

What Does it Mean to be Virtuous? – Teresa Holden

Proverbs 31; Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13 – 4:8

My sermon today is going to be an investigation of what it means to be virtuous. We are led in this direction by our Old Testament passage, Proverbs 31, a passage of Scripture that I have always heard referred to as the “Virtuous Wife” Scripture. As I researched this passage, I saw that my terminology is a bit outdated. Today, it seems that theologians call this a description of a “Capable Wife,” rather than a “Virtuous Wife,” but I think the former title is useful because it describes the way in which Americans, at least, have traditionally thought about the concept of virtue. So before I begin, I have a prop that I hope will serve as a bit of an object lesson.

Here I have my glasses from the 1980’s. I’m going to pass these around and encourage you to put them on. Without my contacts, this is how I saw the world back then. You’ll notice a couple of things about these glasses: first, these were apparently in style at the time, but today, they seem quite big and ugly. Second, I have terrible eyesight! You will notice when you put these on that my peripheral vision is basically gone when I wear glasses, because looking side to side with eyes as bad as mine, one can barely make out anything but blurriness.

So what do glasses and bad eyesight have to do with being virtuous? Only this: we each see the world with a pair of glasses that has been shaped by the culture in which we live. Although not literally on our faces, they may as well be because they entirely shape the way we see the world. What it means to be Virtuous, for all of western civilization, but for America, in particular, has been shaped by some cultural understandings of virtue. For us to truly know what virtue means to God requires us to get a new prescription for our glasses and to see the world through God’s eyes.

Before we can do that, it’s important to understand the meaning of virtue that is embedded in our culture. In America, virtue has historically been defined differently according to gender. Being a virtuous man or boy carried different characteristics than being a virtuous woman or girl. Let me give you some examples.

An early American who considered what it meant to be virtuous was Benjamin Franklin who discussed at length his own pursuit of virtue in his autobiography. Here, Franklin described his attempts to achieve moral perfection. First, he identified thirteen virtues which, when attained, would be evidence that a man was morally perfect or virtuous. His thirteen virtues were: Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Tranquility, Chastity and finally, Humility. In order to attain these virtues, Franklin decided to focus on one per week. And in order to keep track of how he was doing, he made for himself a chart, which had the virtues listed on the left and the days of the week listed across

the top. He would keep track of his failures by putting a black mark in his chart for the day on which he messed up on any specific virtue. In his journal, he copied down slogans from classical authors to inspire him, and he decided that perhaps he should pray for help with this endeavor, so he also wrote a brief prayer that he would recite daily.

After working on this project for a few weeks, Franklin said, "I was surpris'd to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined . . ." (Franklin, 68.) After many pages of describing this project in his autobiography, he concluded, "In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself; you will see it, perhaps, often in this history; for, even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility." (Franklin, 72.)

Despite Franklin's struggle, he embodied what Americans for hundreds of years have considered to be virtue, as it is defined for American males, because male virtue has historically been associated with public, civic virtue. Men proved their virtuosity by participating in democracy, by functioning and using whatever their abilities were in a public world. Franklin represents for us the perfect symbol of the "self-made man." In his autobiography he encourages his readers to try a similar experiment in moral perfection, as he believes it is essential to the formula for a successful person. In America, our idea of male virtue is embedded in this concept of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and making something out of oneself. This is an image that Americans hold dearly.

How do our Scriptures respond to these concepts, so far? James 4:7 says that virtue cannot be attained simply by the strength of any person's will power. Rather, it is imperative to "Submit to God," to "resist selfish ambition" and "to be cleansed and purified by God." James provides the assurance, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." So, for one to be truly virtuous, the prayer can't be an add-on at the end. Virtuosity is attained through a life of seeking God.

In both James and Mark, similar to Americans' understanding of virtue, we see the setting for virtue is definitely within a community. Jesus says that evidence of virtue is not striving competitively to be the best or the greatest Christian, but rather the action of serving. He says, "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all."

So in contrast to this, how has feminine virtue been defined in American culture? Female virtue historically has been demonstrated in the privacy of the home. Women, particularly elite women, had a sacred role in the early republic: First, they were the guardians of morality. Because of women's need to protect their purity, they alone had the power to tame men's promiscuous tendencies. Second, they were responsible for the proper training of their children, which meant they were providing structure for the next generation of civically minded men. These women were responsible for teaching their sons to properly use their talents in a democracy. Historians, in fact, have given early American women a designation that suggests how seriously early Americans believed this job was. They are called "Republican mothers," meaning women who

supported the Republic from the privacy of their homes. The extent to which Americans believed this role was sacred is, in part, what kept women from attaining the vote until the 20th century. The thought of having women dabbling in the dirty business of politics didn't sit well. Many feared that women's virtue would vanish, so that they would no longer be virtuous.

