

How Christian Spiritual Practices Contribute to Virtue Formation

Sabrina B. Little

The Ohio State University

If righteousness is inherited rather than earned, what, if anything, must a Christian do to grow in virtue? This paper introduces readers to a tradition of inquiry on Christian spiritual formation in a broadly Thomistic tradition. It describes the process of spiritual development and puzzles that arise from it, and it evaluates how spiritual development differs from Western secular approaches to virtue formation. The paper is written for non-specialists. As such, it has an explanatory approach, rather than defending particular positions.

This paper has two sections. (1) It defines its terms, evaluating virtue in broadly secular Aristotelian and Thomistic forms. It explains why virtues matter in a Christian life and investigates what is called “the problem of beginnings” in moral and spiritual formation. (2) Next, it explores several tactics used in virtue development and spiritual formation.

1. Preliminaries

What is a virtue?

Virtues are acquired excellences that make their possessors good instances of their kind (Aristotle *NE* 1106a; Hursthouse 1999: 20). Examples include justice, fortitude, and temperance. Virtues are entrenched features of persons, involving thoughts, actions, and feelings (Hursthouse 2011: 8). For Aristotle, virtues are characterized by a kind of psychic unity—having a correct conception of the good, being motivated to perform actions that are indeed good, and performing these good actions (Annas 2008; Snow 2006). They are not performed from a force of will, or through gritted teeth. Rather we desire the good, and our actions follow from this desire.

Additionally, virtues constitute a kind of achievement on the part of the agent, and they are properties “possessed by someone who has cooperated in [their] formation” (Roberts 1988: 142). We are not born virtuous but can become so. Furthermore, virtues involve a threshold of human freedom. For example, if we consistently perform generous actions because we are compelled to do so—such as by a parent or the law—these actions (while good and, on balance, better than stingy actions) are not *virtuous* because they are not free.

Why this matters is that, a common intuition (and an assumption of our legal system) is that we bear responsibility for moral character. This requires that our character—our thoughts, actions, and feelings—are reasonably within our control. For example, if someone lies on their taxes (evidence of the vice of dishonesty), they can be held legally accountable for doing so. When a friend responds with unfitting or outsized anger, I become upset with her. I find her

blameworthy and chastise her for doing so. However, if a young child does the same thing—acting with outsized anger or having a tantrum—I am still not happy with the child. However, I do not find him blameworthy in the way that I find an adult. This is because children are not entirely free with respect to their emotions and actions. Freedom is required for virtue and vice.

Within a broadly Aristotelian framework, virtues are described as conducive to human flourishing (Nussbaum 1988; Aristotle 2011; Annas 2008; Kristjánsson 2023). For example, someone with the virtue of *good temper* is disinclined to tantrum or respond to provocations with unfitting rage. Outsized anger can imperil relationships and prevent someone from navigating social spaces with excellence. Thus, all other variables held constant, the person with good temper is better positioned than the person absent this virtue to flourish. A second example is that *patient* people characteristically respond to slower than desired progress with a reasonable level of calmness (Miller 2024). This means they can pursue worthy goals without becoming restless and giving in. This virtue supports flourishing because the patient person is better able to make slow progress toward arduous goods.

On a broadly Thomistic (Christian) picture, virtues are also excellences of nature. However, nature is described in different terms. For Aristotle, the true nature of a thing is “the highest it can become” (Nichols 1991). Our greatest good is *eudaimonia*, or “good spirit.” This is an activity of the soul that is constituted, in large part, by virtues. Virtues are achieved through our own powers. By contrast, for Aquinas, our greatest good is beatific vision—to see and be in relationship with God. Beatific vision cannot be effected by human action alone. It requires Christ’s action on one’s behalf. This is called *justification*—that someone becomes righteous. They receive a status change before God, and this is received by grace alone. We cannot add anything to it. However, this does not mean that a Christian is passive before God following justification. In the same way that someone marries their spouse and experiences an instant status change, then slowly learns to live in light of this new status over the course of their life, the Christian does the same. They act in cooperation with grace, growing in relationship with God. They (hopefully) mature over time, as they reckon with the gift of salvation. This process of spiritual maturation is called *sanctification*.

