

Junior Summer Article and Reflection Questions:

Chapter 2 of Mere Christianity: The “Cardinal Virtues”

The previous section was originally composed to be given as a short talk on the air. If you are allowed to talk for only ten minutes, pretty well everything else has to be sacrificed to brevity. One of my chief reasons for dividing morality up into three parts (with my picture of the ships sailing in convoy) was that this seemed the shortest way of covering the ground.

Here I want to give some idea of another way in which the subject has been divided by old writers, which was too long to use in my talk but is a very good one. According to this longer scheme, there are seven “virtues.” Four of them are called *Cardinal* virtues, and the remaining three are called *Theological* virtues. The *Cardinal* ones are those which all civilized people recognize; the *Theological* are those which, as a rule, only Christians know about. I shall deal with the Theological ones later on: at present, I am talking about the four Cardinal virtues.

(The word “cardinal” has nothing to do with “Cardinals” in the Roman Church. It comes from a Latin word meaning “the hinge of a door.” These were called “cardinal” virtues because they are, as we should say, “pivotal.”)

They are **prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude.**

Prudence means practical common sense—taking the trouble to think out what you are doing and what is likely to come of it. Nowadays, most people hardly think of prudence as one of the “virtues.” In fact, because Christ said we could only get into His world by being like children, many Christians have the idea that, provided you are “good,” it does not matter being a fool. But that is a misunderstanding.

In the first place, most children show plenty of prudence about doing the things they are really interested in and think them out quite sensibly. In the second place, as St. Paul points out, Christ never meant that we were to remain children in intelligence: on the contrary, He told us to be not only “as harmless as doves,” but also “as wise as serpents.” He wants a child’s heart, but a grown-up’s head. He wants us to be simple, single-minded, affectionate, and teachable, as good children are; but He also wants every bit of intelligence we have to be alert at its job and in first-class fighting trim.

The fact that you are giving money to a charity does not mean that you need not try to find out whether that charity is a fraud or not. The fact that what you are thinking about is God Himself (for example, when you are praying) does not mean that you can be content with the same babyish ideas you had when you were a five-year-old.

It is, of course, quite true that God will not love you any the less, or have less use for you, if you happen to have been born with a very second-rate brain. He has room for people with very little sense, but He wants everyone to use what sense they have. The proper motto is not “Be good, sweet maid, and let who can be clever,” but “Be good, sweet maid, and don’t forget that this

involves being as clever as you can.” God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of any other slackers.

If you are thinking of becoming a Christian, I warn you: you are embarking on something which is going to take the whole of you—brains and all. But fortunately, it works the other way round. Anyone who is honestly trying to be a Christian will soon find his intelligence being sharpened. One of the reasons why it needs no special education to be a Christian is that Christianity is an education itself. That is why an uneducated believer like Bunyan was able to write a book that has astonished the whole world.

Temperance is, unfortunately, one of those words that has changed its meaning. It now usually means teetotalism. But in the days when the second Cardinal virtue was christened “temperance,” it meant nothing of the sort. Temperance referred not specially to drink, but to all pleasures; and it meant not abstaining, but going the right length and no further.

It is a mistake to think that Christians ought all to be teetotalers. Mohammedanism, not Christianity, is the teetotal religion. Of course, it may be the duty of a particular Christian, or of any Christian at a particular time, to abstain from strong drink—either because he is the sort of man who cannot drink at all without drinking too much, or because he wants to give the money to the poor, or because he is with people who are inclined to drunkenness and must not encourage them by drinking himself.

But the whole point is that he is abstaining, for a good reason, from something which he does not condemn and which he likes to see other people enjoying. One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting everyone else to give it up. That is not the Christian way. An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons—marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning.

One great piece of mischief has been done by the modern restriction of the word *temperance* to the question of drink. It helps people to forget that you can be just as intemperate about lots of other things. A man who makes his golf or his motor-bicycle the centre of his life, or a woman who devotes all her thoughts to clothes or bridge or her dog, is being just as “intemperate” as someone who gets drunk every evening. Of course, it does not show on the outside so easily—bridge-mania or golf-mania do not make you fall down in the middle of the road. But God is not deceived by externals.

