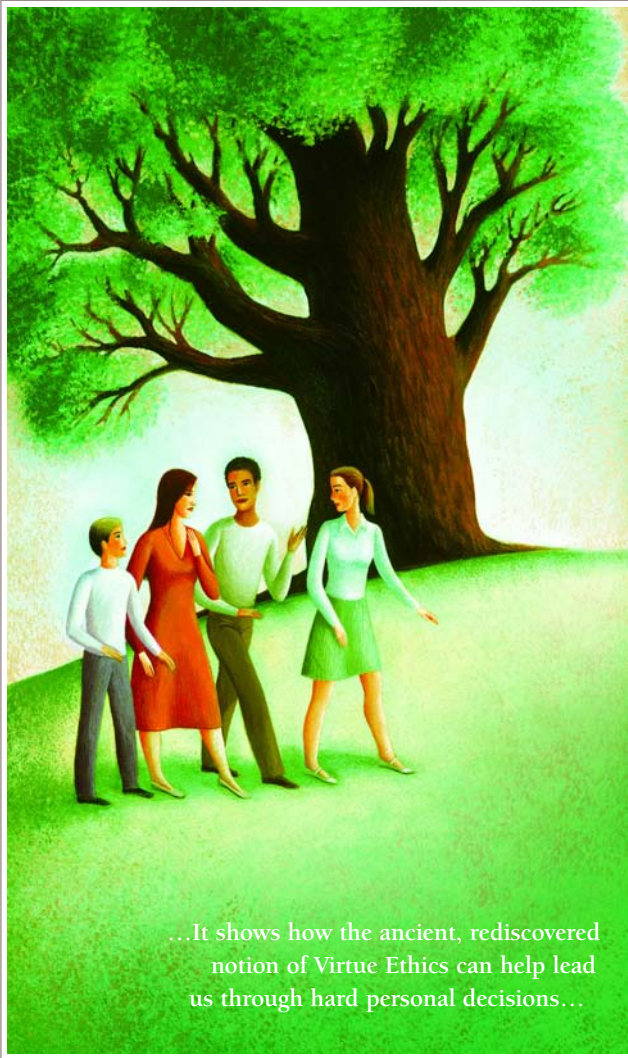


CLAIRE DISBREY



...It shows how the ancient, rediscovered  
notion of Virtue Ethics can help lead  
us through hard personal decisions...

# LIVING IN GRACE

VIRTUE ETHICS AND CHRISTIAN LIVING

# CONTENTS

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## SECTION 1: VIRTUE ETHICS EXPLAINED

An introduction to the book.....	8
1 How the philosophers muddied the waters .....	16
2 The rediscovery of Virtue Ethics.....	27
3 Three ways of approaching the Bible.....	35

## SECTION 2: VIRTUE ETHICS APPLIED

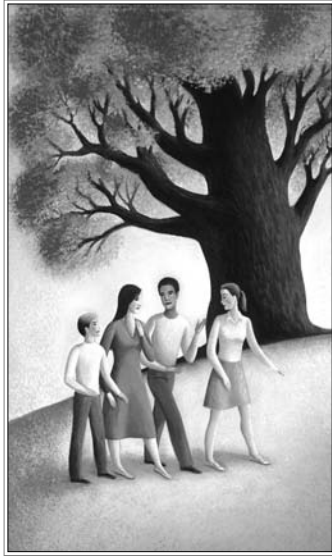
An introduction to the stories.....	46
4 Angela considers a second marriage and looks at Matthew 5.....	48
5 Righteousness .....	57
6 Colin thinks about taking his own life and looks at Galatians 5.....	64
7 Freedom .....	73
8 Desmond wonders about telling the truth and looks at Ephesians 4 and 5 .....	78
9 Wisdom.....	87
10 Charlotte considers an abortion and looks at Romans 13.....	94
11 Love .....	105
12 Alice considers going on a peace march and looks at Philippians 4 .....	113
13 Peace.....	121
14 Patricia and Timothy receive an unexpected inheritance and look at 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.....	128
15 Grace .....	138

