

LIVING FOR
GOD

RECLAIMING THE JOY OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	13
Chapter 1 Virtuous Hearts and Minds	16
Chapter 2 A Virtuous Legacy	26
Chapter 3 A Transforming Virtue: Waiting	36
Chapter 4 The Enemy of Virtue: Envy	45
Chapter 5 The Underrated Virtue: Humility	53
Chapter 6 The Virtue of Gratitude	61
Chapter 7 The Virtue of Prayer	67
Chapter 8 Praying for the Unvirtuous	75
Chapter 9 Virtuous Living Through Suffering and Loss	80
Chapter 10 The Virtue of Digital Detox	88
Chapter 11 The Virtuous Rest	97
Chapter 12 The Virtuous Identity	109
Chapter 13 The Virtue of Jesus	119

Virtuous Hearts and Minds

Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

“I love you with all of my mind!”

Have you ever heard this expression in a romantic film, or included in someone’s wedding vows? Probably not. This expression of love sounds foreign at first, not nearly as genuine or affectionate as the traditional, “I love you with all my heart.” But there’s something uniquely special about being loved by someone’s mind. It’s a beautiful thing when a person stretches their mental capacities in order to understand and love more intelligently.

The more we know God, the more we will love Him and others. We can express our love through *words* as we “[speak] the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). We can express our love in *actions* by being “rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share” (1 Timothy 6:18). We can also express our love in a way that’s often overlooked: by loving with our *minds*.

We typically think of love primarily as an emotion. God *does* want His love to touch our hearts and influence our feelings. But He *also* wants it to touch our minds and influence our thoughts.

The New Testament records an important conversation between Jesus and a lawyer. This conversation deals with matters of eternal consequence. He asked Jesus what it takes to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked the man to recall what Scripture says. He responded, “You

shall *love the Lord your God* with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with *all your mind,* and ‘your neighbor as yourself’ ” (Luke 10:27; emphasis added). Jesus approved of this answer.

This is a remarkable statement. You shall *love* God, not just with your heart, but *with all your mind!* The Greek word used for “mind” here is *διάνοια* (*dianoia*), which describes the “activity of thinking,” “comprehending,” “reasoning,” and “reflecting” in the sense of understanding something.¹ As the crowning work of God’s creation, we have been given the gift of intelligent thought—the capacity to reflect on life, God, nature, science, other people, and ourselves.

Psychologists estimate that human minds think between sixty thousand and eighty thousand thoughts per day. That’s about three thousand thoughts per hour! Our thoughts are precious resources that can be used to improve our lives and the lives of those around us. Right thinking can also bring joy to the Creator of our minds: “Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom” (Psalm 51:6).

Virtuous thinking honors God and helps us develop into all we can be.² Let’s look at some of the key characteristics of virtuous thinking: intellectual carefulness, intellectual fair-mindedness, intellectual honesty, and intellectual humility.

Intellectual carefulness

Whenever we are trying to understand something, whether its another person’s behavior, a complex situation, or knowledge about any topic of interest, we need to cultivate intellectual carefulness.

People who are intellectually careful want to sincerely know the truth. They refuse to rush to hasty conclusions based on limited knowledge.³ Instead, they are thorough and diligent in their thinking and decision-making, cautious not to overlook important details.

We all know of cases in which careless thinking in work, studies,

relationships, science, and theology has led to disastrous results. Sometimes these negative results are seen quickly. Other times, they become evident later. But careless thinking is always dangerous.

A tragic example of intellectual carelessness can be seen in the fateful crashes of two Boeing 737 MAX airplanes—one crash off the Indonesian coast in 2018, and the other in Ethiopia just five months later. These crashes killed 346 people. A faulty software system was implicated. This software had a critical flaw, which caused the planes to unexpectedly and repeatedly nosedive. The Federal Aviation Administration’s regulatory process gave Boeing significant oversight authority, and this contributed to the compromised safety of the Boeing 737 MAX airplanes.⁴ Careless thinking led to the tragic deaths of hundreds of precious people. It also led to significant embarrassment and financial loss for Boeing and the Federal Aviation Administration.