The Thomistic picture describes virtues in the context of grace. There are two kinds. The *theological virtues*, or infused virtues, are faith, hope, and charity. These are granted to the Christian in justification. The *cardinal virtues* are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. They are called “cardinal” because of the Latin *cardo*, meaning hinge. All other virtues depend upon them. If we possess the cardinal virtues, then we can live pretty good lives, all things considered—controlling our desires, acting well, and being able to self-govern. This is a higher sort of life than one absent aspiration or natural excellence. Of course, we fall short of attaining our greatest good, in knowing God. The cardinal virtues are open to everyone, not only for believers. As such, they are a kind of common grace, and everyone can work to develop them.

For the Christian—who possesses infused virtues—the cardinal virtues are also transformed, and reoriented, in relationship to God. For example, someone with the infused virtue of charity recognizes and rises to worthy risks, which reflect well-ordered loves. In this way, their character *en toto* testifies to the saving work of Christ. All of a person, rather than just three infused virtues, are impacted by salvific grace. A final clarification is that, while the theological virtues are infused, we still play a role in developing them. We can grow in faith, hope, and love. For example, we can spend time in Christian community to grow in faith. Moreover, the Christian is motivated to spiritually mature as an expression of gratitude for Christ's work on our behalf. We bear the image of Christ and can act in ways that better reflect that image.

What is spiritual formation?

There is a memorable image in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. Ghost people live in a grey, joyless town where no one gets along, and everything is insubstantial like vapor or smoke. The narrator journeys on a bus with several other ghosts to the foothills of Heaven, where the landscape is described as beautiful and solid—and painful for the ghosts. The ghosts are invited to stay in this joyful, solid place, but many make excuses and return to the grey town. Over time, they retreat deeper into the smokey, insubstantial place.

To summarize, people retreat from a substantial place to a smokey place, where reality is obscured. It may not have been Lewis' intention, but this image is helpful for understanding our relationships to Thomistic natural law (*ST* II.2.94). Aquinas describes *synderesis*, a spark of conscience common to all people. It is natural to us but is also a habit. Through our choices, we can live in ways that partially obscure the moral law, but we cannot wholly efface it. We can retreat from moral reality, which is clear and substantial for the those who desire to see it.

This retreat is both *epistemic*, since moral knowledge becomes hazy and obscured, and *motivational*. The more we retreat from God's moral universe, the less it tugs at our conscience. We can become complacent residing in the un-solid, yet comfortable, ghostly place. This captures spiritual *malformation*. Conversely, we can understand the moral dimensions of spiritual *formation* as growing in sensitivity to the substantial realities of God. The reality of the Gospel becomes more solid to us, and we can build our lives on it.¹ We learn to see and delight in God's will for our lives.

¹ A memorable moment in *The Great Divorce* is when the ghosts attempt to walk across the grass in the hard place, and it is exceedingly painful and awkward for them. By contrast, the solid people can rest on the solid ground without discomfort.

In simple terms, spiritual formation is growing in relationship with God. We described the beatific vision as our greatest good. Seeing and recognizing God is not reserved for death; it begins in a life spent drawing closer to God. What I have been doing in this paper—and will continue to do hereafter—is to define this growing relationship in virtue theoretic terms. I will do so for a few reasons. First, the ability to name virtues and vices—a grammar of moral actions—provides us with a vocabulary for articulating particular strengths (e.g., patience) and shortcomings (e.g., pride) in spiritual development. Possessing a grammar of virtue and vice gives us spectacles to better see ourselves, rather than thinking of ourselves in broad and amorphous terms as ‘pretty good’ or ‘pretty bad.’

Second, we have already said that for Aquinas, our habitual ways of being in the world can either strengthen or partially efface our recognition and desire for living in ways that honor God. Virtue theory concerns our habitual dispositions. For example, what are my typical inclinations relevant to thinking, feeling, and acting regarding the theological virtue of *faith*? What are practices that might increase my faith? Finally, framing this conversation in virtue theoretic terms permits us to draw on a rich tradition of inquiry in character education, discussing various tactics in the Christian context.

The Problem of Beginnings

Why would someone who is *not* virtuous decide to become virtuous? This is called the “problem of beginnings” in virtue formation. There are many methods and tactics we might employ to improve, but why should we? What makes people decide to morally improve?