### SECTION 3: VIRTUE ETHICS EVALUATED

An introduction to the evaluation .....	148
16 Virtue Ethics and legislation .....	150
17 What can Virtue Ethics do for the Church? .....	157
18 What can Virtue Ethics do for the world? .....	169
Further reading .....	175
Study guide .....	176
Notes .....	182

SECTION 1

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VIRTUE ETHICS EXPLAINED



## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

Ideas about how to live well are entering a new era; my discovery of this has been one of the most exciting things to happen to me recently. My children used to ask, ‘Is it allowed?’ to go to the shops on their own, to use the fire extinguisher, to go through the gate on to the railway crossing. Now they have grown up into an adult world where people don’t want to know what the rules are all the time. They still have respect for the laws of the land, however, and can be quite passionate about the importance of virtues like justice, honesty and kindness.

### DOES LOVE MAKE EVERYTHING RIGHT?

A young friend became unexpectedly pregnant. She had some important decisions to make. She wanted to do what was right but wasn’t all that impressed by whether or not the church or the state allowed her to have an abortion. She was not thinking in terms of rules to keep, but neither was she attracted by the idea that love makes everything right. She tried to imagine what the consequences would be of the various options open to her, but she wanted to go further than that and think seriously about what it was that was growing inside her and which course of action would be fairest to the child that could be born, to its father and to herself.

A middle-aged couple inherited some money that they weren’t expecting and were challenged by a sermon to think about giving some of it away. They discovered that Paul’s letters don’t point Christians back to the rules laid down in the Old Testament about giving, and responding to their feelings seemed a poor guide. They were, however, impressed by the New Testament idea of becoming

more generous people, not only in respect of this money but in every aspect of their lives.

Someone else was wondering if he should remarry after a divorce. He knew that doing what's right is not the same as doing what you feel like, even if the feeling does come from loving someone very deeply, but in order to try to find the right course of action, he was thinking more in terms of the virtues of faithfulness, responsibility and wisdom than about rules for which he couldn't see the reasons.

Philosophers are calling this new way of thinking 'Virtue Ethics' and pointing us back to the thinking of the early Greek world, when people talked more about what it meant to be a good or a bad person than what made an action right or wrong. Some Christians are discovering that this is exactly the point made by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7) and by Paul in his letters—that living as a Christian is not, at its most basic level, only about obligations and prohibitions, or simply caring about the consequences our actions have for other people. They are discovering that the ethical teaching in the New Testament is not essentially about forbidding certain kinds of behaviour—murder, adultery, swearing and revenge. That's how the Pharisees saw it, and Jesus wanted to put them right. But neither is it essentially saying, 'Just love people and then anything goes.' This approach easily sinks into a kind of hedonism that puts pleasure at the centre of our thinking. The New Testament approach to living well is, rather, a challenging call to let God's Spirit change the sort of people we are. It is about the quest to become gentle, faithful, honest, self-controlled people.

## AN UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATION AND A NEW DISCOVERY

A few years ago, I was teaching an A level Religious Studies group. We looked at the different philosophical theories about ethics that were around at the time and then tried to fit the teaching of the New

Testament into them. It was all very unsatisfactory and the textbook we were using didn't help us much. It struggled to make some connections, but concluded that biblical ethics includes both the ethics of rules and of love, yet 'conforms to neither and to some extent transcends both'.<sup>1</sup> Little the philosophers had to say helped us to understand the New Testament, and little that the Bible said helped us to understand the philosophers.

What was Jesus trying to tell his disciples about the law, in the Sermon on the Mount? Do we just need a harder set of rules than the Pharisees had? And what did Paul mean when he said, 'Love is the fulfilment of the law' (Romans 13:10)? Does he mean that we should just care about the best outcome for everyone involved and act in the way that seems to us to meet their best interests? Neither of these conclusions—a harder set of rules or acting from love alone—seemed right, and, what was worse, they seemed in many cases to point to quite different ways of behaving.