The example of Jesus compels us to think and work carefully. His carefulness, displayed in creation and seen throughout His life on earth, should inspire our carefulness in thinking. God is never in a hurry, but He is always on time. We do not honor Him when we are not careful and thorough in what we think, believe, say, plan, and do. Intellectual carefulness will lead to success in every area of life. Put positively, you can love God with all your heart *and mind* by being intellectually careful!

Intellectual fair-mindedness

We live in a world of bias. Turn on the news, and you’re likely to hear current events explained in a partisan and polemic way. This spirit of bias can seep into our thinking in ways we don’t even realize. Many people have strong opinions on politics, ethics, theology, lifestyle, and, well . . . essentially everything. But few people are willing to carefully and impartially consider thoughts and ideas that might challenge their own biases.

Fair-minded people earnestly want to know the truth and therefore are willing to listen to different opinions in an objective and unbiased way.⁵ It's impossible to be fair-minded if we think we already know everything and already possess all truth. On the other hand, if we start to believe that truth is relative and that every viewpoint is equally important, the virtue of fair-mindedness will morph into meaninglessness, and the end of education will not be far.⁶ We want to be open-minded but "not so open-minded that our brains fall out!"⁷

Fair-mindedness does not mean that we have no convictions or that we won't stand for our convictions. The secret of fair-minded people is that they have chosen to put the truth over any allegiance to their egos or cherished opinions. Therefore, fair-minded people are consistently willing to listen in an even-handed way to different opinions, even if they already have a strong view on the subject. Fair-minded people also try to view issues from the perspectives of those they disagree with because they are aware that they do not always have the most complete or accurate perspective on a given topic. An intellectually fair-minded person cares more about knowing what's actually true than about convincing themselves or others that they are right. Intellectual bias is the corresponding vice.⁸

Let's explore just a few of the many advantages of fair-minded thinking. First, the fair-minded person is able to escape from a prison of false assumptions. The following historical anecdote illustrates the point.

In seventeenth-century Europe, the astronomer Johannes Kepler committed himself to a greater understanding of the stars and planets. Because of Aristotle, the Western world had firmly assumed that the universe revolved around the earth. Being so convinced, the Catholic Church had interpreted key passages of Scripture in line with Aristotelian logic, which had proven reliable in many other areas. Not only had significant church doctrine been built around this theory, but scientific inquiry had also been rooted in the same set of assumptions.

This perspective was so pervasive that people failed to challenge their assumptions. Those who noticed inconsistencies between the popular view and the way the universe actually behaved, simply created increasingly extravagant explanations as to why these inconsistencies were actually in harmony with the commonly held view.

What distinguished Kepler from his predecessors (beyond accumulating evidence that undermined the accepted view) was his willingness to look at the evidence in a genuinely fair-minded way. It is unlikely that Kepler was any more intelligent than his educated predecessors and peers. He was, however, willing to objectively and impartially consider other possible explanations for the evidence. Kepler's contribution eventually transformed our understanding of the universe and led to a host of other innovations that form the foundation of science today.⁹

But fair-mindedness isn't just for nerds or academics. This way of thinking also has practical relational benefits. Genuinely fair-minded people tend to make and keep friends more easily than those whose thinking habits are closed-minded or biased. Why? The reason is simple. There is an inherent link between fair-mindedness and attentive listening. Because they are committed to discovering truth, fair-minded people actually listen! Active listening helps people feel genuinely valued and respected.

Fair-minded people are curious learners, active listeners, and brave explorers of truth. This habit adds invaluable depth, richness, and wisdom to life. Put positively, you can love God with all your heart *and mind* when you are intellectually fair-minded.

Intellectual honesty

You likely have heard the old adage, "Honesty is the best policy." Of all the intellectual virtues, honesty is perhaps the most admired, but the least practiced. Unlike other intellectual character traits, intellectual honesty is not primarily about the process of *getting* knowledge

but rather about how we choose to *use* or *present* the knowledge we already have. The intellectually honest person won't use information out of context, exaggerate facts, distort the truth by describing it with loaded language, or mislead others by using statistics or any other type of supporting evidence that might have a deceptive effect. In addition, intellectually honest people do not take credit for ideas that are not their own.¹⁰

The casualty of honesty is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that in 2017 the *Collins English Dictionary* chose *fake news* as the word of the year. It defines it as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting."¹¹ Today this practice is so common that people have almost grown to expect it.

