

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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On Virtue

Early in his tenure at the helm of BYU, President Jeffrey R. Holland proposed for our campus a three-word Latin mantra: *Virtus et Veritas*—virtue and truth. *Veritas*, of course, was familiar from the mottos of Harvard and Yale. But President Holland worried that the academy at large was abandoning its traditional concern with character education—with virtue.

At BYU, the primacy of character and virtue is conspicuous in our founding documents. “President David O. McKay taught that character is the highest aim of education.”¹ President Spencer W. Kimball explained that “BYU is dedicated to the building of character and faith, for character is higher than intellect.”² President Kimball further described BYU as a “character-building” university.³ That idea has since been memorialized as our third institutional aim.

Despite this prominence in our canonical texts, the “character-building” prong of our Aims is sometimes the haziest to conceive and the hardest to implement. And despite President Holland’s suggested motto of four decades ago, it seems that we talk less than we could about an education grounded in virtue.

I’ve been thinking about virtue lately while reading an absorbing new book on the subject by Jeffrey Rosen, the president and CEO of the National Constitution Center. The book’s title alone—*The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America*—convinced me that this would be a volume after my own heart. Any book that unites America’s constitutional founders with the classical moral philosophers of antiquity and the

Enlightenment was bound to have me at the title page. Rosen’s book did not disappoint.

His thesis is simple. There was a remarkable consensus among the founding generation regarding “the pursuit of happiness”—one of the most resonant phrases in the sonorous opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence. For the founders, the pursuit of happiness meant the cultivation of virtue. Happiness was an activity, not an emotion. It consisted of being good, not feeling good—of *eudaimonia* not *hedonia*. And for the founders, happiness lay in the pursuit, not the acquisition.

On Rosen’s telling, the founders imbibed this conception from their deep and extensive reading in classical moral philosophy—in Cicero and Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, Xenophon and Plutarch, Montesquieu and Locke, David Hume and Adam Smith. From that reading the founders derived a remarkably consistent understanding of the virtues most worth cultivating.

Rosen organizes his book around America’s most famous list of virtues—that of Benjamin Franklin, which comprised order, temperance, humility, industry, frugality, sincerity, resolution, moderation, tranquility, cleanliness, justice, and silence. As is well known, Franklin set out to cultivate one virtue each month, pausing at the end of each day to note those virtues regarding which he’d fallen short. Franklin eventually gave up the quest, which he found demoralizing, but he acknowledged that the effort, while it lasted, made him a better man.

Although Rosen is unsparing about his subjects’ failures to live up to their ideals, there is much in his tale to instruct and to inspire. In their

disciplined effort to budget their time, refine their characters, and apportion time each day for superior reading, Rosen’s protagonists are models of industrious achievement and lifelong learning. (Even as President, John Quincy Adams read three chapters of the Bible each morning before striding vigorously along the banks of the Potomac to greet the rising sun.)

Much as I loved Rosen’s book, in one respect it struck me as just a little thin. The disciplined pursuit of virtue is always inspiring, but to me it feels incomplete without the fuller discipline of Christian discipleship. The classical virtues are certainly consistent with such discipleship—indeed, I believe with John Quincy Adams that they can illuminate and strengthen it. But standing alone, they do not suffice. What we seek at BYU are not just the ancient stoic virtues, but “those virtues *which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God.*”⁴

Lists of those Christ-centered virtues are scattered throughout the scriptures—in the Sermon on the Mount and the Second Epistle of Peter, in the fourth section of the Doctrine and Covenants and in Joseph’s letter from Liberty Jail.

¹ “The Aims of a BYU Education” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU: Dreams and Foundations* (Brigham Young University, 2022) 78.

² Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity” in *ibid* 169.

As I recently contemplated these scriptural lists, I formed a Franklinesque resolve. I want to focus on one Christlike virtue each month for the rest of 2024. This is the schedule I hope to follow:

March: Gentleness

April: Meekness

May: Persuasion

June: Diligence

July: Temperance

August: Patience

September: Kindness

October: Faith

November: Hope

December: Charity

We cannot, I submit, hope to inculcate Christlike virtues in our students if we do not first cultivate them in ourselves. We cannot provide an environment sustained by those virtues if we do not practice them. I hope to make some progress on that front this year, and I invite you to join me in that quest. Perhaps, like Franklin, we will fail. But we and our students will be better for the attempt.

³ *Ibid* 165, 168.

⁴ “The Mission of Brigham Young University” in *Envisioning BYU*, 65 (emphasis added).