

Excellence In Character (Part Three)

by Martin G. Collins

Forerunner, "Bible Study,"

Our Creator is a Father who is raising what will ultimately be an enormous Family. He loves the individual Family members—His children—and is pleased when they get along and stay out of trouble. His supreme goal calls for an extremely high set of standards for their behavior: He wants His sons and daughters to develop and display extraordinary levels of virtue as they strive to produce plentiful, righteous fruit (Ezekiel 17:23; Matthew 5:16; 13:23; Colossians 1:10).

A crucial element for attaining these high standards is knowledge of God's law, which provides for discernment between good and evil (Proverbs 15:14; Romans 12:2; Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:9-10; I Thessalonians 5:21; Hebrews 5:14). Such discernment proves difficult in our complex, deceived civilization, where every individual defines right and wrong according to his or her own judgment (Deuteronomy 12:8; Judges 17:6; Proverbs 12:15; 21:2).

However, the authentic and faithful Christian must yield to what is right in *God's* eyes (Leviticus 19:37; Deuteronomy 12:28; John 15:10, 14), which entails another crucial element: a sincere conviction for good works driven by a self-sacrificial desire for the welfare of others (John 15:8; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:12-14). Such excellence of character not only glorifies God and reflects His nature, but God also requires it for all who wish to enter His Kingdom.

1. Does virtue relate to bearing good fruit? Titus 1:7-9; 3:8; Psalm 37:27; Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 2:10; I Timothy 2:9-10; 5:10; Colossians 3:12-14.

Comment: Jesus Christ directed His disciples to abide in Him, to follow Him, implying their need to imitate His virtuous character in order to “bear much fruit” and to glorify the Father (John 15:5, 8). In Titus 1, the apostle Paul describes the virtuous character traits required of a church elder as a steward, working in sacrificial service to God. In the next two chapters, he lists the traits that ministers should encourage among the members of the flock, “that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works” (Titus 3:8). We can describe all these traits as virtues critical for Christian service and bearing good fruit (Romans 12:1; Hebrews 13:16; I Peter 2:5).

2. Is virtue measured by accomplishments? Luke 16:15; 18:10-14.

Comment: When we consider Paul's list of virtues in Galatians 5:22-23 alongside those in Philippians 4:8, we see descriptions of moral excellence, not individual accomplishments. We should measure the virtue of a person by his conduct, attitude, willingness to exert himself on behalf of others, and success in being a “doer of the word” (James 1:22; I Timothy 4:12; Hebrews 10:24; Colossians 3:12-14). Those who proudly inventory and display their good deeds might impress men, but not God (Matthew 6:2; Luke 16:15; 18:10-14; Ephesians 2:9).

3. Can virtue lead us to the Kingdom? II Peter 1:2-11; I Timothy 6:18-19; II Timothy 2:21.

Comment: It is noteworthy that the apostle Peter lists *virtue* as the first thing that a Christian should strive to add to his faith, implying that this combination provides a solid foundation upon which the elect can build a spiritual house (II Peter 1:5).

Equally noteworthy are the biblical descriptions of Ruth as virtuous (Ruth 3:11) and Solomon's declaration of the value of a virtuous woman (Proverbs 31:10). Both cases depict virtuous women as willing to work hard in self-sacrificial service for others (Ruth 1:16; 2:3, 11, 17; Proverbs 31:12-27). In these contexts, virtue is moral excellence, the essence of which is self-sacrifice, which is also the essence of good works. While virtuous behavior does not guarantee absolute purity and innocence, it shows itself in the attitudes that drive a successfully righteous, Christian walk.

Finally, the apostle Paul preaches regularly that virtuous behavior is a necessary ingredient in the exercise of Christian faith (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 2:3-4; Colossians 3:12-13; Hebrews 13:16). As we read in I Timothy 6:18-19, he emphasizes this same excellence in character as foundational to the elect for entering the Kingdom of God: "Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life."