Using or manipulating knowledge in a dishonest way causes a battle with the conscience. Unless the conscience wins, one of two negative outcomes will occur. The first possible outcome is a life weighed down with a heavy load of guilt. While intellectual honesty may seem to be a difficult road, in the end, it's characterized by much greater freedom.¹² The second outcome is even worse. Intellectual dishonesty can lead to the death of the conscience, endangering moral integrity. When we distort the truth and then create a moral code that justifies our actions, the result is a corrupted intellectual conscience that no longer values the truth. A dishonest person will eventually have difficulty altogether distinguishing truth from falsehood!¹³ The dangerous thing about dishonesty is that, in the end, you firmly believe your own lie.¹⁴

On the other hand, honesty builds internal self-respect and relational trust. This trust is at the core of all healthy relationships and communities. It is essential for God's people to practice honesty in order to reflect His love and win the confidence of those we wish to reach. Put positively, you can love God with all your heart *and mind* when you practice intellectual honesty!

Intellectual humility

The virtue of intellectual humility is perhaps the most misunderstood virtue. So what does it mean to be humble in the way we think?

Intellectually humble people have the amazing realization and humbling insight that they are dependent upon something or someone outside themselves. They are aware that truth is not of their own making but is ultimately God-breathed. Realizing that their reason and rational intelligence is not the measure of everything,¹⁵ they gladly submit their thoughts to God in obedience to Christ and His Word (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Intellectually humble people understand that the larger their egos the less space in their minds for anything or anyone else. Humility of thought has countless benefits. Humble curiosity is the foundation of all growth in knowledge. It naturally produces a teachable spirit, making humble people very pleasant to work with.

Intellectual humility does not lead to a lack of firm conviction. Humble Christians are confident in God's truth and submissive to it. At the same time, they are aware of the limitations of their own knowledge. Therefore, they are capable of expanding their understanding of the world in a way that arrogant and proud people are utterly incapable of.¹⁶ Proud people don't feel the need to learn from anyone but think they know all there is to know. If we want to continue to learn and grow, our knowledge must be tempered by humility.¹⁷

President Abraham Lincoln modeled intellectual humility in a remarkable way.¹⁸ At the height of the American Civil War, Lincoln was doing everything in his power to preserve the unity of his crumbling country. As the nation's elected president and one of the most intelligent men of his generation, Lincoln had every right to expect deferential respect from his subordinates. And yet, as the war waged, he found himself criticized and ridiculed by friends and foes alike. One whom Lincoln initially considered a friend was his secretary of war, Edwin Stanton. Both publicly and privately, Stanton made no

secret of his disdain for Lincoln. Even though Lincoln was aware of Stanton's insubordination, he kept him as secretary of war, believing that Stanton's sharp mind and independent perspective would be a valuable balance to his own.

At one of the war's most critical points, Lincoln sent a direct order to Stanton. Not only did Stanton refuse to carry it out, but he also called Lincoln a fool. Instead of reacting in anger or spite, Lincoln responded, " 'If Stanton said I was a . . . fool, then I must be one. For he is nearly always right, and generally says what he means. I will step over and see him.' "19

Lincoln was no weakling. He had demonstrated many times that he was willing to stand his ground if necessary. Still, as the story goes, the two men had a meeting in which Lincoln listened carefully to his subordinate, concluded that Stanton was right after all, and withdrew his order. Lincoln ignored the demands of pride in order to pursue the wisest course. Ultimately, this intellectual humility helped save his crumbling nation and ensured his reputation as one of the greatest statesmen in the history of the United States of America.

Put positively, you can love God with all your heart *and mind* when you are intellectually humble.

