

2017

Introduction to The Science of Virtue, Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church

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Recommended Citation

McMinn, Mark R., "Introduction to The Science of Virtue, Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church" (2017). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. 264.

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The Science of Virtue

WHY POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY MATTERS
TO THE CHURCH

Mark R. McMinn



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Control Number: 2017021728

ISBN: 978-1-58743-409-9

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To Auden, Juniper, Eden, Mark, Wesley,
and Nash—my six grandchildren.

Stretch toward virtue as you face the joys, suffering,
blessings, and pain life will offer you.

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Acknowledgments

I have been married for thirty-eight years to Lisa, a sociologist, author, and lovely human being. We consider each other to be our “first readers,” which means we see those drafts that are not yet ready for anyone else to read and recommend ways to make them better. Once again, Lisa was my first reader for every chapter in this book. She graciously pointed out the best parts and the worst, and helped me find my way forward where my ideas and words were confusing or unclear.

As will be evident in almost every chapter, I am grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for funding a three-year grant that allowed my colleagues, students, and me to study positive psychology and the church. Dr. Nicholas Gibson, the program officer at Templeton who directed this grant, was particularly helpful in reviewing the grant proposal and providing feedback along the way. My colleagues Dr. Rodger Bufford and Dr. MaryKate Morse were collaborators on the grant. Dr. Ward Davis at Wheaton College supervised one of the grant projects. Thanks also to George Fox University and Wheaton College doctoral students who worked on the projects funded by the grant: Andrew Cuthbert, Laura Geczy-Haskins, Paul McLaughlin, Jeff Moody, and Jens Uhder.

I work in a remarkably healthy psychology department, made so in no small part by our department chairperson, Dr. Mary Peterson. My faculty colleagues and doctoral students help me think better than I would without them, and I am thankful for their ongoing role in my professional and spiritual development. Heidi Cuddeford, one of our department's administrative assistants, went well beyond the call of duty to help make the Templeton grant projects successful. Adriana Rangel-Ponce served as an undergraduate assistant who helped with reference citations for the early versions of the manuscript.

The church where I worship each week, Newberg Friends Church, has been part of this project in various ways. Pastors Gregg Koskela and Steve Fawver influenced the curriculum we developed for a wisdom-mentoring program, and the church elders and administrative staff welcomed us to partner with them in running the program. Tamera Brand, Denise and Kevin Brooks, Marcile Crandall, Elaine and Gregg Koskela, Carol and David Sherwood, and Elizabeth and Steve Sherwood all served as capable mentors in the wisdom-mentoring program. Natalie Koskela and Megan Anna Neff both contributed in important ways to the wisdom project as well—in Natalie's case by conducting interviews with wisdom participants and in Megan Anna's case by providing theological insight as we developed the curriculum. The Children of the Light Sunday school class allowed me to teach on each of the chapters in this book and offered helpful feedback along the way.

I also appreciate the pastors and other churches that partnered with us on various projects, including Pastors Jeff Getsinger, Lynn Holt, Jed Maclaurin, Bill Moorman, Rich Miller, Ken Redford, and Andrew Yarborough. Dr. Rebecca Ankeny, former superintendent of the Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, was particularly helpful as we established working relationships with churches and pastors.

Finally, I am thankful for the highly professional editorial and design team at Brazos Press. They believed in this idea and helped me craft the manuscript into what it has become.

Introduction

A New Conversation about Virtue

My students look at me funny when I mention 1980, as if we are studying ancient history. It doesn't seem that long ago to me, but most of them were ten years shy of being born. Mount St. Helens erupted that year, gifting my classmates and me with an inch of ash for our college graduation day in Portland, Oregon. Rubik's Cube captured the world's attention and more of my free time than I care to admit. And a concerned couple at my church approached my wife, Lisa, and me a few weeks before we packed our U-Haul for graduate school with a warning that my choice to pursue a doctoral degree in clinical psychology would likely cause us both to abandon our faith. Several weeks later, during my first day on the Vanderbilt University campus, another doctoral student insisted that I couldn't possibly be religious and be a good scientist. Psychology and Christianity were not getting along well in 1980.

While it might not be fair to say that the war between psychology and religion is completely over, I find it remarkable that, thirty-five years later, committed Christians author much of the scientific psychology literature I read. Not only can psychologists be Christians, and Christians be good social scientists, but some of the

most thrilling developments in the field have taken place because committed Christians decided to wage peace with psychology.

