



Introduction

Fully Human: A Biblical Pursuit of Virtue

We live in a world and a time when it can feel like arrogance, hubris, pride, anger, and aggression seem to have become societal values, and our world appears to admire and reward those who practice them. Discussion of virtues and lifting up those who pursue them seem to have little place in our world today.

Yet, our Lord created us in His image and redeemed us by His blood so that, as we live out the salvation Christ has accomplished for us, we might live a life which pursues what it looks like to be Christlike for the sake of our neighbor. Jesus was humble, hospitable, generous...He lived a perfect life of virtue which revealed what it is to truly be human by God's design. Dr. Joel Biermann, Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, more fully examines this idea in his book, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*. I am grateful for his work, which, in part, informed this study, and I highly commend his book as a helpful resource on this topic.

In "Fully Human: A Biblical Pursuit of Virtue," we begin to take a look at four key virtues from the perspective of Scripture. We'll look at how these virtues were seen in the lives of those who knew God's grace in the times of Scripture as well as how they are seen in the life of Christ Himself. We'll also examine how these virtues are reflected in our own walk with our Savior. May the Lord bless you in your pursuit of a life of virtue to Christ's glory.

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Fully Human
A Biblical Pursuit of Virtue
Session I: Fully Human or Not Fully Human

Opening Prayer
Psalm 51:1-15

Fully Human from Humanity's Perspective

What does it mean to be fully human? If you asked people on the street, you'd find a variety of answers, from responses which would reflect thoughts on our core identity to expressions of freedom, and from the idea of being a unique individual to what we all have in common in the human experience of life. The responses to what it means to be fully human will cover a wide range of topics.

The opposite also sheds light on this question. Ask people what we mean when we say someone is inhuman or inhumane and we get a strong picture of what it is to be not fully human. Those responses will likely touch on things such as a person being cruel, without compassion, self-centered, without remorse, hateful, dismissive of others, and the like.

What does it mean to you to be fully human?

What are factors, characteristics, and behaviors in our lives which can make us less than fully human?

Can one be fully human in isolation?

Fully Human from God's Perspective

Read Genesis 1:26-31

Discuss what it means to be created in God's image.

- Why do you think God creates creatures who reflect His image?



- From the roles God gives humanity to fulfill in this text, how were humans to reflect His image?
- How does this give us insight into what it means to be fully human from God's perspective?

No Longer Fully Human

Read Genesis 3:1-19

- How does humanity lose its full humanity in this text?
- How is this reflected in the behaviors of Adam and Eve?
- What are some of the results of Adam and Eve losing the fullest expression of their humanity?
- How does our Lord plan to address humanity's fall into sin? (Genesis 3:15)

Discuss ways that Jesus reveals again what it means to be fully human through His incarnate ministry. Ultimately, how does Jesus restore humanity? (John 1:11-14; Matthew 27:45-50; I Corinthians 15:17-22)

Saved! Now What?

A couple brings their child to the waters of Holy Baptism. There, through the Sacrament, God's Triune Name is placed upon that child. There, by the work of the Spirit, that child, as a sinner, is buried with Jesus into His crucifixion and is raised up with Jesus in His resurrection. There, this child receives forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal salvation through the gift of faith worked in that child by the Spirit through Baptism! It's an amazing gift given. But now, for the rest of that child's life on earth, is he or she merely waiting out the clock for their eternal life to begin?

Read II Peter 3:18

- Why do we not "grow in grace" when it comes to our salvation? (compare to Ephesians 2:8-9)



- How do we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in this world?
 - through the study of His Word
 - through the regular exercise of “Holy Habits” (worship, devotion, and prayer)
 - through the pursuit of virtues

What is a virtue?

This study will introduce us to a biblical perspective of four virtues to aide us on our path to grow in being Christlike before our neighbor. Our inability to be 100% virtuous in our thoughts, words, and actions will always provide us with evidence of our need to stand before God, never based on our virtues, but always in the grace that is ours on account of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

Why pursue virtue? If I’m saved solely on account of Jesus, why pursue virtue?

- It supplies us with evidence that our faith in Jesus is alive.
- Our pursuit of being Christlike, “Fully Human,” blesses our neighbor and, ultimately, affords opportunities to witness the Gospel to others.

