goal setting, of respect for others, of overcoming our fears for a good reason, and of seeking pleasures only within reason, that are the basis of fulfillment and

maturity. These four umbrella habits known most commonly as the cardinal virtues empower us to love well.

The Old and New Testaments, and subsequent Catholic teaching, insist that human virtues are a prerequisite for a living faith. If we cannot manage our emotional life, our sense desires will rule and ruin our lives. The four cardinal virtues are present explicitly throughout the scriptures. Time and again we are urged to purity of heart. Over 300 times we read exhortations to fortitude: 'Do not be afraid.' Our Lord stresses that our very love of God is measured by love of our fellow men and that we should love as he loves, giving of himself completely. And through parables and on every page we are urged to be prudent, to set the right goals, to construct the edifice of our lives wisely. Without virtue we are incapable of loving with all of

our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.

The argument that virtues are the building blocks of character is now even stronger. It has been shown that traditions of moral development across all the major cultures and civilisations affirm a virtue-based paradigm.^[5] But also, many clinical psychologists now look to virtues as foundational factors for mental health. The renowned psychologist and expert in adolescent depression, Martin Seligman, former President of the American Psychological Association, presents his avowed aim as to *‘reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and societal discourse.’* He states, *‘We believe good character can be cultivated, but to do so we need conceptual and empirical tools to craft and evaluate interventions.’*^[6]

Furthermore, advances in neural imaging over the past twenty five years offer insights into the self-directed plastic changes in systems of emotion regulation, motivation, attention and conscious habituation in the brain that underpin the development of good habits. If accompanied by a sound conception of the soul and the human person, these biological phenomena help us to understand how conditioning at the biological level can and should be in concert with our convictions. The sad realities of addictions, repeated abuse, and simple bad habits show how corrupted biological conditioning can thwart good intentions. It is evident that human flourishing requires both sound biological development, habituation, and the development of a clear sense of right and wrong. Aristotle intuited this when he wrote of the need for both ‘training’ and ‘education’ for the development of virtue.[7]

It would be the height of either ignorance or arrogance for anyone to suggest moral growth through virtue development to be just one more “opinion” about the way a human being ought to flourish.

We must respect and seek the truth if we are to love wisely

Some two thousand years ago a rather insecure representative of the Emperor Claudius, when given the opportunity to uphold the rights of an innocent man, washed his hands of this first duty of every ruler and uttered the lame evasion, ‘What is truth?’

We must not break the connection between truth and respect for others, between truth and love.

Demosthenes observed, ‘*What a man wishes to believe, he believes to be true.*’ If we are to love well, we must make our choices based on reality, not on what we justify to ourselves.

Our capacity to discern the truth can be compromised essentially in four ways, corresponding to deficits of the cardinal virtues. Confusion about moral realities can be the result of:

- Poor formation in what is right and wrong: an educational deficiency for which a person may or may not be personally at fault, but because of which they will suffer unavoidable consequences. For example a person deceived through childhood about the existence of God must suffer needless desolation of spirit.
- Absence of the virtue of justice: a profound self-centredness that has been allowed to develop in one's way of looking at the world. The virtues of prudence and justice go hand in hand and must be present in every action. For example Cicero wrote that '*Knowledge*

divorced from justice may be called cunning but not wisdom.'

- Impulsive choices for short term inferior goods are allowed to trump more important goals. Gratification dulls reason. Consider the lessons from Mischal's marshmallow experiments in delayed gratification. Habitual self-control improves decision making.
- Fears or timidity, even in the face of what should be normal challenges, can paralyse our capacity to think straight. Coercion obviates guilt but cannot recover lost opportunities.

Love: 'the innate vocation of every human being' (Familiaris Consortio)

The moral virtues are the foundation for exercise of the supernatural virtues.

Pius XI, writes of this Christian maturity:

‘The true Christian, product of Christian education, is the supernatural man who thinks, judges and acts constantly and consistently in accordance with right reason illumined by the supernatural light of the example and teaching of Christ; in other words, to use the current term, the true and finished man of character.’^[8] —

Without mentioning the word ‘virtue,’ this is precisely what he means. Dispositions to rational, constant, and consistent behaviours, with the gift of faith and the assistance of grace, constitute the supernaturally infused virtues which truly perfect our human character. Augustine captures this reality so simply: *‘You made us for yourself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.’* We are made to love

God, and virtue is the path to get there. For this reason, when the Church considers canonisation of a person with a reputation for holiness, his or her life is examined for evidence of the virtues.

Critical factors for growth in virtue

What is a game plan for us to become more capable of loving well, of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves? Remember that it is virtues that empower us to truly unite ourselves with those we love.

Let us do some systematic soul searching to see where there is work to do on our characters if we are to love God and others effectively. We look in detail at the four cardinal virtues and the three theological, infused virtues of faith, hope and charity. Keep in mind that virtue is an all or nothing affair. Without the emotional management of

temperance and fortitude there is no possibility of rational choices, and if justice is lacking, otherwise rational choices will be self-serving. Equipped with the moral virtues we are disposed to love wisely, and so able to respond with hope and charity to realities revealed by faith.