There are many reasons for undertaking a project in virtue development. These include good books, which illuminate the human condition and compel us to improve, and the experience of negative-valence ameliorative emotions, such as guilt or shame. Sometimes we perform bad actions, are chastised for doing so, then desire to improve to resolve feelings of guilt and shame. Another reason for moral improvement is the influence of good friends who call us to a higher standard. Additionally, a reason to morally improve is to become better at a social practice. For example, to improve at distance running, we must develop perseverance and patience. To improve at gardening, we must become more resilient and conscientious. To improve at chess, we must become diligent and careful. Social practices, such as sports and arts, are not morally neutral; virtues and vices are implicated in our performances. Thus, the desire to improve our performance in a given practice may prompt our moral development.

Another answer to the problem of beginnings (which I assess, in greater detail, in the following section) is exposure to exemplars, or excellent people. Sometimes when someone is (figuratively) morally taller than us, we become aware of the ways in which we fall short.

Excellent people can motivate us to begin a project in self-improvement, to close the character gap between ourselves and an excellent other (Miller 2017).

In the Christian life, there can be many sources of *secondary* promptings to improve—such as when we read Scripture and realize we fall short or are motivated by a good sermon to live out our faith. But the *primary* prompting—and best answer to the “problem of beginnings” for the Christian—is God’s first action on our behalf. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). A powerful image that captures this first action is provided by Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996). He describes how we live in a cycle of violence—of perpetrators harming victims, then victims becoming perpetrators. To stop the cycle, Jesus embraced the perpetrator. He acted *first* in a radical act of forgiveness so that we do not have to continue in the cycle of violence. Additionally, while Christ acts first to embrace us, initiating a relationship, the Holy Spirit also supports our growth. So, this is another motivating force in spiritual development. The promptings of the Holy Spirit move us to pursue a life in Christ.

2. Methods in Virtue and Spiritual Formation

Virtues can be *caught*, *sought*, or *taught* (Kristjansson, Harrison, & Peterson 2024).² When virtues are “caught,” they are not directly developed. Rather, virtues arise through observation, role modeling, and daily experience. One way that virtues can be caught is through the influence of exemplars, which I describe in greater detail below. Another way this can occur is through culture. For example, in an honor code university, a student may habituate practices of honesty because institutional norms direct her to do so, whether or not she is aware of doing so. In a church setting, someone may participate in service activities or charitable giving because she is presented with opportunities to do so.³

From an Aristotelian vantage, “catching” virtues will not be sufficient for possessing them. For example, we must act for *good reasons* and with a high level of *stability* and *cross-situational consistency* (that is, acting well in most domains relevant to a virtue—for example, being honest not just while paying taxes but also while talking to friends, taking quizzes, and so forth). Additionally, virtues require *prohairesis* (deliberate, free choice). They must reflect our agency and decision-making, something that is not a given when we catch or absorb virtue-tracking actions from our circumstances. For actions to be freely chosen, we must recognize the

² This is the character education framework employed by the Jubilee Centre at the University of Birmingham.

³ The church has played greater and lesser roles as a culture-making institution, not just within the church, but in society more broadly. Whether a church plays a robust role as a culture-maker depends on the historical moment. For example, the church was a cultural and intellectual center in major cities in much of the medieval period. The church’s cultural position also depends on the denomination in question. There is a range of postures a church can have toward the wider society. Anabaptist churches retreat from the culture to varying degrees. In stark contrast, Gustavo Gutiérrez advocates for the institution folding into society as a liberating community. These are two opposed positions on the spectrum of engagement, and there are many approaches in between. The point is, to the question of whether virtues can be “caught” by way of ecclesial culture, the answer is “it depends.”

good action as such. This recognition can take the form of a *de re* acknowledgement of the good action as better than alternative, morally worse options, rather than something more robust (such as an ability to articulate what makes an honest action good).⁴

Virtues can also be “sought.” This means we can intentionally acquire them on our own initiative. An example is Ben Franklin’s quest for moral perfection. Franklin did not seek to acquire “virtues” as Aristotle would have recognized them. His definitions of virtue were pragmatic, rather than aiming at excellence simpliciter. For example, he defined chastity as follows: “Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another’s peace or reputation.” His virtues were directed toward political success and reputation protection. Moreover, the virtue pedagogical sequence was backwards. (Humility, defined as the imitation of both Jesus and Socrates, is listed last. Imitation should come first, both because we are more imitative when we are young and because it is more difficult to imitate others once we already have habits in place.) Regardless, Franklin sought virtue. He did so systematically, with spreadsheets and a plan.