When Christians come to the Bible looking for rules about how to behave, they can judge that suicide is always wrong, even when someone seems to have good reasons to take their own life. But when they come to the Bible believing that it teaches them to make judgments out of love for everyone involved, they can conclude that, when the reasons are good enough, suicide is always right. So what are Christians in real ethical dilemmas meant to do?

One evening, at a meeting with some staff of the university I work for, a member of the philosophy department shared with us some new ideas about ethics that had crept into the world of academic philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Instead of putting either rules or consequences at the centre of ethics, she took us back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322BC), who focused his ethics on the idea of virtues. Living well, he believed, essentially involved not just keeping rules, and not just calculating consequences, but acquiring and practising virtues.

I saw at once that this was what was needed to break through

the impasse I had reached. I went back to the Bible and it was like having a new pair of glasses to look through. Human nature being what it is, when trying to solve our ethical dilemmas there has always been a tension between looking back to rules (wanting to know what is prohibited and what isn't) and looking forward to consequences (caring about the effects our actions have on others), and the academic moral philosophy of the last two centuries has done nothing but aggravate this tension. Now I could see that the New Testament is not a confusing muddle of these two approaches but is pointing us to a way of 'living well' that incorporates them both and integrates them into a larger picture.

### PHARISAISM AND HEDONISM

I detect that many Christian people today are disenchanted by what can be seen as the pharisaism of the conservative wing of the Church—the tendency to see, in selected words of the Bible, absolute rules that must be uncompromisingly upheld and applied. They suspect that an ethic based on following rules for which you can't always see the reason is immature and out of step with the culture in which we are now living. More importantly, they see it as a denial both of the mercy and compassion that seem to be at the centre of Jesus' life and teaching and of the freedom from the law that Paul spoke about so often. These Christians may be very firmly committed to living by what the Bible says but not convinced that looking for rules is the best way to do it.

On the other hand, many Christians are alarmed by what can be seen as the hedonism of the liberal wing of the Church. They are concerned that if there are no absolute rules, there will be no constraint on what people can do: human beings are so hopelessly lost that they are unable to cope with that sort of freedom. If the rules of Christian living can change with changing circumstances

and people have only to claim that they are following the path of love, won't their behaviour be guided more by what is pleasant than by what is right? What will then be left to make the Christian life distinctive from the surrounding culture? These people feel that the only way to be truly 'biblical' and to preserve the distinctiveness of Christian living is to find unchanging rules in the scriptures and insist that Christians uphold them without being distracted by what is going on in the world around them.

### IS THERE A THIRD WAY?

So is there a third way? Can we take the Christian call to holiness with great seriousness without falling into pharisaism, and take on board the Christian's radical freedom from the law without falling into hedonism?

I believe now that there is such a way. I have come to see that approaching the teaching of the New Testament through the ideas of Virtue Ethics can expose the pharisaism that Jesus was so much against because it excluded people from the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 23). It can also help us to rediscover the freedom of Paul's ethics in which 'everything is permissible' (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23), but at the same time everything is constrained by the pursuit of Christian character, described by Paul as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22–23).

In this book, I want to explain and explore this 'new' approach to the ethical teaching of the New Testament. In fact, it is not a new approach at all but an old one, which has become obscured by the work of academic moral philosophy within the movement known as 'modernity'. Modernity is a way of thinking that developed in Western Europe in the 17th century, which displaced faith in God from the centre of our thinking, replacing it with faith in the ability

of human rationality to answer all our questions and solve all our problems. At the same time, it turned the focus of ethical discussion away from the behaviour of corporations and states and towards the behaviour of individuals.

Some readers may be wondering why Christians need concern themselves with the secular world of academic philosophy. Can't we just read the Bible for ourselves and put into practice what we read? But the fact is that although we may not be aware of it, the way ordinary Christians approach the Bible today and interpret what they read is already, to a large extent, determined by what has gone on in the world of academic philosophy in the past. The polarization between the ethics of rules and the ethics of consequences that has distracted and fragmented the secular world has distracted and fragmented the theological world too, and the different traditions of ethical thinking have become as polarized in the church as they are elsewhere.

