

About Virtue in General

I. Introduction

- a. Goal of Sherpa Club: help the boys become men of character (God-fearing, upright, industrious, loyal, courageous, self-controlled, prudent, etc.).
 - i. We cannot do too much here *directly* with the boys in just two hours/month. But *indirectly* we hope to help *you* to help them.
 - ii. It is the fathers (parents) who educate their children in virtue and not really anyone else: not their uncle, not the neighbors, not their schools.
 - iii. Sherpa will help the boys to be men of character primarily by helping you, their fathers, in your task of forming them in virtue.
- b. These talks will be talks about *character*.
 - i. Character is the sum total of one's virtues and vices
 - ii. You need to know about the virtues if you are going to educate your sons to be men of character.
 1. You need to know what you are aiming at (we all know in a vague, general sort of way, but it's better if we are clear and can articulate it to ourselves, to wives and to the sons).
 2. You need to be able identify virtues and lacks of virtue in your sons. This is like a doctor who has to diagnose the illness before he can prescribe a treatment.
- c. Today I will just give a general overview, touching on many topics that we will develop in subsequent talks in the upcoming months.

II. What virtues are

- a. We can start with the question: what is it that makes a person act well in a steady, reliable way and not just now and then and not just when it is easy, but steadily, even when it is hard? Some people tell the truth even when it will be hard; some are loyal to their friends, even though it will cost them. Others are not.
- b. Some modern answers:
 - i. **Environment:** if you put people in the right environment then they will behave well.

1. This is not borne out in practice; criminals don't usually stop being criminals when you move them. Lazy people don't suddenly become industrious just because you change their environment.
 2. But environment does have a large influence on how one forms his character. For example, if a person grows up among thieves, he is more likely to become a thief: thieving is presented as a good way to live. We will talk about this in coming months, because the environment in the home is extremely important.
- ii. **Physiological factors:** vice = a sickness to be treated medically.
1. We see this often: all moral problems are to be solved with medicine (especially Ritalin).
 2. This has some roots in the ambient materialism: whatever goes on in a person is somehow caused by the state of his body; if something is wrong, then there must be something out of whack physically, and so we need doctors and medicine to treat it.
- c. **Virtues** (the classic answer)
- i. There are internal, fixed, dispositions (habits) toward good actions (virtues) or bad actions (vices). They are formed over time, and once formed, are pretty stable. These are what make a person good or bad; people normally act in accord with their character (there is always a possibility of changing, but it becomes harder as you are older).
 - ii. This is a tradition of 2500 years: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and taken up by Christians and most highly developed in St. Thomas Aquinas (we will follow him, although I will not quote the *Summa*); virtues are discussed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (so this is part of Catholic doctrine and not simply a theory of philosophers).
 - iii. If you want people to act well, to lead good lives, you should pay attention to the virtues (even political authorities should do this).
 - iv. There are many distinct virtues (good habits), each dealing with a different aspect of life. Some examples:

1. Fortitude: for handling difficulties (these are encountered throughout our lives in most areas of our lives).
2. Temperance: moderation of desires and pleasures of all kinds.
3. Justice: our dealings with others, specifically respecting their rights and giving them their due.
4. Meekness: for handling anger well.
5. Generosity: for handling money well.

III. Why virtues are important

- a. Virtues are the single most important factor for a successful life; by success we mean *a good life on the whole* and not just professional success, wealth, fame, etc. We mean *a happy life*. Happiness depends on many factors (talents, good and bad fortune, one's political regime, etc.), but the single most important one is virtue. Virtue lets you handle the vicissitudes of fortune (endure hardship well and not be corrupted by good fortune). This is also true of eternal life (the most important factor is the virtue of charity).
- b. Virtues are necessary.
 - i. Other skills are good, but not necessary (e.g., playing the piano, learning chemistry, doing auto mechanics, playing tennis, etc.).
 - ii. Virtues are necessary; without the virtues, the other good things will be ruined (e.g., a person with a drinking problem will undermine his job, his sports, piano playing, etc).
 - iii. Virtues/character are like the operating system; if it is not stable, it will crash. The programs or applications, no matter how good they are, will not function well if the underlying operating system is not stable. So too, a person may have many excellent talents, but these can be undermined by a lack of virtue.
 - iv. The virtues are not selected or named arbitrarily. They are precisely the good habits a person needs to lead his life well and without which he can ruin his life (e.g., if you do not handle drink or anger well, you can end up without job, family and friends).

IV. Why it is important to know about the virtues

- a. Given the above, if you want your sons to be happy and lead good lives (this being what parents most want for their children), you need to pay attention to virtues.
- b. You need to know about them to help sons grow into them.
- c. You need to understand their basic structure (what they are, what kinds how they function).
- d. Need to know how they are acquired (this is especially where you want to help your sons).
- e. Need to be able to identify them (or their absence).
 - i. You should should be able to identify them by name ; like a doctor who doesn't just know you are sick, but has to identify the disease; we all tend to know when someone lacks virtue, but not everyone can say just what virtue is lacking.
 - ii. Need to be able to teach sons about virtue; identify the virtues for them (as we do with trees and birds) in themselves, and around them in others, and in literature.

V. How the virtues are acquired

- a. By habituation
 - i. Habits are formed by repeated actions (hard at first, but they become easier as the habit is formed)
 - ii. A big job of parents is to get their children to do the actions that will form the good, virtuous habits (a long battle that requires fortitude and perseverance). Parents have to watch that they do not protect their children from hard things; if so, they miss many opportunities to acquire the virtues.
- b. By example
 - i. There is more than just repeating actions; ultimately virtuous actions are *chosen actions*, and chosen actions are *done by reason*: you do it because you think it is good to do (not just instinctual like animals). So education in virtue also includes educating children's reason. The goal is that eventually they will do virtuous actions on their own because they realize it is good for them to act that way.
 - ii. The first (often unconscious) way children learn what is good and bad is what they see in those around them, especially their parents. They will imitate what they see

- (we all know stories of tots who hear bad language from their parents and start to repeat it).
- iii. Personal examples: parents' example is the single most powerful example in their lives.
 - iv. Literature: books, TV, movies, etc. present all sorts of examples of good and bad behavior. The presentations are not always accurate (often vice is presented as good). Parents need to be very careful about the literature their children are exposed to. Bible stories and saints lives should be a core part of the literature they see/hear.
- c. Instruction: actually talking about character and virtues with your children.
- i. We want them to understand virtue and character (their own and that of others). They need to hear about the virtues and have them identified and explained.
 - ii. Eventually we want them to act virtuously on their own and for that understanding is required.
 - iii. This aspect of inculcation of virtue increases as they get older (especially once adolescence hits).

VI. Future talks

- a. Each month the talk will have two parts: 1) virtue in general and 2) a specific virtue.
- b. Virtue in general: kinds of virtue, structure of virtue, role of reason and passions/impulses, relationship to personality, etc.
- c. Specific virtues: classic cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance) but also the many virtues that fall under them (e.g., under temperance comes, eating, drinking, sex, but also humility (self-aggrandizement), meekness (anger), studiosity (desire to know) and *eutrapelia* (playing games)).

[This outline is very close to outline #1 from September 2013.]