

What is the goal of having a virtuous life?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

The Roman philosopher Epictetus, who was born several decades after the death of Jesus, had a lot to say about living a good life. He taught that the greatest good was virtue, and living virtuously naturally leads to “a life that flows smoothly.” This doesn’t mean we won’t encounter troubles or make mistakes. It simply (and profoundly) means that a person can choose what is in their control and what is not; we can rationally decide to keep our hands off and our minds off those things that are not “up to us,” which is, most things. As a Stoic, Epictetus thought that Reason (God, Nature) ran a fairly orderly universe and all we needed to do was align ourselves “according to nature.” The Roman Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius said “virtually” the same thing.

In his “Discourses,” lessons recorded by his student Arrian, Epictetus offers wisdom on making progress in the practice of virtue. And that was the point: to practice. He asks, “Who is making progress. . .the

one who has read [many books]?” His concern was for students who came to his school merely to read and build their library. He said, “If that’s what it is, then progress cannot amount to anything more than learning as much [from books] as we can.” He suggests if this is all someone wants, to get book-learning, they might as well go home; he has nothing to teach them; they won’t become more virtuous filling their heads by reading. He wants to see evidence of actual progress in the goal of the good and virtuous life.

As an illustration of this lesson, he uses a conversation with an athlete. Asking to see their muscles, the athlete shows him the weights (his exercise equipment). This isn’t what the teacher wants to see. “What I want to see isn’t the weights but how you’ve profited from using them.” In his students he wants to witness how they practice and apply his instructions, how they are preparing themselves to be wise human beings. Are they in “harmony with nature,” or do they merely comment on the books they’ve read? If that’s all it is, the teacher says, then just go write your own book. He wants to see for himself that a student is progressing in character. Memorizing words won’t do. Books can be great tools, if they are used to assist a person in

their quest to live better, to be a healthier, happier human being.

Epictetus was admired by many Christians through the centuries because his moral teachings were similar to some of Jesus’ teachings (even monks read him as a rulebook). Perhaps some of that admiration came from the life-story of Epictetus. His mother was enslaved and he was born into slavery. Eventually freed, he opened a school of philosophy on the West Coast of Greece. His ethical principles paralleled biblical teachings and the goal was similar: to honor the divine within, and live well.

Epictetus’ concern for over-reliance on books got me thinking about the fact that none of the famous founders of faith traditions carried books around; they didn’t write; and many didn’t even encourage reading! Think about that. Did Moses or Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad, command their followers to sit around and study scriptures – books they didn’t write anyway? Were they impressed by people quoting their words? Did they instruct disciples to make scriptural texts the center of worship and the life of faith? Not as I see it. So, if these ancient teachers didn’t pack piles of paper (or papyrus) with them, or write anything with their own hands, what are all the “sacred books” for?

This came to mind recently when someone was aggressively quoting Bible verses at me. It’s popular in some circles to use the Bible as a kind of weapon to wield, a sword to attack with “God’s Word of Judgment” (condemnation, intimidation, shame). In other circles, the most valued proof of faith is proudly proclaiming how diligently you’ve studied the Bible, and how much scripture you’ve memorized. In yet other circles, “preaching the Word” is highly esteemed, and preachers are elevated to an elite position, respected for their “Bible knowledge” and exposition of “The Word.” With all this emphasis on “The Book,” what happens to progress toward the good and virtuous life? I’m with Epictetus – if all a person wants to do is read and repeat ancient texts, they might as well go home.

We ask someone to show us the results of all their reading (their muscles), and they just respond with verses (weights they lift). It seems so unnatural. You can study or preach about all the holy books in the world, but have you progressed toward a more virtuous character?

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).