I believe that returning to the idea of virtue may not only be a way for the church to disentangle some of its present conflicts and work towards presenting a united, distinctive Christian ethic to the world, but it might also point a way towards a much-needed universal ethic for a pluralist world, one that can be welcomed and embraced by the world's religions as well as its secular institutions.

The book is not addressed to theologians or philosophers (although there are footnotes to help those who would like to make connections and take things further). It is addressed to ordinary Christians who want to live by the Bible and heal the divisions that damage the church and its witness to the world.

## WAYS OF USING THE BIBLE

This is essentially a book about how to use the Bible. It is for people who believe (or perhaps would like to believe) that when we come

to the Bible as members of an ongoing community of believers, with our minds in gear and praying for the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, we find not only the challenge and inspiration but also the practical help and direction that we need to live well.

I believe that many Christians who face real dilemmas and want to do what is right turn to the Bible for help or ask other Christians for guidance, and end up confused, because the Bible seems to say different things. Even biblical scholars appear unable to agree on how to make sense of it all.

This book will explore what happens when a group of fictitious people—each facing a specific moral dilemma and genuinely wanting to know what is the right, distinctively Christian course of action—turn to the Bible for help. It will, perhaps rather artificially, separate out three approaches to ethics, which many people try to use together, with differing emphases and differing outcomes. How the stories end will depend on which of these approaches they bring to their reading of the Bible—what they are looking for as they search for guidance on what to do.

People who approach the Bible looking for quite different things sometimes seem to be shouting at each other across a huge void. It is often not the case that one side is more 'biblical' or more ready to be obedient than the other, but just that people are approaching the Bible with different interpretative tools.

If we are confused about what we are looking for, we shall find conflicting answers. Does the Bible, for example, lay down the absolute rule that divorced people may not remarry, whatever the consequences, or that people may not take their own lives whatever the circumstances? Or does it, on the other hand, tell us that in these sorts of situations we should let love be our only guide and take whatever course of action secures the best outcome for everyone involved? And if we approach the Bible from a different angle altogether, considering the virtues that it sets before us, will that lead us more clearly towards Christian holiness? What will happen

if we concentrate our thinking not on right or wrong actions but on good and bad people? Can the Bible provide us with clear ideas about the virtues or vices that we should pursue in these kinds of situations, and will this be of practical help in the complex questions of real life?

We shall be looking quite closely at some real-life situations and different ways of interpreting particular passages of the Bible. All the people in these dilemmas will genuinely want to know what the Bible says and to be obedient to it, and we shall see what happens when they approach the Bible looking for rules, or looking at consequences, or looking for virtues.

## TOWARDS UNITY AND DISTINCTIVENESS

My hope is that the old insights of Virtue Ethics can help Christians to get beyond a state of confusion and conflict and move towards a way of seeing the ethical teaching of the New Testament as a coherent and eminently practical whole. I hope that this will help Christian people of different temperaments and from different traditions to begin to discern and agree on a distinctively Christian way of living in the contemporary world.

Before considering these stories of Christian people like me, and perhaps you, who find themselves faced with decisions about divorce, suicide, honesty, abortion, war and possessions, we will dip into the world of philosophy to see how Virtue Ethics was rediscovered.



## CHAPTER 4

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# ANGELA CONSIDERS A SECOND MARRIAGE AND LOOKS AT MATTHEW 5

### ANGELA'S STORY

Angela is a young Christian woman living in Australia who consciously tries to live by the ethics of the Bible. At a Christian youth leaders' conference, she meets and discovers a strong attraction to an older man who shows her a lot of attention. Over the next few months, they develop a close friendship. Impressed by the work he does in the youth group at his local church, and concerned that her commitment to chastity before marriage is under some strain, she is persuaded to marry him within a year of their meeting. Over the next twelve months, she discovers that he is a cruel and violent man, that he has been implicated in the sexual abuse of children and that she is pregnant.

