

# Holy Virtues, Deadly Vices, and the Christian Life

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IN A CULTURE where image often trumps character, and the very term *virtue* is dismissed as quaint or old-fashioned, how do we as Christians understand and develop our own moral identity? A new *Companion* series will examine that question, as it takes a closer look at virtues and vices.

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**V**ictor Hugo's classic novel and the now well-known theatrical piece *Les Misérables* recounts the fall and redemption of convicted thief Jean Valjean. Originally a morally good person of little financial means, Valjean is sentenced to five years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family. After several attempts to escape prison, however, he is kept behind bars for nineteen years.

Over those many years of incarceration, Valjean's moral disposition and character change from virtue to vice, from one inclined to seek goodness to one habituated to do evil. He becomes a hardened criminal whose tattered countenance is mean, suspicious, and deceitful. Upon being released from prison, he is friendless, without money or food, and carries within himself an acute awareness of his own desperate and contemptible state. "I am not even a dog," he laments to himself as person after person turns him away empty-handed.

At a crucial point in the story, Valjean is directed to a bishop in town who is known for his exceptional and long-standing humility, kindness, and good works for the poor and friendless in society. Without hesitation, and in full knowledge of Valjean's past life and recent incarceration, Bishop Myriel receives the convict and bestows dignity upon him by looking Valjean in the eye, sharing a meal using the finest silver, and inviting him to sleep the night in a bed with clean sheets. Overwhelmed, Valjean's countenance changes from gloom and hardness to satisfaction and joy as he receives the bishop's freely offered graces. His distant memory of experiencing these virtues in another human being is reawakened, and he receives and celebrates them with open arms and a full stomach.

Despite being returned to this long forgotten state of goodness, Valjean's nineteen-year habituation into a life of desperation, deception, and criminality while in prison remains potent.

In the middle of the night, awakened by the sheer novelty of sleeping in an actual bed, Valjean can't help but think of the silver plates at the dinner table and the increasingly tempting possibility of stealing them to buy his own freedom. The newborn remembrance of his virtuous pre-prison life is no match for his now more hardened self-serving vices, and he steals the silver and flees the bishop's house.

As the story stands so far, it is tragic. There is, of course, more to it, and we shall return to the crucial second encounter between the bishop and Valjean. But let us pause here to examine what this brief narrative tells us about how we experience and understand the moral life.

If you were to examine the potential this story holds for teaching us about the Christian life, what questions would you use to evaluate it? As I teach my students, *how* you ask your questions determines the range of possible answers. If you're not asking the right questions, you can't count on



getting the right answers.

The two most basic questions that Christians face in the moral arena are: “What should I do?” and, “What kind of person ought I become?” The first question focuses on specific actions and decisions; the second focuses on moral character and virtues.

If we are oriented by the task of doing the right thing, our reflections on the Christian life will focus on the particular actions or duties each of us should perform in a given context. If we are oriented by the task of becoming particular kinds of people, our descriptions of the Christian life will appeal to a vision of both human virtues and vices, of human excellences and depravities, of individual saints and scoundrels. Which of these two questions we consider more basic to the Christian life will shape how we think about our own lives as Christians.

The brief example of Jean Valjean’s encounter with the bishop serves to introduce a distinct and worthwhile

framework for understanding the Christian moral life that we all hope to live. Does the story teach us more about right actions or about good character?

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Our biblical and theological heritage provides us with many tools for enabling ethical practices and ennobling moral character, including the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, stories of the heroes and saints of faith, sensible advice for individual churches and individuals, the life of Jesus himself, and others. One particular tool for examining ourselves and our communities, which Christians have employed over the years, is to consider our *vices* and our *virtues*.

There are as many virtues and vices

as there are human excellences and depravities, and so, given the complexity of the human person, there is no set list. Nevertheless, the Christian tradition often names seven virtues and seven vices. The virtues are divided up into four cardinal virtues (courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom) and three theological ones (faith, hope, and love). The vices are often called the “seven deadly sins.”