What is interesting about the “sought” approach from the Christian vantage is that some degree of seeking is imperative for all believers. By this I mean that, pursuing a relationship with God cannot occur incidentally to other activities (such as when we bond with a classmate over studying for a test). The Christian life involves the recognition of the goodness of Christ as someone worthy of our attention, pursuit, and praise. On many accounts of justification, we must assent to the truth of the Gospel, which involves conscious and independent recognition that we have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and that our only hope is in Jesus. The church can play a significant role in supporting the life of a believer, but the believer also has individual accountability before God (2 Corinthians 5:10). While Christ seeks us first (Luke 19:10, John 15:16, Luke 15:4), even while we are still sinners (Romans 5:8), we must also seek God.

Additionally, while folks like Ben Franklin seek virtue directly, as a sort of radically independent, boot-strapping attempt to attain “moral perfection,” the Christian seeks *Christ*—a person. Virtues can *facilitate* progress toward that goal, as in the case of virtues such as hope, love, and faith. Virtues can also arise *incidentally* in pursuit of that goal, such as in the case of joy. (Aquinas describes joy as a “consequence of love.” It arises in us when we are rooted in the love of God.) But virtues are not the goal itself. In this way, Thomistic virtue differs from humanistic projects in maximizing nature or “attaining perfection,” in Franklin’s phrasing. From the Thomistic vantage, union with God is the goal.

⁴ Julia Annas puts forward an Aristotelian account that requires the articulation of virtue, or the ability to “give an account,” if asked, of what makes a virtue good. She does so on the grounds that virtue is a kind of expertise and must be distinguished from an *empeiria*, or an inarticulate knack. Most accounts in the Aristotelian vein do not maintain such a high intellectual requirement of virtue.

Finally, virtues can be “taught,” or directly instilled in a learner through instructions and mandates. Examples include directing children to share toys and discussing with them the value of generosity. Another example is praising good actions and chastising bad ones. Virtue instruction primarily occurs in childhood. Aristotle writes, “It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference” (*NE* 1103b23-26). Teaching children virtue by helping them form good habits early in their lives is imperative for Aristotle.

There are many reasons to challenge Aristotle’s claim that virtue development *must* occur in early childhood—that it makes “all the difference”—both from a secular and Christian vantage. As a Christian, this would foreclose the possibility of changed lives, or the intervention of Christ in one’s life yielding moral fruit. Christianity aside, there are many counterexamples of this claim—of people exhibiting sincere character change later in life. For example, entering the military, facing one’s mortality, the loss of an important relationship, or becoming a parent can all provoke character change. Even so, there is truth to the idea that moral change can be more difficult later in life. When we are young, we are like canoes—easy to turn. When we are older, we are like barges. We resist changing direction. This is because we already have well-trodden habits in place. Children are more malleable and teachable. This idea is reflected in Proverb 22:6. “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” As a rule, early habituation impacts the way we are inclined to live later in life, so disciplining children is important. Churches should prioritize early spiritual formation. This is helpful guidance in general, even if it admits many exceptions concerning outcomes.

To summarize, virtues can be caught (implicitly acquired), sought (intentionally pursued), or taught (attained through instruction). Within these three avenues, there are several methods commonly employed to morally improve, many which have special significance in the life of the believer. For the remainder of this paper, I name, classify, and evaluate these methods.

Exemplarism

Exemplars are role models, or those who exhibit excellence. They have two roles in the moral life—*epistemic* (or knowledge-assisting) and *motivational*. By “epistemic” is meant that they both demonstrate what a virtue is and why virtues are choice-worthy. For example, a firefighter might demonstrate courage, and a teacher may exhibit intellectual humility. I can learn about these virtue terms apart from the modeling of exemplars. Perhaps I read that courage is rising to worthy risks and intellectual humility involves knowing my limitations. However, until I see these virtues demonstrated, I may not know how, in practical terms, to perform them. Also, in observing the performance of these virtues, I see them as beautiful or worth pursuing. They are made compelling to me.