Angela's husband is removed from the youth work team and leaves the church. Angela, with deep regret for what now appears to have been a bad mistake on her part, takes the advice of a Christian counsellor and applies for a divorce to end the marriage. She obtains the divorce quite quickly and, because of his history, her husband is denied access to their child. Having no close family of her own in Australia, Angela moves to England with her baby daughter to start a new life.

Being a single parent in a new country turns out to be lonely and stressful, until Angela gets involved in a local church and meets Richard there—a gentle, single Christian man with a kind and

supportive extended family. She and her daughter both come to love him. He then tells her he would like to marry her and adopt her daughter as his own.

### ANGELA TURNS TO THE BIBLE

Angela is aware that she has not really worked out for herself what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage, so she turns to Matthew 5 for guidance, where she reads that Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

MATTHEW 5:27-32

### LOOKING FOR RULES

Let us first imagine that Angela approaches this passage looking for a universal rule for Christians about divorce and remarriage. Reading it simply, and presuming that it applies to women divorcing men as well as men divorcing women, she will take the last sentence to

mean that because her request for a divorce was not precipitated by her husband's sexual unfaithfulness, but by his cruelty and violence and the danger he might be to their daughter, she is prohibited from remarrying. Doing so would make both Richard and her guilty of adultery, which, Jesus indicates earlier in the passage, is prohibited in the law and so will lead them both to hell.

Angela, however, owns some Bible commentaries<sup>32</sup> and, turning to them, she discovers that trying to make a universal rule from this verse is not as straightforward as it might seem. The commentaries encourage her to think about these statements in their cultural context. Jesus is talking about men divorcing their wives, women in Jewish law at the time having limited rights to initiate divorce proceedings. To reach a universal rule, she has to presume that the rule is the same for women, even though it seems to her that, for women, physical danger is a better reason for ending a marriage than adultery.

She discovers that it is not at all clear what the phrase translated 'marital unfaithfulness' ('fornication' in the King James version) means, this being a point of dispute among Jews at the time. Does it just mean sexual unfaithfulness, as people today would assume, or are there other ways of being unfaithful to one's marriage vows?

Angela then looks at Matthew 19, where some of this teaching is repeated. The context here is that some Pharisees have asked Jesus to take sides in a dispute on the question of what counts as a valid reason for a divorce. They ask him, in verse 3, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'

Her commentary tells her that there was a dispute at the time between two rabbinic schools about the meaning of a verse in Deuteronomy, where the law permits a man to divorce his wife (and for her to remarry) if she 'becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her' (Deuteronomy 24:1). One side took this verse to mean, if she becomes displeasing for 'any and every reason' (hence the question in Matthew 19:3), while the other

took it to mean, only if the man discovers she has committed adultery.

Jesus' first reply can be seen as a refusal to take sides with either of them. He points them back to the ideal of marriage—two people irreparably joined together—quoting from Genesis, 'They will become one flesh' (Genesis 2:24) and adding, 'What God has joined together, let man not separate' (Matthew 19:6). When the Pharisees remind him that the Jewish law permitted divorce, Jesus says that Moses allowed this law 'because your hearts were hard' (Matthew 19:8), and then repeats the teaching on divorce and remarriage from Matthew 5:32.

Angela learns that, in fact, the Jewish law allowed divorce not only for 'indecency' (from Deuteronomy 24:1), the meaning of which was disputed among the rabbinic schools, but also for material and emotional neglect (from Exodus 21:10–11), which most of the rabbis accepted. So, is Jesus rejecting this reason for divorce and siding with the harder interpretation based on Deuteronomy 24, or is he only saying that 'any-and-every-reason' divorces are not legal?

Angela finds that when Jesus' teaching on divorce is reported in two of the other Gospels (Mark 10:11–12 and Luke 16:18), there are significant differences. Mark, writing for a Gentile readership, includes women divorcing their husbands, and both say plainly, without the addition of any exception clause, that those who divorce and remarry become adulterers.