1. **Self control.** Do I make deliberate choices of what I pay attention to, of what I put time into? How well do I manage my thoughts: ‘Whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.’^[9] Do I seek what is good, noble and beautiful, shunning cheap imitations? Can I easily say ‘no’ to myself? Do I remake any

habits of pampering myself and overeating; do I set small, practical, daily goals? Do I offer others only positive emotions, affection and kindness? Do I overcome the impulse to return negative emotion to those who show me negative emotion? Do I establish a positive emotional tone in my family by my cheerful face?

2. **Fortitude.** Do I see work as a school of fortitude? Can I say 'yes' to noble challenges? Am I reliable in the jobs I am responsible for? Do I clean up after myself? Am I orderly? Do I stay calm in the face of difficulties? Am I a cheerful person despite difficulties? Can I follow a timetable? Am I optimistic and encouraging of others? Do I face and overcome my fears: of discomfort, of embarrassment, of loneliness, of unpopularity, of having hard

conversations? Do I dodge physical exertion? Do I have another go after failures never giving up? Do I make and honour commitments? Do I articulate my convictions? Do I give leadership, shunning the comfort of waiting for someone else to lead.

3. **Justice in all my actions.** Am I a kind person? Do I treat others well habitually? Do I suffer when those around me suffer? Do I share their joys and sorrows? Am I habitually courteous and punctual? Do I know how to apologise? Do I know how to forgive? Am I first in acts of service? Do I give in to impatience and anger? Do I make service the lynchpin of family life? Do I drop what I am doing to give my full attention to others? Do I ever think critically of others, or do I correct the behaviour finding

excuses for the person: 'Think others as being better than yourself.'^[10] Am I a grateful person? Do I serve those who are less fortunate?

4. **Sound judgment.** Do I set goals, priorities and make resolutions? Do I ask advice to find out what is right and true? Do I tell the truth without compromise? Do I avoid excuses? Do I avoid talking about myself or drawing attention to myself. Do I take conversation with others seriously, seeking to learn from others? Do I listen more than I talk? Do I offer gratuitous opinions? Do I think before acting, avoiding impulsive purchases and responses to others? Do I listen to my conscience? Have I problem solving strategies: break challenges down into parts; set interim goals, etc? Do I take

time for reflection; do I seek out nature? Do I examine my behaviour daily?

5. **Faith.** Is my daily priority to give honour and show gratitude to God my Father? Am I determined to be holy? Do I seek to know the will of God? Do I ask for a stronger faith? Do I ask the Holy Spirit for light to better understand; 'He will lead you into all truth'.^[11] Do I make acts of faith? How much priority do I give to prayer and sacraments daily? How much time do I spend time with our Lord in the Eucharist each day? Do I study my faith through diligent spiritual reading? How do I give spiritual leadership to my friends? Am I prepared to show my faith to others: 'Faith is a flame that grows stronger the more it is shared and passed on.'^[12] Do I live unity of life, integrating my faith with my

work? Do I worry, or do I trust in God's help during difficulties?

6. **Hope.** Am I constant and determined in holding to the course I have decided upon? Does my faith extend to care for the small details knowing that our goal is to act in all things in love, and nothing can stop me putting love into the smallest actions? Do I manifest a living trust in God, showing joy and your optimism at all times? *'When we pray we have hope; when we stop praying we lose hope'* wrote Pope Benedict. Does my patient determined prayer demonstrate hope?
7. **Love of God and love of others in God.** Do I seek to accompany our Lord in his Passion and do I realise I am called to be a grain of wheat that dies if I wish to bear fruit? Do I seek out the Blessed Eucharist each day? Do

I schedule confession and keep my appointment? As Pope Francis recommends, do I make the sentiments of Christ in the Our Father my own? Do I give generous time to prayer each day? Do I atone for my sins and for those I see around me? Do I act with rectitude of intention, acting always out of love? Is my happiness a reflection of peace of heart? Aristotle said that happiness is the first effect of love: am I joyful habitually? Am I a source of peace and trust in God for others?

Andrew Mullins

apjm.vic@gmail.com

.....

[1] Plutarch, *Moralia*, 'On Listening'.

[2] David Isaacs, *Character Building: A guide for parents and teachers*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001).

[3] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b16, in Aristotle, *The complete works of Aristotle*, ed Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), Volumes 1 and 2.

[4] Rosalind Hursthouse *On Virtue Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 167.

[5] For example, see C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1943).

[6] Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Introduction.

[7] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a15.

[8] Pius XI, *On the Christian Education of Youth* (1929).

[9] Philip 4:8

[10] Philip 2:3

[11] John 16:13

[12] Pope Francis, *Homily*, World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013.

pdf | document generated
automatically from [https://opusdei.org/
en-ie/article/lessons-in-love/](https://opusdei.org/en-ie/article/lessons-in-love/)
(07/24/2025)