By “motivational” is meant that I am inclined to do likewise. Linda Zagzebski (2015) calls the exemplar “imitably attractive” and describes admiration’s action-potential in terms of the motivation to imitate. Archer (2019) describes “value-promotion” as the action-potential of admiration, with imitation as a secondary inclination. In both cases, I do not simply “appreciably perceive” (Roberts and Spezio 2019) the excellent other, which Kierkegaard calls *mere* admiration. I am motivated to put on virtue myself.

Since we are imitative creatures and social learners, exemplarism is one of the most effective ways to grow in virtue. It can also go horribly wrong if we admire the wrong people (e.g., a charismatic, manipulative person) or admire in the wrong ways (e.g., uncritical alignment with someone with a questionable character). This can happen in the life of the church. For example, perhaps an elder in my church has the vice of scrupulosity and is Pharisaical about moral performance. Following his lead, I start to morally police my friends, thinking that this is what Christianity is all about. Teachers in the church have a platform and can lead Christians astray, either through direct instruction or through modeling bad actions. It is for this reason that Luke 17:2 cautions, “It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to sin.” Leaders can have an outsized negative impact on young believers. So, bad exemplars are part of the life of the church. Gratefully, the central exemplar of Christianity—Jesus—will not mis-model, misdirect, or distort the message of Christianity.

Christian means Christ-like. This is what is referred to as an “agent-based approach” to morality. As followers of Christ, we are imitators of Jesus. The Christian life can be distilled down to just that, imitating Christ in how He loved God and others. As long as we are doing that, we are growing in relationship with God.

Overcorrection

Overcorrection is a category term for moral strategies that aim to correct for our natural dispositions by performing opposite actions (Little 2026). This approach to moral improvement is rooted in an image that appears across the history of philosophy, employed by thinkers such as Xunxi, Kant, Plato, and Aristotle of warped wood. For example, Aristotle advises students to notice the errors to which they are most prone, since “different men are inclined by nature to different faults” (*NE* 1109a4). He writes that we must “drag ourselves away in the opposite direction, for by steering wide of our besetting error we shall make a middle course. This is the method adopted by carpenters to straighten warped timber” (*NE* 1109a5). We should act in terms of the opposing vice to develop virtue (Curzer 1996: 142). For example, the buffoon should act like a bore to correct toward wittiness. The glutton should act in restraint to correct toward temperance. The extravagant should act stingy to correct toward generosity.

The context in Aristotle is the virtue mean—virtues as positioned between two opposing vices (one of deficiency and one of excess). To develop a virtue through overcorrection in this context involves acting in terms of an opposing vice (or a *perceived* opposing vice)⁵ to develop a virtue. However, absent the context of virtues describable in terms of a mean, the overcorrection strategy can still be helpful. It is employed quite often in the Christian tradition. We know it as asceticism.

Asceticism involves the renunciation of bodily pleasures and austere practices of self-discipline, for shorter or more extended seasons. Examples include fasting, frugality or limiting commercial activities, silence, chastity, sacrificing goods, undertaking a Lenten practice of digital temperance, and so forth. Another, more idiosyncratic example, is the stylite—the sect of Christian ascetics in the medieval period who lived on pillars for the mortification of their bodies.

The motivation for undertaking these kinds of practices is to *overcorrect* for the common human experience of consistently attending to our desires. If we can better master ourselves—with the help of God—controlling our appetites, we can get in our own way less. We are better positioned to pursue God as our highest desire. There are important questions to ask about the long-term sustainability of an overcorrective practice in the Christian life. For example, there are bodily limits to fasting, especially for those of weaker physical constitutions. Also, the practicalities of family life and other allegiances may restrict participation in ascetic communities and practices.

Additionally, it may be worth mentioning that we sometimes fruitfully undertake practices that correct us in the opposite direction—toward our appetites, such as through feast days and celebrations. Jesus’ first recorded miracle involved providing extra wine at a wedding, so perhaps this is unsurprising. The goal of faith is not to extinguish desires but to orient our desires according to the realities of Christ. The point is that not all overcorrections are ascetic in nature. Nevertheless, assessing areas of dependency on various desires, then responding through opposite actions can be valuable in advancing spiritual maturity.

