

Two Keys for Becoming a Good Man

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It was a five-day road trip my dad had planned since the moment I was born. Now sixteen years later we pulled his 1983 Datsun 280ZX up to a small roadside gas station on a lesser-known part of route 66 somewhere between Flagstaff and Winslow. As the attendant pumped gas, I stepped out to stretch my legs and my father engaged the young attendant in some fact-finding small talk. "Where are we? What is this area known for? Any great men born here?" The attendant, not much older than I was, thought deeply on the question, and scuffed the dirt with his feet. After a drawn-out silence he looked wryly at my father with a mix of sincerity and mischievousness (I knew the look all too well and had employed it generously on the road trip). "No sir," he answered, "no great men been born here, just babies." The young gas station mystic had stated a profound truth. Great men aren't born, they are made great through the crucible of life.

It is a mystery left only to God's providence that you would be reading this article in a particular place, and particular time, much of which has little to do with your choosing. You and I were born into a place, a people, and a time with all its particular benefits and challenges. We don't choose when or where we come into the world, but each of us will be judged by how well we live in it. We are judged by how well we develop our gifts and talents in service to God and one another. This, of course, is hard work. It requires both self-knowledge and self-possession, the two pillars of maturity upon which the foundation of our holiness is built.

Self-Knowledge:

The ancient world thought often about what it means to be human. More specifically what it means to be a human fully alive - "a good man." Competing philosophies about our purpose and our end proposed very different ideas of the "good man". Visions that reduced humanity to simply consumers of the material world placed wealth, pleasure, and honor as the priorities of the "good" life. In large part, this confusion continues today, and unfortunately bad anthropology continues to breed bad philosophy. However, the question still rings out in the heart of every person. We all want to know our purpose, as well as how to achieve it, and many of us have tried and failed to find lasting happiness in the material aims of life. Deep down every man asks themselves, "what is my mission?" "how do I achieve it?" and "do I have what it takes?" Modernity answers these questions in insufficient, perplexing and often destructive ways, which is why so many men are jaded, uninspired, and apathetic today. They are living for things that aren't worthy of their time, let alone their lives.

They don't know their call to greatness, nor how to achieve it. They have forgotten that great men aren't born, they are made!

Emblazoned on the lintel of the entrance to the Oracle of Delphi were the words "know thyself" (γνώθι σεαυτόν). A maxim that was as enigmatic as it was practical. What good would any of the oracle's supposed knowledge or advice provide the person who didn't know who they were or what they had to offer. If the "fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom" (Prov. 1:7) knowing thyself is the beginning of discovering one's mission. It is the hard work of looking into one's natural inclinations, abilities, and acknowledging one's strengths and weaknesses. What am I good at? What fills my heart with joy? What energizes me? Where am I weak? What vices dominate my life? What virtues do I need to develop?

The answer to these questions will reveal a lot about both your temperament and your character. Your temperament is a biological reality, it gives you a particular set of motivations and is made up of the default tendencies and inclination that come naturally to you. Your character builds upon your temperament but is ultimately about how you respond to the various challenges and blessings in your life. It can be said that your personality is the sum of your temperament and your character.

Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, theorized that there were four temperaments. In brief, *choleric* described people of action motivated by results, *sanguine* described people-persons motivated by relationships, *melancholic* described deep-thinking people motivated by ideas, and *phlegmatic* described diplomatic people motivated by keeping the peace. Another way of thinking about this is how we react to things, and how much energy we have to persevere. Choleric tend to be quick in reacting and have a lot of energy to persist. Sanguines tend to be quick in reacting but short on the ability to stay the course. Melancholics tend to be slow in reacting but have a lot of energy to persist. Phlegmatics tend to be slow in reacting and short on the ability to stay the course. For this reason, you cannot have both a choleric and a phlegmatic temperament or both a sanguine and a melancholic temperament. Generally, each of us strongly possesses one of these temperaments and more moderately manifests a second temperament. It is important to remember that you are not just your temperament. Your temperament is only a part of who you are. It's the raw material, so to speak. As Alex Havard explains, "It is the foundation upon which we build our character." That's why knowing your temperament is very helpful for knowing and understanding yourself. Your temperament is ultimately a gift and brings with it some natural strengths and weaknesses. Over time and with practice, these strengths can become virtues. Similarly, if left unchecked, these weaknesses can become vices.

Really knowing ourselves requires some deep introspection, as well as attentive listening to the people who know us best. Knowing our temperament as well as reflecting on the experiences that have shaped us into who we are is a good start towards self-knowledge. It can help us better understand how we can lean into the various callings of our life.

Ask yourself. What strengths come naturally to you? What strengths are the result of hard work and grit? What strengths do you need to develop to better serve your family and your community? What weaknesses have you overcome? What weaknesses do you still struggle with?

