



Teaching the Way of Love

Parenting With the Heart of Christ

For all parents,
especially those
with small children.



It is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues...

~Familiaris Consortio #42

A foundational belief of all Christians is that God inscribes His law upon each and every human heart. This law provides a foundational desire to do

what is good and to avoid what is evil. It connects each person with God – even when there is a weak or denied faith about His presence. It is within the human heart that one will come to know God and true happiness and fulfillment.

If the heart is the place where God connects with you, then it is also the best place for you to connect with your children. Why? Because it is in the heart that you can partner with God in raising your children to do what is right and ultimately find true happiness. God counts on you to be “his hands” and “his heart” on earth.

One of the best ways to work with God in the formation of a child’s heart is virtue development. Virtue development includes any parental actions that advance the child’s ability to know and choose what is good over evil. Parents who intentionally demonstrate firm habits of thinking about and choosing to live morally good lives develop virtues within their family.

What exactly is a virtue? A virtue is a firm habit to do what is right and good. It allows one to perform good acts and to give one’s best. A virtuous parent chooses what is morally good in every concrete action, even when faced with temptation.

It is important to note that virtue development cannot be forced upon anyone. Rather, virtue development is acquired through human effort. Your child has to freely choose to become virtuous – you as a parent

cannot coerce or manipulate him or her to do what is right. This personal commitment towards goodness is made internally, within your child’s heart.

When parents try to change a child’s behavior through manipulation or force, they often find themselves painted into the corner of, “If you do what I say, I will give you what you want.” This parenting strategy develops the child’s selfish tendencies instead of his or her commitment to do what is right. Changing the outside behavior of your child does not ensure that the heart of your child has followed. You know you can press your child to change his or her outside behavior, but you cannot force the internal change. This is why parenting through the virtues is harder to accomplish.

The process of building good character begins with the four Cardinal Virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. These key moral virtues form the foundation upon which all other virtues grow. If you focus on helping your children develop prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, you will be instructing their hearts and leading them towards authentic goodness.

Even though virtue development requires more time and effort, the rewards of parenting for virtue are great. Virtues endure. A change of heart results in real conversion, where a change in behavior may be only a temporary, surface-level fix. Virtues help children internalize the goodness to which you want to lead them. There are few greater gifts a parent can give their children than a heart that is virtuous and firm in its commitment to pursue goodness and truth.

From the DVD (WATCH THE CLIP THAT CORRESPONDS WITH THIS SEGMENT.)

A virtue is a _____ to do what is right and good.

The four cardinal virtues are:

_____ is the ability to know what is right and good.

_____ is the ability to do what is right and good.

_____ is moral courage.

_____ is the ability to control desires.

_____ is the ability to order sexual matters to the will of God.

Teach human virtues to children by;

_____ virtues in your own life.

_____ clear expectations.

_____ questions that engage thinking.

_____ your child being virtuous.

Continue the Discussion

Read and reflect on the following questions and examples.

1. Whose standards should a child live by in order to be prudent - God's or yours? Explain.
2. Which is true justice – treating your children fairly or treating your children equally?
3. How might parents help develop a child's moral courage or fortitude?
4. If parents follow the saying, "Do what I say and not what I do," will their children develop temperance? Why or why not?
5. Why is it more important to work on changing your child's heart rather than just the behavior?

Make a Plan

Virtues are caught more than they are taught. In other words, children repeat what they see. That is why it's important to ask yourself, "How well am I living the virtues that I want my children to learn?" The following activity will help determine how well you have developed the foundational virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance and chastity.

There are five segments to the table below. On the left side of each segment is a description of immature virtue development and on the right is a description of mature virtue development. Below the descriptions is a bold line. Determine where you **consistently** fall on each scale by placing a mark on the bold line. A mark towards the left side would indicate you have work to do to develop that virtue. A mark towards the right would mean that you are doing well in your development of that virtue. Notice the dashed line that appears right of center in each segment. Marks to the right of the dashed line indicate maturity or reasonable mastery. Marks to the left of the dashed line indicate immaturity. Once you have made your mark, explain why you placed your mark where you did in the "Here's Why"... space. Record the concrete behaviors that show your mastery of that virtue.

Immature Virtue	Prudence	Mature Virtue
I don't make much effort to know the good that matches God's will. I don't typically have a plan to attain or do what is good.		I make an effort to know the good that matches God's will and I often create plans to attain and do what is good.
<i>Here's Why...</i>		

Immature Virtue	Justice	Mature Virtue
I am more concerned with my needs and rights than I am with those of others.		I seek fair dealings with others and always consider what will increase the common good.
<i>Here's Why...</i>		

Immature Virtue	Fortitude	Mature Virtue
I do what is right and good only when it's easy to do so or when others are watching. I do not battle personal weakness.		I do what is right and good even when it is difficult and even when nobody witnesses it. I consistently take on personal weaknesses and try to defeat them.
<i>Here's Why...</i>		

Immature Virtue	Temperance	Mature Virtue
I regularly treat food, drink and physical intimacy only as means of pleasure. I tend to overindulge.		I regularly balance my desires for food, drink and physical pleasure so that they are enjoyed properly.
<i>Here's Why...</i>		

Immature Virtue	Chastity	Mature Virtue
I indulge in sexual intimacy for my own pleasure. I do not believe that sexual self control is necessary. I do not honor God's plan for sexual intimacy within marriage.		I demonstrate sexual self control by avoiding any actions, media or situations that arouse selfish sexual pleasures. I honor God's plan for sexual intimacy within marriage.
<i>Here's Why...</i>		

Now that you have marked your current level of development of each of these virtues, reflect on how your example is impacting your children. Consider ways to improve your example so that your children may grow toward rather than away from God's goodness and love.

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