Practicing Virtue

Aristotle wrote that “men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts” (*NE* 1103b). We develop virtues, in part, by practicing them. Seen one way, this

⁵ Sometimes we think we are overcorrecting—or acting in ways that exceed the mean—but we are wrong about where the mean is located. An example is that a bore, attempting to acquire the virtue of wittiness through buffoonery, might put himself out there, making many jokes. He thinks he is acting like a buffoon, when in reality, he is participating in a modest way in humor which seems excessive to him.

simplifies things. For virtues, we have to *do* them to *be* them. This takes the guesswork out of the process of character development. So, for example, to develop perseverance we can create regular opportunities to persist long toward good ends. To develop courage, we should rise to worthy risks repeatedly until doing so defines us in a stable way. But seen another way, this is challenging news. It means we have to commit to acting virtuously before we are actually virtuous. This is the problem of beginnings I referred to earlier: Why would the unvirtuous person decide to undertake a virtue practice? In section one, I supplied many answers to that question.

In the Christian life, we said the answer to the problem of beginnings is supplied for us: Christ sought us while we were still sinners. Our good work is both a *response* to saving grace and is *facilitated* by the work of the Holy Spirit. We practice virtues with the aid of the Holy Spirit. This can look like acting in faith, even if our faith is modest, in order to strengthen that disposition. It can also look like choosing to love our neighbors, even ones with whom we formerly had acrimonious relationships. Doing so can transform our thoughts and emotions. Even if we start through gritted teeth, we can come to love our neighbors over time. We can also incorporate virtue practices into our work and hobbies. For example, Rebecca DeYoung describes how monks practiced *stabilitas loci*—stability of place—in the scriptorium and the fields, practicing love of God in their work by avoiding the twin vices of *acedia* (sloth and desperate escapism).

There are two kinds of virtue practices. (1) There are those which target specific virtues (such as when we act in *faith*, as a means of growing in faith, or *persevere* to become better at persisting longer in some good (Little 2024, 2025)). (2) The second kind of practice in spiritual development are those activities that form us in a general way toward our *telos*—growing in relationship with God—which may impact many aspects of character at once. A wide array of practices may be helpful here. Prayer, singing worship songs, and Bible-reading are all practices which are fruitful for growing our relationships with God. Several virtues, such as humility, patience, and carefulness can be grown through these practices. Celebration, a practice described by Willard (1990), can prompt spiritual growth in the virtues of joy and hospitality. It also permits us to learn something about the character of God—that God is good and delights over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).

Another practice that targets spiritual development in a range of ways is parenting. I am currently in the midst of raising young kids, and nothing has fortified my own faith quite like discipling my own children. Virtues such as humility, patience, courage, and longsuffering are germane. I have to assert beliefs, working through puzzles of the incarnation in order to communicate them clearly to my children when they ask big questions. I have to develop agency for aspects of faith that I have imbibed without formally questioning them, to decide if I will raise my kids to think and practice the same things. I have to invite my children into daily

practices of prayer and thanksgiving. I also have to consistently model the character of Christ so they can see it. In developing my children's young faith (hopefully in good ways), I am developing my own. Parenting seems to be a fruitful spiritual practice. There are likely many avenues of life in which, as we walk with Christ, we become better at doing so.

I have two caveats about virtue practice. The first is that motivation matters. For example, if I mature in certain ways to receive praise and attention from others, rather than to honor God, this unfitting motivation undermines the virtue. Second, not all virtue "practice" will improve our character. Aristotle observes that "the actions from or through which any virtue is produced are the same as those through which it also is destroyed—just as is the case with skill in the arts, for both the good harpers and the bad ones are produced by harping, and similarly with builders and all the other craftsmen: as you will become a good builder from building well, so you will become a bad one from building badly" (*NE* 1103b). It is difficult to speak in a general way about what might constitute *bad* practice. An example is that developing patience should not look like passivity. These are not the same thing. Another example is that, if we practice humility by deflecting compliments and feigning meekness, we are not actually performing what amounts to a virtue. So, we might closely examine the practices we undertake to make sure we are reinforcing dispositions that align with virtue.

Entering (or Existing) a Community

Hebrews 12 begins as follows: "Therefore, *since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses*, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." We can persevere in faith "since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." In the chapter preceding, we encounter a list of heroes of faith—people who came before us who can encourage us to keep running the race. Why are we told about community alongside a call to persevere in faith?