But of course, this is just a cultural understanding of virtue. I would like to offer the example of a nineteenth century American woman who broke all the barriers of gender, but also exhibited the kind of virtue that Jesus talks about in Mark, and that James tells us about. This woman is Harriet Tubman. She is known by some as the "Moses of Her People," because as a fugitive who had escaped slavery, herself, she made thirteen trips from Canada to Maryland and back in order to lead roughly 70 other people out of slavery. Tubman's story is remarkable to me because her life was in total contrast to what Americans believed was virtuous for a woman. Yet, she demonstrated her virtue by living a life completely dependent on God. This dependency was heightened, not only because of her condition as a formerly enslaved woman, but also because she suffered physical difficulties. As an enslaved twelve year old, Tubman was involved in a horrific accident. In a fit of fury, an angry master heaved a two pound steel weight at another slave. Tubman accidentally got in the way of the flying weight and took the full impact on her skull. It took months for her fractured skull to heal, but other consequences of the injury never left her. She suffered petit mal seizures, which were like semi-conscious trances, and bouts of narcolepsy, so that she suddenly would fall asleep in the course of her everyday activities for the rest of her life. But Tubman believed that these conditions were part of God's plan for her. She believed God spoke to her through these experiences. One of her biographers paraphrased Tubman's description of her seizures. Tubman told her that during them she could feel the close presence of God, and thus, her physical ailments lifted her "up above all doubt and anxiety into serene trust and faith." (Larson, 102.)

We know relatively little about Harriet Tubman because she was illiterate, first because the law forbade teaching slaves to read and write, but second because her injuries did not allow her to sit still for long, concentrated periods of time. Instead, she spent her entire life helping people, eventually in the 20th century she died in the New York home she had established for aged former slaves who had no other place to go.

Venturing outside of the privacy of a home and taking actions that no other person (male or female) took in that day, Tubman's life challenges the notion that virtue can be defined in terms of gender. She fulfilled Jesus's challenge by putting her own safety last. And she fulfilled James's challenge to draw near to God in order to be virtuous.

This brings us to back Proverbs 31 where (in the first nine verses) we see that King Lemuel (sort of a mystery man since this is his only appearance in the Bible) quotes the words of wisdom his mother gave to him at an earlier point in his life. She seems to have instructed him on what it takes to be a good king (sort of like the Republican mothers we heard about earlier). She told him to not allow his strength to be taken away by women, and she warned him against strong drink. After a list of don'ts she transitioned into some do's. First, she encouraged him to live

justly. Then she provided her description of a virtuous, or capable wife, the kind of wife she envisioned for him.

At times, I have seen this passage held up as the standard to which wives should strive. The current cultural standard of the American superwoman frequently gets superimposed on this passage, and it is a standard that no woman should have to live up to. So what can we take from this passage and the context in which we find it? Perhaps, King Lemuel's mother, along with detailing what she was hoping to see in her future daughter-in-law, was also celebrating the remarkable grace that is exhibited when people (in this case, women) make the mundane things in life look easy. At this time, marriage was mostly a business relationship, particularly among the elite. Men and women brought property and goods to the marriage. Women were expected to play their role and hold up their end of the marriage bargain, by fulfilling the tasks that accompanied their role in society and by being completely subservient to their husbands. What is unique about this woman is not what she did, but how she did it. No where else in Scripture do we find a detailed list of the kinds of tasks women were expected to perform. By drawing attention to these things, King Lemuel's mother celebrated the day-to-day routine of ancient women, simply by recognizing all that they did. We all have to admit, that, even today, we spend a lot of time doing mundane, routine, everyday tasks. Perhaps the lesson contained within Proverbs 31 is that there is virtue in cheerfully and faithfully going about our lives, not focusing on superficial things, but rather on living as unto the Lord.

We also have to understand this passage within the context of Mark 9. As his disciples were arguing about who was the greatest amongst them, Jesus called a child into their midst, and he told them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." We're not told if this was a boy or a girl, but we get the message that God is telling us that all human life is precious. Jesus lived this way, as though all people, young, old, men, women, poor, wealthy, sick, everyone was worthy of his regard. So, separate from whatever social and gender roles people have played throughout history, Jesus has always recognized people for the preciousness of who they are and not whether they can sew up a fine-looking dress.

Finally, with God's glasses, we see that the pursuit of virtue is a peaceful pursuit. James mentions "peace" three times as he describes God's wisdom, and in Psalms 1 we see that those who seek God's wisdom are like a peaceful scene, "a tree planted by streams of water," that is fruitful and healthy. This is the kind of place where it would be nice to have a picnic and linger for awhile. When we draw near to God, through our faithful acts of worship, He increasingly leads us into a life of virtue and peace, the same kind of peace that Harriet Tubman felt during her physical hardships.

There's something to be said for those who have taken the time to even think about what it means to be a virtuous person. Today's Scriptures help us to see from God's perspective, that to be virtuous we must seek Him and not look to our own abilities. They also show us that when we are faithful to God, we become revolutionaries. We resist cultural constructions and seek a

vision that is only possible through God. God's outcomes are always so much bigger and better than what we could have seen with our own glasses.

Sources

Benjamin Franklin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996.

Kate Clifford Larson. *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*. New York: Random House, 2004.