Justice means much more than the sort of thing that goes on in law courts. It is the old name for everything we should now call “fairness”; it includes honesty, give and take, truthfulness, keeping promises, and all that side of life.

Fortitude includes both kinds of courage—the kind that faces danger as well as the kind that “sticks it” under pain. *Guts* is perhaps the nearest modern English. You will notice, of course, that you cannot practice any of the other virtues very long without bringing this one into play.

There is one further point about the virtues that ought to be noticed. There is a difference between doing some particular just or temperate action and being a just or temperate man. Someone who is not a good tennis player may now and then make a good shot. What you mean by a good player is the man whose eye and muscles and nerves have been so trained by making innumerable good shots that they can now be relied on. They have a certain tone or quality which is there even when he is not playing, just as a mathematician's mind has a certain habit and outlook which is there even when he is not doing mathematics.

In the same way, a man who perseveres in doing just actions gets in the end a certain quality of character. Now it is that quality, rather than the particular actions, which we mean when we talk of a *virtue*.

This distinction is important for the following reason. If we thought only of the particular actions, we might encourage three wrong ideas. We might think that, provided you did the right thing, it did not matter how or why you did it—whether you did it willingly or unwillingly, sulkily or cheerfully, through fear of public opinion or for its own sake. But the truth is that right actions done for the wrong reason do not help to build the internal quality or character called a *virtue*, and it is this quality or character that really matters.

(If the bad tennis player hits very hard, not because he sees that a very hard stroke is required, but because he has lost his temper, his stroke might possibly, by luck, help him to win that particular game; but it will not be helping him to become a reliable player.)

We might think that God wanted simply obedience to a set of rules; whereas He really wants people of a particular sort.

We might think that the *virtue* was necessary only for this present life—that in the other world we could stop being just because there is nothing to quarrel about and stop being brave because there is no danger. Now it is quite true that there will probably be no occasion for just or courageous acts in the next world, but there will be every occasion for being the sort of people that we can become only as the result of doing such acts here.

The point is not that God will refuse you admission to His eternal world if you have not got certain qualities of character: the point is that if people have not got at least the beginnings of those qualities inside them, then no possible external conditions could make a *Heaven* for them—that is, could make them happy with the deep, strong, unshakable kind of happiness God intends for us.

1. Why does Lewis emphasize that prudence is a virtue, despite modern tendencies to overlook it?

What does this suggest about the role of intellect in spiritual and moral life?

2. Lewis says God wants “a child's heart, but a grown-up's head.”

What does this phrase mean to you, and how might it guide the way you approach faith and decision-making?

3. How does the misunderstanding of the word "temperance" affect how people practice or misinterpret this virtue today?

What are some areas in your life where "temperance" in its fuller sense might be needed?

4. What does Lewis mean by saying that "Christianity is an education in itself"?

Have you ever found your thinking or character sharpened as a result of trying to live out your faith?

5. Lewis argues that doing a good action for the wrong reason does not build virtue.

Can you think of a time when you did something "right" for the wrong reasons? What was the effect on your character?

6. How does the comparison to a good tennis player help explain the difference between performing a virtuous act and becoming a virtuous person?

In what areas of your life do you see this kind of character formation happening (or needing to happen)?

7. Lewis warns against thinking that moral virtues are only needed for this life.

Why does he believe that becoming a certain kind of person is essential for Heaven? Do you agree? Why or why not?

8. Justice is described as encompassing truthfulness, fairness, and keeping promises.

How does this broader definition challenge or expand your usual understanding of justice?

9. How might practicing fortitude be necessary even in everyday situations that don't involve obvious danger?

Can you recall a time when you needed courage just to persist through something difficult or uncomfortable?

10. Lewis notes that God is not "deceived by externals."

In what ways might we appear "virtuous" on the outside while neglecting true inner transformation?