If you have ever tried persevering—remaining in place toward arduous goods—you know that having other people beside you makes things a lot easier. Additionally, if you know that someone else has already accomplished something, it makes that accomplishment seem more attainable. A rough comparison is the time when the first 4-minute mile was broken. In 1954, Roger Bannister ran 3:59.4 during his lunch break in medical school at Oxford, in leather shoes no less. Prior to that time, people assumed that if you broke a 4-minute mile, you would break yourself in the process because your heart would explode. His heart did not explode.

But thereafter—once it was done—the feat seemed infinitely attainable. A mere 46 days after Bannister's run, someone else broke his record. Now the world record for the mile is 3:43, and even the women have nearly broached the 4-minute barrier, with Faith Kipyegon running a 4:06 mile in 2025. As of 2022, 1,755 runners have broken the 4-minute mile, and even a few

talented high schoolers do so every year. The point is that knowing someone has persevered in a given respect has an emboldening character to it. It makes you think that you can do it, too. Moreover, knowing that there are people currently persevering alongside of you makes a world of difference as well. You can draw on each other's strength in weaker moments, sustaining hope as a collective exercise, and spur each other on to the finish.

The church matters a great deal for spiritual formation. Being part of a community following Christ together means we are emboldened by the people who are doing the same. We can learn from others and count on them to help sustain our hope in Christ when we are struggling. We can lean on others for accountability and pray together. We can collectively identify our weaknesses and figure out how to serve God in our communities together. We can also “outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10), which seems to involve a kind of emulation, or productive competition for the good. The Bible is full of examples of edifying friendships, such as David and Jonathan, Paul and Timothy, Paul and Barnabas, and Ruth and Naomi. It can be easier to live well alongside others who are doing the same.

Additionally, Aristotle writes that we are social creatures, and many virtues cannot be performed alone. That is, radical independence is not a feasible route for living a good life because it makes certain virtues impossible to attain. For example, we cannot be *just* without people to be just toward. We also cannot be *hospitable* or *forgiving* apart from others. If we wish to grow in these virtues, there is no opting out of community. We need to figure out how to live well with others.

There are other reasons why membership in the church matters for spiritual maturity. One is that it has an authority structure which offers accountability for bad actions. In becoming a member of the church, we submit ourselves to ecclesial governance. In some denominations, we can be sanctioned, such as through temporarily removal from worship, for bad actions. In Catholicism, we can be excommunicated from the church altogether. The church also has corrective practices to restore repentant believers to the community after misdeeds. Churches also offer liturgies around confession and repentance, as well as quiet moments to reflect on sins. Often priests dress in black and white to signal both our sin and God's making us new as weekly reminders of our status change before God. These practices present us with structures that add coherence and direction to experiences of moral emotions such as guilt and shame. We feel the weight of our sin (shame) in the context of the good news of Jesus (hope) so that we neither sink into grief about our failures nor forget the gravity of our sin.

Additionally, participating in the church avails us of liturgical seasons, which remind us of the significance of God entering history as a baby, who grew into a man, who bore our sins and rose again. We are refreshed of the story that changes everything. Being part of a church—a community of people who have this story in common—is incredibly valuable in sustaining faith.

I also noted the possibility of *exiting* a community as a strategy for spiritual formation. This is perhaps a less obvious developmental method following what I have just described as the manifold benefits of being part of a church. However, isolation has been constructively employed for spiritual formation. Two examples are solitude and silence, which are both advocated by Dallas Willard (1990) as instances of ascetic practice. We spend time alone with God in brief or prolonged periods to hear God's voice and not be distracted by the noises of daily life or the opinions of others. Jesus undertook a night of solitude in the garden, just prior to the crucifixion to pray and call out to God.

A more extreme version of this practice, undertaken in the medieval period by anchorites, was living alone. Anchorites sought holiness through removal from society. They attempted to eliminate social distraction and focus all of their social energy on the person of Christ. Whether this is a tenable strategy for most people is questionable. Many people are unable to remove themselves responsibly from their communities for sustained periods.⁶ Other people find it destructive and isolating. Removal from the church also makes the believer vulnerable to doubts and loneliness. It amounts to running the "race of faith" alone, which is a challenging way to run.

Conclusion

This paper introduces readers to the process of spiritual development and puzzles that arise from it, and it evaluates how spiritual development differs from Western secular approaches to virtue formation. There are many more things to say with greater clarity than I could manage in a paper of this length. Regardless, I hope this prompts meaningful dialogue.

⁶ I am a mother of small children. I could not do this.