Closing Prayer



Fully Human A Biblical Pursuit of Virtue Session II: Courage

Opening Prayer Psalm 27

To be Courageous

A firefighter puts on bunker gear and enters a smoke-filled building, looking for those who need rescue. A community leader takes an unpopular stand on an issue, knowing it will bring him an avalanche of criticism, because he believes it's the right thing to do. A patient takes her first difficult steps in therapy, even after the doctors said there was little hope of ever walking again. The virtue of courage can take many expressions.

How would you define the virtue of courage?

Share a story of someone you believe exhibits this virtue and why you believe them to be courageous.

Luther On Courage

Whether it was his posting of the 95 Theses, or his “Here I stand, I can do no other” statement at the Diet of Worms, or his return to Wittenberg while being condemned as an outlaw and heretic, Martin Luther did not lack in the virtue of courage. Read how Luther writes of this virtue:

“A precious realm is the kingdom of Christ. The man who believes that God is gracious to him and is his Father, that Christ, the Son of God, has abolished death, sin, hell, and the devil – ought he not to rejoice and exult? Indeed, he should break through mountains of iron and all sorts of adversities with a fearless and invincible heart, and be convinced that everything is flowing with honey, milk, and wine. And he should moreover praise God with the highest joy and gratitude, because he is no longer mortal but alive forever...” (What Luther Says, CPH #1034)



- According to Luther here, how does courage help shape a person's view of their world?
- To what does Luther tie courage in this statement? How does Christ's gift of eternal life become a foundation for a courageous life?

The Courage of Three

Read Daniel 3:8-28

- In what difficult situation did "certain Chaldeans" place Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego through the hubris of King Nebuchadnezzar?
- How did King Nebuchadnezzar overstep his authority in this matter? (Romans 13:3-4a; Acts 4:17-20) How did his confrontation of the three men makes things worse?
- How did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego demonstrate the virtue of courage? Why did they rise courageously to this occasion? (Daniel 3:16-18)
- What was the outcome of their courage for them? And for the glory of the Lord? (Daniel 3:24-30)

The Courage of One

Read Galatians 2:11-16

- How might Paul's actions in this text be understood to be courageous?
- What was at stake if Peter's behavior had not been confronted by Paul?
- What was the source of Paul's strength to be courageous in this situation? (Galatians 2:20)



The Courage of Christ

Read Matthew 26:36–45; Hebrews 12:2-3

- As you recall the details of Jesus’ passion, as represented here by His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, what are some ways that Jesus demonstrates courage?
- According to Hebrews 12:2-3, what was Jesus’ focus, which contributed to His courage in the face of such suffering, shame, and death?
- What is the blessing of Jesus’ courageous ways? (John 3:16)

Having Courage Today

- What are some challenges in your life today in which you struggle to be courageous?
- What are some situations in our world in which you may be called on as a follower of Jesus to be courageous?
- How does the gift of salvation and our Lord’s abiding presence for you in His Word and Sacraments strengthen this virtue in you?
- How might others benefit from your courage as a follower of Jesus?
- When this virtue is not as forthcoming in your life, what comfort does our Lord give us in I John 2:1-2?

Closing Prayer



Fully Human A Biblical Pursuit of Virtue Session III: Generosity

Opening Prayer Psalm 136

To Be Generous

It's often noticed in the world when someone rich or a philanthropic foundation makes a large donation to a worthy cause. Those acts are often pointed to as being generous, and understandably so. However, generosity is a virtue wonderfully seen in more modest expressions as well, and it is certainly not limited to monetary giving.

How would you define the virtue of generosity?

Share a story of someone you believe to be generous and why you believe they demonstrate generosity.

Luther on Generosity

Martin Luther was reputed to be wildly generous. His response to the Gospel was, in part, expressed in his joyful willingness to give to the needs of others and to graciously support the work of the Church in proclaiming the Gospel. He was certainly also generous in using his own God-given gifts in proclaiming that same Gospel. Read how Luther writes of this virtue:

“God is pleased when I worship and honor Him with all my heart. Abel’s offering (Genesis 4:4) was pleasing and acceptable because he offered it in the fear of God and in faith and because he strove to show his grateful heart by his gift. For when the heart is offered, this is a gift that is very gratifying indeed to God.” (What Luther Says, CPH #1612)

- How does Luther link the virtue of generosity with our faith in God in this passage?



- How does having a mindset of gratitude affect one's exercise of generosity?

