

## Can Virtue Be Taught?

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As I write this, another academic year looms ahead. Instead of sleeping late, taking naps, going to the gym, and travelling, I'm now spending my time on creating welcome letters, updating supply lists, adjusting assignment sheets, and answering emails from parents who want to ensure that their "little darlings" are adequately prepared for their first foray into PEP. I've taught long enough so that if all I did was change the dates of the assignment sheets from previous years, I would have coherent lesson plans for each class, and nobody would ever know the difference. A decade is a long time to teach the same class with the same books. It's almost as long as my students have been alive! But this begs the question: Why? Why assign readings from texts that are three thousand years old? Why assign weekly study questions on the reading material? What's the point of writing essays, taking tests, or even coming together for class? Certainly, the writers at *Spark Notes* have done an adequate job of summarizing the texts we read, performing literary analyses, and bringing out the important themes of the texts that we read. Perhaps they do a better job than any of us will. So, what is it that brings us together each class day to discuss these texts? Surely people have read these texts and mined the depths of them over the last millennia so that we have nothing to add that has not already been written by someone else.

Some peruse the multitude of readings assigned at PEP and conclude that we are trying to fill the heads of our students with facts. Again, if this were the case, would not the memorization of *Spark Notes* be a more efficient strategy to accomplish this end? Why waste the time that it takes to read Homer, Plato, Virgil, or Augustine? Why come to class to discuss these works, if this is our goal?

A number of parents enroll their children in PEP desiring that their offspring be well read and well rounded, chiefly to compete well for college admissions and scholarships. Others desire for their children to earn "high school credits," whatever that means. To be sure, there are as many reasons for enrolling at PEP as there are families who enroll.

One reason that I never hear for requiring students to complete the lists of readings and assignments is for the student to acquire virtue. There may be several reasons why this goal rarely comes up in conversations. First, we read mostly non-Christian authors who arrive at different conclusions about the "permanent things" such as God, man, the problem of evil, the purpose of life, government, and ethics than the Scripture teaches. That is, that the ancient writers may disagree with the Biblical writers on what constitutes virtue and vice. This objection is fair enough. But when one compares what Homer, Virgil, Euripides, and Sophocles illuminate as virtuous actions through their characters and actions, there is remarkable agreement with Holy Writ. Second, it is rightly recognized that what we read and study is literature in its own right. It seems dishonest to reduce Plato's *Republic* to a list of virtues to emulate. While Plato has remarkable insight into the purpose and process of education, reducing the *Republic* or any other text to traits to be emulated is to rob the learner of the full value of the text.

It may be that the most consistent objection to the idea that the purpose of education is to acquire virtue is a spiritual objection. The argument is expressed something like this: The Bible

teaches that apart from Christ, no good thing dwells in us. Therefore, to attempt to teach virtue apart from the gospel is at best, ineffective, and at worst, to substitute moralism for salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. In other words, people will become self-satisfied with their own performance, or that they will despair of acquiring any goodness whatsoever. What we may infer from this argument is that to teach virtue apart from the gospel is to put our ladder up against the wrong wall. Once we arrive at the top, we find that we have arrived on the roof of the wrong building. According to this line of reasoning, apart from regeneration, virtue will not take hold. So, this makes instruction in virtue a waste of time until the new birth takes place.

However, we are happily inconsistent on this point. Parents pray with and for their children, and teach them to pray before a child makes a verbal profession of faith in Christ. Such parents want their children to see prayer as the natural activity of the Christian, and to build habits and encourage in their children the delight of communion with God. Prayer works, not only as a discipline for those who are self-professed believers. The habit of prayer brings about the desire to know God and enjoy communion with Him. In praying, we recognize and acknowledge that we are dependent on God for our every need. The habit of prayer builds the mentality of prayer.

All education is necessarily moral. No matter what a teacher or curriculum intends to teach, something is taught. If a teacher in the classroom of a secular school does not mention the name of God for the duration of an entire school year, something is being taught about God, despite the efforts to maintain neutrality in matters of faith. When a Christian school tacks on Bible verses to areas of study with no apparent connection, something about the Bible is being taught.

James K. A. Smith has written several books about what he calls "cultural liturgies." Some of his more important insights are, first, virtue is "more caught than taught," and second, virtue is acquired as a habit. Through continuous practice, one grows to prefer the good to the bad, the genuine to the counterfeit, and truth to falsehood. While disciplines, including studies, consist of outward acts, performing these acts changes us from the inside out. One of the most frequently heard examples of this is the person who takes up running who perceives herself as unathletic. At first, she loathes the activity. She may have fallen victim to a sedentary lifestyle for which even a fast walk is a "big ask." Perhaps her experience with running is that it was punishment for dropping fly balls at softball practice. Or, she's self-conscious about how she looks in Spandex, and feels defeated about having to walk every quarter mile. But she perseveres, and soon begins to feel better, to have more energy and confidence. She becomes liberated from being concerned about how she looks in Spandex. Along the way, her loathing of exercise is transformed into enjoyment. How did this happen? She dragged herself out the door, day by day, and persevered until running became a habit that not only brought about physical benefits, but transformed her attitude about exercise, and ultimately, her self-image.

Virtue is cultivated by habit. Through training and repetition, one learns to love what is good, and true, and beautiful. While stories aren't written as morality plays, they take us into worlds where we experience truth, beauty, and goodness. J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is a fantasy adventure story. But in his story, Tolkien shows us heroism, friendship, courage, manliness, self-sacrifice, and the power of love to destroy hatred and evil. Tolkien shows us what is good, and this goodness resonates with our spirit in such a way that we would desire such goodness to be part of our lives.

So while literary analysis, philosophical argument, and Biblical apologetics will be the bulk of what we do in class, these activities are tools. These disciplines are instruments to prod us to acquire virtue, to learn to love what is good. The Apostle Paul admonishes us in Philippians 4:8 to think about "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable." We are to train ourselves in the truth, in goodness, in righteousness, to hate what is evil and love what is good.

If I achieve any success this year, you will be different from your peers. The relativism and privatization of faith and morality gives the impression that virtue is unnecessary for human flourishing. The monetization of every form of public space -- from Google to Facebook to Twitter to YouTube and even the credit card swiping machines at the grocery store imparts the lesson that we are first and foremost consumers, and that our happiness does not consist in acquiring virtue, but in consuming goods and services. The connection that we make from the monetization of public discourse to education is that education is consumption. Texts are consumed to pass on information that can be regurgitated on tests or in essay. In this way of thinking, we become what we buy.

However, this perception of the human being as primarily a being who consumes misses the mark. The educational version of this is to see people only as "thinking things," containers who hold information. In this view, the job of the educator is to fill the container of the "thinking thing" with facts and information.

Writing in the fourth century AD, St. Augustine spoke of sin as "disordered loves." Because of the Fall of Man and indwelling sin, we love the wrong things, or we love the right things but not in Biblical proportions. We are told to "love our neighbor as ourselves," but our self-love predominates over every object of our love. We love the gifts of God's creation more than the Giver.

Augustine's message is, "you are what you love." We love, not simply with our emotions, but as the Apostle John writes, "in deed and in truth." It is my hope that we will not only see how our loves are disordered, but how we can rightly order our loves for the glory of God and for the benefit of others.