Much of the change is due to *positive psychology*. In 1998 the president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, noted that we psychologists had done a very good job describing and treating what goes wrong with people, but had largely overlooked what goes right with people. Almost overnight a vibrant contemporary science of virtue was born,¹ and since then many Christians have been involved in this new movement to study virtue scientifically. Many of the leading researchers on the topic of forgiveness are Christians, as are some of the world's leading experts on gratitude. Almost every scientist currently studying humility is Christian. New research programs are being developed to study grace, and guess who is leading the way? It's difficult to even imagine studying grace without knowing Jesus.

The John Templeton Foundation deserves much of the credit. Even in the face of persistent criticism from old-school scientists who still hold that religion has no place in empirical investigation, the Templeton Foundation has given generously to fund world-class research on religion and science. The foundation demands excellent science while affirming the importance of ultimate questions of meaning and purpose. Many of the Christians involved in positive psychology research, as well as researchers of other religious faiths, have received funding through this foundation.

This is an exhilarating time to be a Christian scholar, a social scientist, a counselor, and a follower of Jesus. Tensions remain between psychology and the church, but mostly they seem as distant as 1980 is to my students. Today we have a new conversation that opens the possibility of partnership and mutual collaboration.

Why Write This Book? Why Read It?

I have four reasons for writing *The Science of Virtue*, but I'm offering just two now and saving two for the end of the introduction.

First, positive psychology helps us to reclaim, or redeem, the language of virtue, which has been largely lost in contemporary times. One understanding of the word “redeem” is to buy back or repurchase something.

Conversations about virtue waned with modernity, as did our ability to comprehend virtue.² Today we value science, with its intense scrutiny of “what is,” more than virtue, which requires an awareness of who we are to become (teleology). Redeeming virtue requires us to envision a calling, to grasp that we are called to become more fully human, more abundant and Jesus-like. We need a Point B to help make meaning of our current Point A, and then we also need an idea of how to move from Point A to Point B.

Though science cannot fully reclaim the rich understanding of virtue that people had in centuries past, positive psychology is a step in the right direction. Positive psychology is redeeming virtue, bringing topics that have been considered since before the time of Christ—but mostly lost in recent decades—back into focus. As Aristotle taught both virtue ethics and empirical study of the world, so positive psychology brings virtue and science together to consider topics such as hope, resilience, compassion, gratitude, coping, forgiveness, authenticity, humility, creativity, wisdom, and more. I will consider only a few of these topics in a short book such as this, but in each chapter we’ll venture into the science of virtue to see how positive psychology is influencing our understanding of human character, mostly in helpful ways.

Mostly. This leads to my second reason for writing the book. Another meaning of the word “redeem” is to change for the better. The contemporary science of virtue will be most effective if the church gets informed and involved. Positive psychology needs the church. I will argue this point in every chapter of the book. In a moment I will summarize my argument for why positive psychology needs the church, but first let me set the context by considering virtue in relation to what Jesus described as the greatest commandments.

Virtue and the Greatest Commandments

Take a minute to think only of yourself. What might you want for your next meal, and how will you go about getting it? Are you enjoying your work? Do you make as much money as you want, and if not, how will you make more? To whom are you attracted, and if that person does not return your affection, how might you go about making that happen? How is your health, and what will make it better? Okay, now it's time to stop, but imagine for a moment that your whole life consisted of thinking only of yourself. This is the essence of vice: self occupying one's entire visual field.

It is tempting to suggest that vice is self-focused and that virtue, in contrast, is other-focused, but being entirely other-focused is not possible for embodied individuals. It seems we are hardwired for self-interest. Consider this sentence: *To be fully virtuous, we should completely empty ourselves of self and focus on the other.* Do you see the logical error? How can a self remove a self? The self exists and will be interested in its own existence. None of us has to work very hard to think about ourselves—that comes quite naturally for us. So the essence of virtue is not to remove a self, or eliminate all self-interest, but to find a balance point where interest of other coexists with interest of self. Further, virtue calls us to consider the growth of the self—both my self and other selves—toward some fully functioning state.

What might I want for my next meal, and how do my food choices affect those who grow my food in my own country and around the world? How do my food choices shape me? How do they affect the character formation of my close and distant neighbors? Am I enjoying my work, and does my work contribute to making the world a more wholesome and beautiful place? How do I balance my interest in money with a profound awareness of those with less access to financial resources? Does my relationship with money reflect a desire to become more and more the person Jesus created me to be? To whom am I attracted, to whom am I committed, and how do my attractions and commitments reflect

the sort of love that contributes to the welfare of others? How are my health, the health of those around me, and the health of the planet related? These more complex questions lead to the possibility of virtue, where self-interest is contained and balanced with interest in others and a godly yearning for moral growth. Christian psychologist Everett Worthington writes, “The essence of most virtues is that they self-limit the rights or privileges of the self on behalf of the welfare of others.”³

Consider the classic virtue of prudence, the ability to choose the right and avoid the wrong. How can we even know what is right without considering how our actions impact others? Prudence requires a balance between self-interest and awareness of the other. Another classic virtue, justice, is to give others what they are due. This requires a cognizance of the other, a keen ability to observe and understand the nature of the other. Fortitude is the strength to be just and prudent, sometimes calling us to put a higher cause above our own self-interest. Temperance calls us to moderate our self-interest, to enjoy the pleasures of this good life without becoming enslaved to them. Virtues limit self-interest, and they call us to become people who routinely do so.

