

Ten Essential Virtues

What virtues are most important for strong character?

The ancient Greeks named four. They considered **wisdom** to be the master virtue, the one that directs all the others. Wisdom is good judgment. It enables us to make reasoned decisions that are both good for us and good for others. Wisdom tells us how to put the other virtues into practice—when to act, how to act, and how to balance different virtues when they conflict (as they do, for example, when telling the honest truth might hurt someone’s feelings). Wisdom enables us to discern correctly, to judge what is truly important in life, and to set priorities.

The second virtue named by the Greeks is **justice**. Justice means respecting the rights of all persons. The Golden Rule, which directs us to treat other persons as we wish to be treated, is a principle of justice that can be found in cultures and religions around the world. Since we are persons ourselves, justice also includes self-respect, a proper regard for our own rights and dignity. Schools, in their character education efforts, often center on justice because it includes so many of the interpersonal virtues—civility, honesty, respect, responsibility, and tolerance (correctly understood not as approval of other people’s beliefs or behaviors but as respect for their freedom of conscience as long as they do not violate the rights of others). A concern for justice—and the capacity for moral indignation in the face of injustice—inspires us to work as citizens to build a more just society and world.

A third, much-neglected virtue is **fortitude**. Fortitude enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulty. The right decision in life is often the hard one. One high school captures that truth in its motto: “Do the hard right instead of the easy wrong.” A familiar maxim says, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Fortitude, as the educator James Stenson points out, is the inner toughness that enables us to overcome or withstand hardship, defeats, inconvenience, and pain. Courage, resilience, patience, perseverance, endurance, and a healthy self-confidence are all aspects of fortitude. Teen suicide has risen sharply in the past three decades; one reason may be that many young people are unprepared to deal with life’s inevitable disappointments. We need to teach our children that we develop our character more through our sufferings than our successes, that setbacks can make us stronger if we don’t give in to feeling sorry for ourselves.

The fourth virtue named by the Greeks is **self-control** (which they called “temperance”). Self-control is the ability to govern ourselves. It enables us to control our temper, regulate our sensual appetites and passions, and pursue even legitimate pleasures in moderation. It’s the power to resist temptation. It enables us to wait—and to delay gratification in the service of higher and distant goals. An old saying recognizes the importance of self-control in the moral life: “Either we rule our desires, or our desires rule us.” Reckless and criminal behavior flourish in the absence of self-control.

The Greeks covered a lot of the moral territory but by no means all of it. A fifth essential virtue is **love**. Love goes beyond justice; it gives more than fairness requires. Love is the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of another. A whole cluster of important human virtues—empathy, compassion, kindness, generosity, service, loyalty, patriotism (love of what is noble in one’s country), and forgiveness—make up the virtue of love. In his book *With Love and Prayers*, F. Washington Jarvis writes: “Love—selfless love that expects nothing back—is the most powerful force in the universe. Its impact on both the giver and the receiver is incalculable.” Love is a demanding virtue. If we really took seriously the familiar injunction to “love your neighbor as yourself,” says an essay on this virtue, would we not make every effort to avoid gossiping about others and calling attention to their faults, given how sensitive we are to such things said about us?

A **positive attitude** is a sixth essential virtue. If you have a negative attitude in life, you're a burden to yourself and others. If you have a positive attitude, you're an asset to yourself and others. The character strengths of hope, enthusiasm, flexibility, and a sense of humor are all part of a positive attitude. All of us, young and old, need to be reminded that our attitude is something we *choose*. "Most people," Abraham Lincoln said, "are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." Said Martha Washington: "I have learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other with us in our minds wherever we go."

Old-fashioned **hard work** is a seventh indispensable virtue. There is no substitute in life for work. "I challenge you," says the great basketball coach John Wooden, "to show me one single solitary individual who achieved his or her own personal greatness without lots of hard work." Hard work includes initiative, diligence, goal-setting, and resourcefulness.

An eighth essential virtue is **integrity**. Integrity is adhering to moral principle, being faithful to moral conscience, keeping our word, and standing up for what we believe. To have integrity is to be "whole," so that what we say and do in different situations is consistent rather than contradictory. Integrity is different from honesty, which tells the truth to others. Integrity is telling the truth to oneself. "The most dangerous form of deception," says author Josh Billings, "is self-deception." Self-deception enables us to do whatever we wish and find a reason to justify our actions.

Gratitude is a ninth essential virtue. "Gratitude, like love, is not a feeling but an act of the will," observes writer Anne Husted Burleigh. "We choose to be thankful, just as we choose to love." Gratitude is often described as the secret of a happy life. It reminds us that we all drink from wells we did not dig. It moves us to count our everyday blessings. Asked what was the biggest lesson he learned from drifting 21 days in a life raft lost in the Pacific, the war hero Eddie Rickenbacker answered: "That if you have all the fresh water you want to drink and all the food you want to eat, you ought never to complain about anything."

Humility, the final essential virtue, can be considered the foundation of the whole moral life. Humility is necessary for the acquisition of the other virtues because it makes us aware of our imperfections and leads us to try to become a better person. "Humility," writes the educator David Isaacs, "is recognizing both our inadequacies and abilities and pressing our abilities into service without attracting attention or expecting applause." "Half the harm that is done in the world," said T. S. Eliot, "is due to people who want to feel important." "Every virtue turns worthless," writes the philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand, "if pride creeps into it—which happens whenever we glory in our goodness." Without humility, observes another writer, we keep all our defects; they are only crusted over with pride, which conceals them from ourselves. Humility enables us to take responsibility for our faults and failings (rather than blaming someone else), apologize for them, and seek to make amends. The psychiatrist Louis Tartaglia, in his book *Flawless! The Ten Most Common Character Flaws and What You Can Do About Them*, says that in more than 20 years as a therapist he has found the most common character flaw to be "addiction to being right." ("Do you find yourself discussing disagreements," he asks, "long after they are finished, just to prove you were right?") The key to character growth in therapy and life, he says, is simply the humble willingness to change.

—*Dr. Tom Lickona, CHARACTER MATTERS: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues (Simon & Schuster, Feb., 2004)*