As followers of Christ, we can love God with all our hearts *and minds* by being intellectually careful, fair-minded, honest, and humble. In addition to the benefits already described, these intellectual virtues also enhance our ability to worship God. Entering into meaningful worship is closely tied to the character of our minds.

As we apply our minds to understand God through His written Word and created works, our ability to worship Him increases. While worship includes far more than an intellectual understanding of God, this understanding is still important. Our worship and relationship with God depend on the full engagement of our minds. You cannot truly worship God without thinking.

How we think also influences how we behave. When we practice

the habits of virtuous thinking, our actions will reflect God's goodness. When we are careful in what we say about others, treat their opinions in a fair-minded way, are honest in our dealings, and cultivate curiosity and humility, we allow God to reveal His gracious love through us!²⁰ This is how God deals with each one of us.

Imagine if our homes, places of work, churches, schools, and communities were filled with people of such character and attitude. What a fellowship that would be! Imagine how the relationships and the atmosphere within the home, the church, and the world at large would change for the better if we all practiced virtuous thinking. God would be delighted, people would be attracted, and each one of us would be greatly blessed! May you experience the joy of loving God and others with all your heart *and mind* by choosing the freedom of virtuous thinking.

God be in my head, and in my thinking.
God be in my eyes, and in my looking.
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking.
Oh, God be in my heart, and in my understanding.²¹

Reflection questions

1. How does your love for God influence your ability to think and reflect?
2. Reflect on a time when you had the opportunity to exercise each of the four virtues mentioned. What happened?
3. How can you listen more attentively to the people around you?
4. Experiment with attentive listening and make a list of the benefits.
5. The biggest fake news of all time is that God is *not* love. How does rejecting that fake news help us to live the virtuous life?
6. In what way does living the virtuous life help us to love God and worship Him better?

1. See “*διάνοια, ας, ἦ*” in William Arndt Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 234.

2. Philip E. Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).

3. Cf. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 147.

4. Michael Barbaro, “The Origins of Boeing’s 737 Max Crisis,” July 30, 2019, in *The Daily*, produced by Michael Simon Johnson, Jessica Cheung, Clare Toeniskoetter, podcast, MP3 audio, 26 :16, accessed, August 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/podcasts/the-daily/boeing-737-max.html?searchResultPosition=2>. See also Anurag Kotoky and Kyunghye Park, “When Will Boeing 737 Max Fly Again and More Questions,” *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2019, accessed August 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/when-will-boeing-737-max-fly-again-and-more-questions/2019/08/15/5ae3096c-ee1d-11e9-bb7e-d2026ee0c199_story.html.

5. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 149.

6. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 48. For a powerful argument in favor of truth, see Princeton professor Harry G. Frankfurt’s short book *On Truth* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 2006).

7. Walter Kotschnig, speech given at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, January 27, 1940, “Professor Tells Students to Open Minds to Truth,” *Blytheville Courier News*, Quote Page 2, Column 2 and 3, Blytheville, AR (NewspaperArchive), cited in Quote Investigator, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/tag/walter-kotschnig/>.

8. Cf. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 49, 149.

9. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 51–53.

10. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 61–69, 151. I honestly admit my great indebtedness to the ideas in Dow’s remarkable book.

11. *Collins* online dictionary, s.v. “fake news,” accessed August 23, 2019, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/word-lovers-blog/new/collins-2017-word-of-the-year-shortlist-396, HCB.html>.

12. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 66.

13. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 66.

14. Robert Spaemann, *Gut und Böse—relativ? Über die Allgemeingültigkeit sittlicher Normen* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1996), 13, 14, points out that human language is the medium to express our thoughts and that lying makes the real thoughts of a person invisible and thus leads to a disappearing of the person because the medium of language that makes the person visible is destroyed.

15. Cf. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 72, 152, 153.

16. Cf. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 72.

17. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 462.

18. See Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 72, 73.

19. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years* (New York: Mariner, 2002), 354, as quoted in Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 196.

20. Cf. Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 97, 98.

21. *Sarum Primer* (1558), as quoted in “God Be In My Head,” *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1991), no. 679. The text has been beautifully put to music by John Rutter and the Cambridge Singers on YouTube, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGMcFt61yjo>.