

Virtue and vice

Virtues are habits of character that help you get the most out of life, and vice is self-destructive. This series reflects on the virtues emphasised in the scriptures, and the role of the Spirit in helping us to flourish.

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**BIBLE
SOCIETY**

Live light

Scripture taken from *The Holy Bible: NIV*

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
1	<p>My child, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity.</p> <p>Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.</p> <p>Then you will win favour and a good name in the sight of God and man.</p>	Proverbs 3:1-4	<p>We learn about the good life from our parents, who desire the best for us. There is an implicit promise that if we live virtuously and obey the things they say and model then we will do well in life. The Proverbs generally reveal that wise and virtuous behaviour results in our flourishing. But there is a hint in this passage that virtue alone is not enough, that the favour – the grace of God – is the ultimate source of our well-being.</p> <p>Do you agree with the general principle that virtuous behaviour leads to our flourishing? Can you think of times when acting virtuously has gone well for you, and other times when it has not?</p>	I pray, holy Father, for favour and grace. Help me to learn your good commands, and strengthen me to be faithful to your word, so that I might prosper in righteousness and love. Amen.
2	<p>The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.</p>	Galatians 5:19-21	<p>There are two ways to live; either in the flesh or in the Spirit. We tend to think of living in the flesh as being mostly about sexual immorality, but fleshy living occurs whenever we let any of our passions run riot. Passions are a good thing (hunger, thirst, desire, longing – without them we are dead), but unmediated by the Spirit and steered by vice they can be destructive. The consequence is ruined friendships and broken down communities.</p> <p>Can you identify, in your own life, any of the acts of the flesh described in this passage? Are there acts of the flesh not listed here that are undermining your friendships and working against the kingdom of God?</p>	Forgive us, Jesus, for we have let our impulses run wild, and given in to our selfish desires. Spirit, open our eyes so that we might face up to our brokenness, and own the hurt that we've done to ourselves and others. Forgive us Holy Father, cleanse us, and change us. Help us not to be weighed down by guilt, but to accept the gift of your grace. Amen.

Virtue and vice (continued)

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3	But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.	Galatians 5:22-24	<p>The fruits of the Spirit are what tradition labels as virtues. They are habits of character, which moderate and control our unbridled passions. Fruit grows naturally from a tree, and just as a “fleshy” tree produces rubbish fruit, so does the Spirit-filled tree produce the fruit of virtue. A virtuous person is no mean-spirited legalist, but acts rightly out of a Christ-like character.</p> <p>In what areas do you need the Spirit’s help in transforming your character?</p>	<p>Come, Holy Spirit, fill our hearts and set them on fire with your love. Transform our character in the light of the life of Christ, that we might model his virtues. Help us to love what is true and good, and to be agents of healing and peace in the church and beyond. Amen.</p>
4	Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.	Colossians 3:12-14	<p>Different societies and cultures have different lists of virtues. What is distinct about Christianity is that rather than elevating pride, power and honour, Jesus modelled the seemingly lowly virtues of compassion, humility, patience, forgiveness and the like. Perhaps this is why the gospel resonates so much with outcasts, migrants, the disabled, indigenous peoples, and women – those normally excluded from power and honour.</p> <p>Which of these virtues do you think you embody best, and which do you need most to develop?</p>	<p>Holy and beloved Jesus, help us to see with your eyes of compassion, to act with your kindness, to walk with your humility, to speak with your gentleness, and to persevere with your patience. Forgive us where we fail to do so, and help us be equally forgiving to others. Amen.</p>

Virtue and vice (continued)

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5	<p>When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.</p> <p>And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.</p>	1 Corinthians 13:11-13	<p>Faith, hope, and love are described in church tradition as the theological virtues. They are gifts from God that colour and shape the whole of a person's life. Although they are gifts, we don't earn them instantaneously, but develop them as we grow in maturity. Faith is trust in God that overcomes pessimism. Hope looks to God and his promises and so helps us to persevere through dark times. And love, poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, motivates us to live for God and others.</p> <p>Has life worn you down, so that you struggle to experience faith, hope, and love? If so, what practical steps might you take to regain them?</p>	<p><i>From St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226):</i></p> <p>Lord make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.</p> <p>Amen.</p>
6	<p>So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?</p>	Romans 7:21-24	<p>The genius of this passage is that most of us can recognise ourselves in its words. We long for goodness – to be good – but we just can't seem to pull it off.</p> <p>How do you see yourself in Paul's words here?</p>	<p>Help me, God, to face up to my wretchedness. Not that I might feel paralysed by despair and guilt, but so that I might be opened to my need for grace and freedom. Amen.</p>

Virtue and vice (continued)