But before we get ahead of ourselves, let us be a little more specific about virtues and vices. Broadly speaking, a virtue of a thing is what constitutes its distinctive excellence in view of its purpose or function. The virtue of a knife whose purpose is to cut is sharpness. The virtues of a point guard in basketball whose purpose is to run the offense are agility and decisiveness.

But the virtues of a human person as such are not as simple as those of a

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knife or a point guard. Our virtues are those distinct excellences of character through which we live into our moral and spiritual purposes well. According to broader Christian tradition, *a moral virtue is a settled disposition of a person to act in excellent and praiseworthy ways, cultivated over time through habit.* The constellation of virtues a person may embody provides for the organization of his or her moral desires, and hence, state of moral character.

For example, while a Christian may have a duty not to bear false witness in view of the commandment from God, God hopes for more than mere obedience to this commandment. Rather, God's desire is that every believer possess the moral virtue of honesty. Honesty, when it is a virtue of one's character, is a basic, enduring, and identifying characteristic of the person. If you are honest, you don't lie one day, tell the truth the next day joyfully, and on the third day tell the truth begrudgingly. To be honest is to be so habituated to being honest that in any given situation, one consistently lives honestly without regret. Keep in mind, however, that in developing moral virtue, our emphasis is not on any particular action or decision, but on the cultivation of a moral identity from which the action comes "naturally."

Given this framework, we can understand the nature of human vices as well. A vice is a settled disposition of a person to act in inferior and abhorrent ways, cultivated over time through habit. If your vice is greed, you are inclined to be greedy rather than fair or generous. You may not constantly choose to hoard for yourself, but your character has been so shaped that selfish acquisition comes "naturally" to you. The seven vices, or deadly sins, are pride, greed, gluttony, sloth, anger, lust, and envy.

The Bible speaks of a wider variety of vices and virtues. Consider Colossians 3:5-14 as it describes the whole person, from the "old self" and its

vices to the "new self" and its virtues:

"Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)...But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator....As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

In Victor Hugo's story the bishop's enduring character, cultivated over time through habit, is one of humility, kindness, and compassion. The convict's moral identity is more complex because he has been formed by two narratives—his previous life as a virtuous and honorable man, and his nineteen years in prison as one habituated to deceit and selfishness that enabled him to survive a bad situation. The language of vices and virtues helps us to see that Jean Valjean's conflict that night at the bishop's house was about much more than the choice between right and wrong actions—to steal or not to steal—but between two moral identities. What kind of person would Jean Valjean become?

The real climax in this brief story occurs in their second encounter, where the bishop's virtues seize hold of Valjean's own heart, where a virtu-

ous heart triumphs over a vicious one. After fleeing the bishop's house with the silver, Valjean is apprehended by the police and returned to the bishop's house with his fate all but sealed as a convict returning to prison. But the bishop's virtue does not allow that to happen, for the bishop had seen the night before the memory of virtue sparked momentarily in Valjean, and he has compassion. In keeping with his virtue, the bishop *forgives* the convict.

Prominent Christian philosopher Jean Luc Marion writes that the essence of forgiveness is to give again that which was originally given but disregarded in ingratitude. But what is given again here from the virtuous priest to the vicious convict is Jean Valjean's own virtue, his own good soul, which was lost in memory over the course of those nineteen years but is now given back. Upon granting forgiveness, Bishop Myriel says to Jean Valjean, "Now, go in peace.... Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become a better man... Jean Valjean, my brother, you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdrew it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition and I give it to God!"

In the end, human virtues and vices teach us several things about the Christian moral life. First, these character traits mark an enduring individual moral identity. The bishop's virtues and the convict's vices, once acquired, are difficult to lose. Second, our virtues and vices are contagious and shape the character of those around us. The convict's character was shaped by his fellow prisoners, but it was also eventually converted by the bishop's virtue. Third, our moral virtues indicate to whom we belong, namely, to the good, to God. Throughout this series we shall consider each of these elements of vice and virtue with the hope of offering further discernment of how to live well as Christian people. ■