Christian virtue introduces a third dimension—an awareness of and love for God. When the religious leaders of Jesus’s day tried to trap him by asking him what was the most important rule from the Old Testament law, Jesus gave an answer that has been resounding for over two millennia: “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37–40). Here we see that following Jesus involves loving God, loving the other, and properly managing our instinctive desire to love ourselves. We may sing catchy praise choruses about worship being all about Jesus, but actually it’s not. Jesus clearly connected loving God with love of self and other, and so collective worship is about honoring a relational God who cares deeply about each

of us. Worship is a virtuous act involving God, self, the other who sits beside us, and the other who lives across the world.

Balancing an awareness of God and other with our natural desire to honor ourselves calls us to a more complex set of questions. What do I want for my next meal, and how do my food choices reflect both a love for local and global neighbors and a desire to understand and love what God loves? How does my work reveal God's image and contribute to God's redemptive presence in our broken world? How do my relationships image God while bringing joy, meaning, and hope both to the other and myself?

We can categorize vice, virtue, and Christian virtue if we wish. Many helpful taxonomies have been developed over the centuries, from the seven deadly sins that were actually eight until Pope Gregory the Great distilled the list a bit in the sixth century, to the four cardinal virtues that made their way into Christian thinking through Aristotle, to the three theological virtues identified by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. But all of these taxonomies ultimately reveal that vice elevates self to preeminence and traps us in gratifying present desires. In contrast, virtue calls us to a place of balance where we exercise control over wanton self-interest because we love God and neighbor. Virtue invites us to imagine a better self and a better world, and Christian virtue does this while being embedded in a profound love relationship with God.

Why Positive Psychology Needs the Church

With this understanding of virtue, now we can explore the essence of the argument I make throughout this book. Left to itself, psychology tends to veer toward self-interest. Many have written scathing critiques of psychology, some of which border on the ridiculous, but one of the most thoughtful and compelling critiques is offered by psychologist Paul Vitz in his text *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*,⁴ where he explores the ubiquity of selfism in contemporary society. Psychology can become a

worldview, much as a religion, according to Vitz, and can lead to an excessive focus on the self. Even positive psychology, which developed after Vitz's book was published, can veer in this direction.

Consider forgiveness, which has been an enormous boon to the positive psychology movement. Not too many decades ago forgiveness was relegated to religion and was almost never considered in the context of psychology. Now we have thousands of articles on the topic, including impressive scientific studies showing the power of forgiveness (more on this in chapter 2). But find someone on the street and ask why forgiveness is important, and you're likely to hear about the immediate personal benefits of forgiveness. Indeed, much of the science demonstrates the personal health benefits of forgiving an offender. Do you want to lower your blood pressure, to sleep better, to feel happier? Forgive someone who has hurt you. This is important research that should be celebrated, but notice how easily this can veer toward focus on the self and on a static view of self.

Now consider forgiveness from the vantage point of Christian virtue, as we will in detail in chapter 2. It's not just about me wanting to get on with my life and feel better. No, forgiveness is a spiritual act, a worshipful act, in recognition of God's gracious and forgiving character. God's character, revealed in Jesus, changes me. To whatever extent I am changed, I can then have a transforming effect on others around me, helping them glimpse what it looks like to move more toward the life Jesus lives. Thus conceived, forgiveness is a community act, designed to foster healing, hope, and growth.⁵ We forgivers need the church to remind us why it matters, to put our self-interest in the context of something deeper and richer than we naturally might consider.

Stanton Jones, former provost of Wheaton College, offers a useful and balanced critique of positive psychology.⁶ While Jones acknowledges various dimensions to be celebrated, he also raises serious concerns about how positive psychology understands the nature of existence (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), and practical philosophy. This is not just academic quibbling; it is the

necessary role of Christian scholars to consider how any new scientific advance squares with Christianity. As much as I value the past twenty years of positive psychology, the movement is still in its infancy. The church has been around a long time and serves as a custodian of truth. Positive psychology needs the church in order to identify its strengths and blind spots. I've given a preview of this by considering forgiveness and will make similar arguments about wisdom (chapter 1), gratitude (chapter 3), humility (chapter 4), hope (chapter 5), and grace (chapter 6).

