

Virtue Ethics and the Christian Life

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Virtue ethics has the advantage of sharing the biblical emphasis on developing character rather than focusing solely on actions. As Kyle D. Fedler explained, from the start of Christian ethical thought, a good person has been one who does not merely do the right things, but who does them “with the right motives and intentions” (Fedler 33). This requires that we develop certain virtues. Fedler defines a “virtue” as “a type of habit. . . . an inclination or disposition to act, think, or feel in a certain way” (Fedler 34). In their discussion of virtue ethics, Craig A. Boyd and Don Thorsen elaborate that a “habit” is an “acquired disposition” that we develop through “frequent repetition” (Boyd and Thorsen 157).

Boyd and Thorsen, however, ask, “If virtues are character traits and based on a person’s moral character, then how can that possibly guide the rest of us who might not possess that kind of character?” (Boyd and Thorsen 167-68). The answer is twofold. First, even if we have not yet developed virtues, we can look to biblical role models (of whom Jesus is the model par excellence) and imitate their behavior. Second, we can habitually follow the purposes underlying God’s law. Viewing God’s law as a means to develop virtuous character, and not as an end in itself, prevents both the dangers of antinomianism (because we recognize the function the law plays in developing virtuous character) and legalism (because we look to the purpose behind the law in developing virtue and do not see it as the ultimate end). Thus, the Christian ethical life is one of imitating biblical role models and following the purpose behind God’s law in order to form the habits that result in virtuous character.

WORKS CITED

- Boyd, Craig A. and Don Thorsen. *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy: An Introduction to Issues and Approaches*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018. Print.
- Fedler, Kyle D. *Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. Print.