

Reflections

JULY 2019

People of a Particular Sort

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis included a chapter addressing the four Cardinal virtues — Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Fortitude. He noted that this reflects one of the ways the subject of morality has been divided by old writers. An excerpt, covering the last three of these virtues, follows.¹

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...

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...

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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. And Fortitude includes both kinds of courage — the kind that faces danger as well as the kind that “sticks it” under pain...

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 “virtue.”

This distinction is important for the following reason. If we thought only of the particular actions we might encourage... wrong ideas.

(1) 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...

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

As we follow Jesus Christ, let us seek, with His help, to grow into the people He wants us to be.



“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge...”

2 PETER 1:5 (ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Touchstone: New York, 1996, pp. 75-77.