The Wisdom of Generosity

Read Proverbs 11:24-25; Proverbs 22:9

- How does the first passage describe the virtue of generosity? What is the blessing for the one who is generous with what God has entrusted them?
- What does it mean to have a “bountiful eye” (ESV) or to be “a generous man” (in other translations)? According to this second reading from Proverbs, why is the one who has such an eye blessed?
- How do these passages encourage our own practice of generosity?

The Generosity of Others

Read Mark 12:41-44; II Corinthians 8:1-8

- What point of comparison does Jesus make note of in the Mark 12 passage?
- How was the widow's gift a superlative example of generosity, as Jesus points out to His disciples?
- Why do you believe the widow gave “all she had to live on?” How does she inspire our generosity?
- What was the attitude of the churches of Macedonia which moved them to respond with a “wealth of generosity?”
- What insight does II Corinthians 8:5 give us in regard to generosity?
- How does Paul use the generosity of the Macedonians as an encouragement to the Corinthian Christians? To us as well?



The Generosity of the Lord

Read Psalm 145:15-16; Matthew 5:45b, 6:31-33; Deuteronomy 10:18; Genesis 9:3

- How do these verses describe the generosity of the Lord?
- Read and discuss Martin Luther's closing statement on the First Article of the Apostle's Creed in his Small Catechism:
"All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true."
 - What is our Lord's motivation for His generous heart towards us?
 - How does Luther describe our response?

Read II Corinthians 5:21 and II Corinthians 8:9

- How does Paul describe Jesus' generosity towards us in these passages?
- According to these passages, what does His generosity give to us?

Being Generous Today

- In what circumstances do you find it most difficult to practice generosity?
- How can those things about which you are passionate or your compassion for others encourage your practice of this virtue?
- What greater blessings flow from our generosity towards God's work through His Church?
- How does our Lord's assurance of eternal life encourage us to be generous?

Closing Prayer



Fully Human A Biblical Pursuit of Virtue Session IV: Humility

Opening Prayer Psalm 25:1-10

To Be Humble

Humility is a difficult virtue on which to turn a spotlight. As soon as we give favorable attention to this virtue, it seeks to turn that attention elsewhere, to something more worthy of praise, or more important in life, making humility all the more praiseworthy and noble as a pursuit. It is said that humility is the cure for selfishness, as it is a virtue which sees others as more important, setting their needs above the one who is humble. Humility also leads us to that place where we grow aware of our unworthiness of God's grace, which is the very place where we find we freely receive His grace on account of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

How would you define the virtue of humility?

Share a story of someone you believe is humble. What marks them with this virtue?

Luther on Humility

Luther regarded humility as one of the most significant of virtues and believed only followers of Jesus lived in true humility. While he may not have described himself as a humble man (the thought itself, he would likely advise, would lead to this virtue's opposite, pride), his humility is seen in his stalwart confession that there was nothing in himself that would find any merit before the Lord. Read how Luther writes of humility:

“But the truly humble look not to the result of humility but with a simple heart regard things of low degree and gladly associate with them. It never enters their minds that they are humble. Here the water flows from the well; here it follows naturally and as a matter of course that they will cultivate humble conduct, humble words, places, faces, and clothing, and, so far as possible will shun great and lofty things. Thus, David says in Psalm 113:1 ‘O Lord, my heart is



not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high.’ And Job 22:29 says: ‘He who has been humbled shall be in glory; and he who bows down his eyes shall be saved.’ Hence, honors always come unexpectedly to them, and their exaltation is a surprise; for they have been content with their lowly station and have never aspired to the heights.” (What Luther Says, CPH #2083)

- How does Luther link contentment here with humility?
- According to Luther, how does humility shape one’s entire life?

Humility in Suffering

Read Matthew 15:21-28

- What is the Canaanite woman suffering as a result of her child’s possession? What would you do to rescue your child from the clutches of Satan? What does this woman do?
- What are factors which would reckon this woman unworthy to receive any help or rescue from Jesus? As His disciples ask Jesus to send the woman away, what does Jesus say is the priority of His earthly ministry?
- What does Jesus call this woman and, by implication, her child in verse 26? How do Jesus’ words reveal the great humility in her response?
- What does Jesus then declare about this woman in verse 28, and what is His gift of grace to her?