Why the Church Needs Positive Psychology

I reserved my final two reasons for writing this book until the end of this introduction, knowing that one is controversial and the other quite challenging. Here's the controversial one: the church can benefit from positive psychology. One could argue that the church is relatively self-sustaining, has been over many centuries, and has little need for the latest psychological trend or current social-science research. Still, I write this book because I am convinced the church needs to consider positive psychology and what it offers to conversations about virtue that have been going on for centuries. I offer two illustrations of this point here and will suggest more in following chapters.

One reason the church needs positive psychology is that the time has come for Christianity and science to become better friends. Consider the plight of a teenager growing up in a church that avoids dialogue with science. On Sunday this teenager learns that religion is the path to truth, and perhaps even that science is not to be trusted. Monday through Friday, in the context of a public school, the teenager learns that science is the most credible way to know something, and perhaps that religion is backward and naïve. At some point in life this teenager will face a choice to remain in the church and distrust science or to trust science and leave the church. Increasingly, the church is losing this battle. We may hear something

like this and blame public school systems, but what are we doing to promote meaningful dialogue and peacemaking between science and faith? Social and natural scientists at any Christian college will affirm that science and faith are good conversation partners and need not be foes, but sometimes the church gives a different message. Embracing meaningful dialogue between science and faith will help build the church and keep us relevant in a time when science is garnering even more credit than it deserves. Positive psychology provides an ideal venue to foster conversation between science and faith because the subject matter—virtue—is something valued by both parties in the conversation. We may go about studying virtue differently, but we both care about it deeply and are looking for truth.

Another reason that the church needs positive psychology is to make the tenets of Christian thought practical. Consider forgiveness again. Most Christians agree that forgiveness is important. Jesus taught that we should forgive others in various ways, even right in the middle of the Lord's Prayer. All through the New Testament we see some mysterious relationship between God forgiving us and us forgiving others. Most of us have heard many sermons about the topics and feel both an obligation to forgive and peace when it happens. But how do we forgive? What are the practical steps I can take to forgive someone who has wounded me deeply? The practical strategies for accomplishing forgiveness tend not to show up in the Bible, though it is clear that we are called to figure it out. I have good news about this because positive psychologists have done tremendous work in figuring out the mechanism of forgiveness. Imagine a sermon that goes beyond the Christian mandate to forgive and demonstrates how it is actually done. Likely, that will be a sermon by a pastor who understands both Christian theology and positive psychology.

Christian Counselors and Positive Psychology

Finally, I offer the reason for writing the book that is most challenging, and likely most rewarding: positive psychology can help

Christian counselors and pastoral counselors do their work in new and refreshing ways. Why is this so challenging? Because the two related branches of psychology—clinical psychology on the one hand, and positive psychology on the other—haven't built many bridges for meaningful interaction. Clinical and counseling psychologists meet with their patients and clients and offer services based on traditional theories of intervention, whether they be psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, family focused, client centered, or some related strain. Meanwhile, positive psychologists tend to work in the academy. Though many positive psychologists are trained in clinical work, they tend to keep their research quite separate from their work with patients. With the exception of forgiveness (chapter 2), gratitude (chapter 3), and some preliminary work on humility, positive psychology stays in the ivory tower too often, and it seems important to ponder its implications for the work of Christian counselors.

As a clinical psychologist who has been immersed in the Christian counseling movement for many years through reading, counseling, researching, speaking, and writing, I think it responsible to speculate a bit at the end of each chapter about how positive psychology can inform Christian counselors. So I will.

In summary, I offer four reasons to read this book: because it is worth knowing something about positive psychology, because positive psychology needs the church, because the church needs positive psychology, and because positive psychology can help Christian counselors think creatively about their work. If this all seems somewhat vague now, it will become clearer as we move into chapters about particular virtues: wisdom, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, hope, and grace. And if grace doesn't seem like a virtue that belongs on this list, try to suspend judgment on that for now. I'll address why I include grace as a virtue later.

The married couple in our church that warned Lisa and me about the dangers of psychology back in 1980 were two of the most godly and honorable people I have ever known. They loved Jesus and lived out virtue in remarkable ways. As difficult as it

was going against their advice, I think Lisa and I have also found important ways to love God and neighbor in the process. Psychology has changed me, especially positive psychology, and some years later, when Lisa completed a PhD in sociology, that changed her as well, but in the process we have grown comfortable with the idea that social science can enhance our faith just as faith can sharpen our science. Join me on this integrative journey, and let's work together to redeem virtue.

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