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7	Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.	Romans 8:1-4	<p>Christian faith is not about condemning sinners, but about freedom in Christ. Even so, most of us live bound up by self-imposed legalism, and so we condemn ourselves. Paul's solution is that we give up the fight for perfection altogether, and look to the amazing grace of the gospel of Christ, setting our minds on the freedom of the Spirit. The Spirit transforms our minds, which doesn't make us perfect, but liberates us to live by grace.</p> <p>Are you harder on yourself than you are on others? Have you allowed Christianity to be another form of legalism?</p>	God, I know there's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, but still I condemn myself. Forgive me, and set me free from impossible ideals. Set my mind on the freedom of the Spirit. Change the way I think. Transform the habits of thought that bind me. Give me internal peace that trusts in the grace of Christ and the power of the Spirit. Amen.
8	Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.	Matthew 5:7-9	<p>The Beatitudes reveal just how countercultural the gospel of Jesus is. In a world torn apart by strife, everyone strives for power to get themselves on top. We generally think of the "blessed" as those who win in life: the rich, famous, influential and strong. But the Beatitudes argue for an alternative blessing. Rather than fighting to win, the blessed are those at the bottom of the pile, where the goal is not to win, but to bring war to an end.</p> <p>Do you think the Beatitudes should inform the way we make political decisions? How could we bring these values into our public life?</p>	<p>The Beatitudes make for a perfect prayer, so consider opening the Bible and praying through the text in your own way, e.g.:</p> <p>Jesus, help me to know the blessing of being poor in spirit, of being comforted when I mourn, of accepting my meekness, of hungering and thirsting for righteousness, of being merciful and pure, and of bringing peace. Help me, even, to accept the blessing of persecution that comes from countercultural living. Amen.</p>

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9	<p>“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.</p>	Matthew 23:23	<p>The virtue of justice is to give a person her due, and mercy is heartfelt sympathy for another’s distress, responding to both victim and perpetrator with compassionate grace. In ancient times, and still today, justice is highly valued, but mercy is understood as a sign of weakness – especially by those in power. Jesus challenges us to hold the two in tension: practising justice without neglecting mercy.</p> <p>How do you decide when to offer one person justice or mercy?</p>	<p>Holy God, you have called us to speak out for justice, but we have remained silent. Lord, have mercy. Holy God, you have been merciful to us, but we have treated others harshly. Spirit, empower us to be merciful. Holy God, help us to be faithful servants of Christ, and fill us with the Spirit of wisdom to know how to live justly and mercifully. Amen.</p>
10	<p>Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.</p>	Acts 4:11-13	<p>Traditionally, the virtue of courage lies in between the vice of fear on the one hand, and of foolhardiness (rushing unthinkingly into battle) on the other. In today’s reading, Peter is the same man that fearfully denied Christ three times, but now, post resurrection and post Pentecost, has the courage to stand boldly before the very same priests that had Jesus crucified.</p> <p>Where do you fit on the fear-courage-foolhardiness spectrum?</p>	<p>Lord God, help me to live one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace. Help me take, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right. Amen.</p>

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11	Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.	John 1:16-18	<p>John tells us that if we want to know what God is like, what God values, then we need look no further than Jesus. When we do, what we see most clearly is grace and truth. This is truth, not as a weapon, but as a revelation of the fullness of life that is possible when in relationship with the Father.</p> <p>When was the last time you meditated on what it is that Jesus reveals to us about the nature and character of God? What stands out when you do so?</p>	Holy God, forgive us for the countless ways we've misjudged you, for the times we've erected idols in your place. Lord Jesus, we pray for a fresh revelation of your gospel. Illuminate the scriptures as we read them, so that we might see your goodness and grace afresh. Open our hearts to the Spirit, that we may be led into relationship with you. Draw us into your presence that we might also be taken into the bosom of the Father. Amen.
12	Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.	Psalms 16:9-11	<p>Religious people are often thought to be wowsers, and the religious life one of drudgery. But the Bible holds that faithfulness leads to happiness. The modern science of positive psychology has discovered what the Bible has known all along; true happiness is not found in pursuing pleasure, but in living meaningfully for a cause beyond oneself. While there is a time to mourn, faith should also have us celebrating life.</p> <p>Have you lost sight of joy? If so, try the gratefulness exercise. Over the course of the next week, start each day by finding something to be grateful to God for. At the end of the week, reflect on whether you found reason for joy.</p>	Pray your own gratefulness prayer: Father, I am grateful for...

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13	Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.	1 Corinthians 13:4-7	<p>Love is a multifaceted word. It can denote passionate longing for the beloved, a giving of oneself for the sake of the other, and deep friendship. In this passage the focus is self-giving love, which is exemplified in the self-sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Love here is made practical by our virtuous actions: patience, kindness, truthfulness, self-control, humility and more.</p> <p>Who do you love, and how do you show them that you love them?</p>	Come, Holy Spirit, inflame our hearts with love. Open our eyes so that we might glimpse your love for us, and give us the grace to love one another passionately, sacrificially, and deeply. Amen.
14	You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.	Matthew 5:14-16	<p>Contemporary Christianity often talks about ways in which we can make the gospel stand out so that it attracts others to Jesus. But in this passage it is not spectacular miracles or charismatic preaching that makes the gospel “famous.” The metaphor of salt and light follows immediately after the Beatitudes, and here it is Christian character that is in view. Paradoxically, our light shines before others, not in the spectacular, but in the simplicity of meekness, mercy, purity, and peacemaking. In a dark world, it’s virtue that shines bright.</p> <p>Have you fallen for the lie that because you’re not famous or influential you are insignificant? In what ways might you, in humility, let your light shine?</p>	Lord Jesus, you have said that your followers are to be lights in a dark world. Help me to be that light, and to radiate your message of love. Give me the courage to let my light shine. Change my thinking so that I care nothing for fame and glory, but care only about everyday goodness, that others might see past me to your glory. Amen.