Humility of a Sinner

Read Luke 5:1-11

- What specifically was Jesus doing before His dialogue with Peter in this text? Why is the teaching of God’s Word important to the gift of faith in Jesus? (Romans 10:17)



- How does Peter at first demonstrate that he, at times, could be brash even while obedient? (Luke 5:5)
- After the miraculous catch of fish, how does Peter's response to Jesus reflect humility? (Luke 5:8) How does Jesus share God's abundant grace with Peter?

Humility of Jesus

Read Matthew 11:28-30; Philippians 2:1-11

- How does Jesus describe Himself in the Matthew reading? Share a favorite moment in Jesus' earthly ministry which demonstrates His humility to you.
- How does Paul describe Jesus' humility in Philippians 2? What is the result of His willingness to be obedient to death on a cross?
- According to these verses, how does Jesus' own humility shape ours?

Being Humble Today

- What are some ways our world today reflects that it doesn't value humility?
- Where do you find it most difficult to be humble?
- How does humility help you to count others as more significant than yourself? (Philippians 2:3)
- How does Jesus' humility give us rest?

Closing Prayer



Fully Human A Biblical Pursuit of Virtue Session V: Hospitality

Opening Prayer Psalm 23

To Be Hospitable

It's a joyful welcome at the door. It's making someone feel at home and that they belong. It's an open sharing of what we have, and yes, it often joyfully centers around food. While welcoming the unexpected company who simply "pops by" may be a less and less common practice in the modern world, hospitality is a virtue which not only offers the gifts of kindness (like a cup of coffee), but it also runs much deeper. In being receptive and attentive to the one welcomed, and in a world which suffers more and more from loneliness, being hospitable is a wonderful expression of friendship.

How would you define the virtue of hospitality?

Share a time when you've been the recipient of someone's hospitality. How are you blessed by someone who is hospitable?

Luther on Hospitality

Martin and Katie Luther were adept in the virtue of hospitality. They would regularly lodge and entertain dozens of guests in their home for days on end, making sure their earthly needs were met. They would often take in Luther's students who would then be blessed not only by the gifts of food and shelter, but also by the extra time sitting with Luther at his table, hearing him speak of the life lived out under Christ's grace.

Read how Luther writes about hospitality:

"There are some of us who think to ourselves, 'If I had only been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby. I would have washed His linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the



manger!' Why don't we do it now? We have Christ in our neighbor.” (AZ Quotes on Martin Luther)

“A Christian loves his neighbor as a brother; he makes no difference between persons or things. He does not consider whether he is serviceable or not, whether he is wise or unwise...God loved all, even His enemies, without making any difference. Therefore, we too, should love as brothers even those who are not lovable.” (What Luther Says, CPH #2586)

- How does Luther connect Christ to loving one’s neighbor?
- How is hospitality a Christlike expression of love to one’s neighbor?

Hospitality with Good News

Read Genesis 18:1-15

- How could Abraham have responded to three strangers traveling by his tent in the heat of the day?
- Review the details of Abraham’s exercise of hospitality for these three “visitors.” What are the various layers of hospitality revealed in this account?
- What good news does the Lord share with Abraham and Sarah at this encounter?

Hospitality with More Good News

Read Luke 10:38-41

- How does Martha practice hospitality at the start of this text?
- What tension seems to exist for Martha relating to her sister’s (Mary), action? How might Mary’s action also be seen as practicing hospitality?
- What good news does Jesus share at the end of the text?



Hospitality with Even More Good News

Read Luke 19:1-10

- How is Zacchaeus described at the start of the text? How would this description influence his reputation in Jericho?
- How does Jesus prompt Zacchaeus' hospitality? Why "must" Jesus abide in his home that day?
- How does Zacchaeus demonstrate his depth of hospitality?
- What good news does Jesus share with Zacchaeus? How is it that such a "sinner" can be declared a son of Abraham? (vs. 9)

Jesus' Hospitality

Read John 14:1-6

- What is the context of Jesus sharing this message with His disciples?
- How does Jesus describe His "hospitality" in this passage? What does the imagery of this passage bring to mind for you?
- How do we receive this hospitality? (vs. 6)

Being Hospitable Today

- How do the following passages inform our practice of hospitality? (Leviticus 19:34; Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; I Peter 4:9)
- The Greek New Testament word for hospitality literally means "love of the stranger." What challenges do you find in practicing this virtue in your life?



- What good can our Lord accomplish through our pursuit of this virtue for our neighbor? For us?
- How does hospitality remind us of the joy of eternal life? (Revelation 7:9-17)

Closing Prayer