Self-possession:

In addition to knowing ourselves we must seek to gain mastery over our passions. Our passions are the energies of our appetite that draw us towards certain things. Properly understood most of what we are drawn towards is good. Our appetite for food is ultimately connected to our survival, our appetite for sex is ultimately connected to our desire to create offspring. However, due to the fall, our passions are often disordered, or are too strong or too weak to fulfill their ultimate purpose. For example, our desire for food may be too strong and lead us to eat too much, or eat poorly, or eat too many sweets. The solution may surprise you. The goal is not to overcome our passions or destroy them, but rather to subdue them and direct them towards what is good, beautiful, and true. The problem of our appetites is usually not that they are bad, but that they are too small, and need to be liberated so they can help us achieve our ultimate end. Subduing our passions requires virtue which perfects our intellect and appetites. Said simply, the virtues are the strengths that help us live freely and ultimately help us to fulfill our vocation and our particular mission in life.

The virtues help us be more in control of our thoughts and actions, and more fully alive. Developing the virtues takes practice and hard work. In fact, becoming competent in the virtues, is much like becoming competent in any trade. It requires a lot of practice in order to become a habit. Knowing what virtues you need and how to develop them in your life begins with self-knowledge.

Prudence, the virtue of making wise decisions has two interrelated components, deliberation on one hand, and action of the other. If you deliberate and come to a decision but do not act on it, you are not being prudent. It is likely that depending on your temperament you struggle more with one of these components. For example, the choleric temperament is motivated by action and does not struggle with making

decisions, but they often fail to deliberate. The person with a choleric temperament that wants to grow in prudence will need to focus on practicing deliberation.

Likewise, fortitude is the virtue of bravely responding to what each situation demands. It also has two interrelated components. Audacity, the willingness to initiate action, and perseverance, the willingness to stay the course. It is likely that one of these components may come more easily to you, and the other one will require some practice. If your temperament is sanguine, you probably don't struggle with starting things, but finishing them is difficult. The person with a sanguine temperament that wants to grow in fortitude will need to focus on practicing perseverance.

Temperance or self-control is the virtue of moderating or subduing our passions. It is about saying no to things that aren't good for us and saying yes to all the good things that contribute to our becoming more of who we are. The two components of the virtue of temperance are saying no to the bad, and yes to the good. Real self-control goes beyond just delaying gratification or temporarily saying no to things we know aren't good for us, though this can be the start of forming this virtue. Often we think too narrowly of self-control, seeing it as only saying no or denying ourselves of something we want. But self-control is bigger than this. It's about saying yes to a greater good, a better way, that leads to a more real, full, and nourishing life. If your temperament is phlegmatic it is likely easy to say no to those things that won't ultimately fulfill us. However, the person with the phlegmatic temperament struggles to say yes and energize their noble aspirations and desires. The phlegmatic who wants to grow in temperance will need to focus on responding to their noble passions.

Justice is the virtue of gladly giving to others what they are due. It is about being in right relationship with others, and also about serving the common good. The melancholic temperament tends to see the ramifications of his actions as they relate to the common good. In fact, melancholics often excel at considering the effects of an idea on the common good, and often strive to serve the common good. However, when it comes to being in right relationship with those closest to them, they can often be unjust and treat them as a means to an end. The melancholic who wants to grow in the virtue of justice will need to focus on being in right relationship with those they live and work with.

All of the cardinal virtues, prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, as well as the other virtues of humility, magnanimity, gratitude, generosity etc. require both self-knowledge and a willingness to put in the hard work to grow in that virtue.

The Glory of God is Man Fully Alive

We are all annoyed by incompetence, whether it be in the workplace or in line at a fast-food joint. Similarly, we are all impressed by the workmanship of a real craftsman, one who is truly competent in their field. The Christian man ought to have self-knowledge and self-possession, and in this way be competent in the craft of being a man fully alive and capable of responding to the needs of their time and place. Of course, we are broken and live in a fallen world. The effects of sin impede our progress, but they do not cut us off from the reservoir of God's grace. "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more" (Rom 5:20). The Christian vision of man fully alive, is one who knows who they are as a beloved son of the Father, and who knows the strengths that they must develop and the weaknesses they most avoid. This can take a lifetime of practice, and with God's grace we can develop these virtues and become the men who God made us to be; the men that our families, communities, and church so desperately need.

I remember vividly going to confession with an old priest who was well known for his wisdom. After confessing my sins, I asked him, "Father, I feel like I have been confessing the same sins for most of my life. Tell me, does it get any easier?" Without even pausing he looked at me directly and said "no." Crestfallen, I looked back at him with a blank stare as a slow smile came across his face. "No," he said "but you will get stronger. With God's grace, you will get stronger."

The truth is that the Christian live takes work. It's work that is infused with and depends on God's grace, but it is real work none-the-less. St. Frances de Sales reminds us that "We must take all the care that God wishes us to take about perfecting Ourselves, and yet leave the care of arriving at perfection entirely To God." In other words, we must do our part, but let God do His. By growing in self-knowledge and self-possession we do our part to become more, not less, of who we God made us to be. Do the work. Pray, reflect, develop an interior life, learn the movements of your heart, surround yourself with honorable ideas and images, ignite your noble passions, discern your mission in life and lean into it with all your heart and mind, and by God's grace you will get stronger and more competent at being a man fully alive.