Angela then considers Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7: 'To the married I give this command (not I but the Lord): a wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife' (vv. 10–11). Later in the same chapter, however, Paul says that if an unbeliever leaves a marriage to a Christian, 'a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace' (v. 15).

## WHAT IS THE RULE?

Angela has turned to the Bible looking for a universal rule. It is clearly not easy to deduce a coherent law for Christians from this diverse and, to us, somewhat opaque teaching. From Matthew 5:32 and 1 Corinthians 7:15, an argument can possibly be made for re-marriage if the partner's adultery or desertion precipitated the divorce, but neither of these reasons applies to Angela.

The weight of the teaching taken plainly, she decides, is that Jesus prohibits the initiation of divorce proceedings by anyone in any circumstances and even more strongly condemns anyone who remarries after a divorce. This is confirmed when she learns that the Christian Church, once it had moved away from its Jewish roots, took this line and held it in a fairly consistent way until quite recently.

The ambiguous or contradictory notes struck in the New Testament on this subject can, she discovers, be explained. Perhaps a later Jewish editor added the exception clause in Matthew because some of the Pharisees were arguing for divorce to be compulsory if a wife had committed adultery, and Paul was perhaps talking about something else when he said that a Christian believer is not bound to an unbelieving spouse who leaves the marriage.

## ANGELA'S CONCLUSION

Angela concludes that until she can establish that her former husband has died, the right thing to do in this situation is to ask God to forgive her for the mistakes of the past and then deny her strongly felt need for a loving, intimate partner, her desire to return and enjoy Richard's love, and her sense of responsibility to provide protection and care for her daughter. She must turn this offer down, and bring up her daughter alone. Angela knows that many people will find this conclusion hard to understand, but she also knows that Christians are called to live distinctive lives.

## LOOKING AT CONSEQUENCES

Some Christians will agree with this outcome. Others may respond by thinking that it does not seem a good resolution of the situation, that it doesn't reflect God's readiness to forgive and his concern for us to live abundant and joyful lives—that something has perhaps gone wrong here.

If Angela thinks that ethical questions should be decided not on the basis of looking for rules but on the basis of looking at consequences, she will find it hard to find any helpful guidance from Matthew 5. It seems to say that the consequences of her marrying Richard are that both of them will become adulterers and in danger of going to hell—far more important than any consequences for anyone in this life.

## ANGELA'S CONCLUSION

If she is going to make any sense of the consequence approach, Angela will have to put this passage out of her mind and say something like, 'Ah, but in other places both Jesus and Paul tell us that all the commandments can be summed up with the rule, "Love your neighbour as yourself" (see Luke 10:27 and Romans 13:9). If I apply this to my situation, the consequences of my not marrying Richard are all bad—heartbreak, self-denial and loneliness for both of us and no father for my child, while the consequences of marrying him are all good. Surely love tells me that this is the right way forward?'

Thinking a bit deeper, she may see that her going into a second marriage may make it easier for other people to enter marriage, or start divorce proceedings, without sufficient thought, but this argument seems rather removed from the intensity of her own situation.

Some Christians will agree with this outcome: God is full of mercy and wants us to live abundant lives. Others may respond that

it is deeply unsatisfactory because it does not seem to take on board, at any level, what Jesus says about divorce in Matthew 5 and 19. However much you try to read into the context, Jesus did not say that in the case of divorce and remarriage love makes everything right.

### LOOKING FOR VIRTUES

What happens if Angela comes to Matthew neither merely looking for universal rules nor just considering the consequences of her choices, but looking for help to develop the practical wisdom of a virtuous person, asking herself, 'What sort of character is Jesus pointing his followers towards in this passage? What virtues need to be expressed in this situation?'

Angela might then notice that in this whole chapter, Jesus is considering the ethical rules laid down in the Old Testament. He commends them as good guides, but he goes on to teach that we must look beyond them to what they show us about the sort of character that fits into the kingdom of heaven. We should not, for example, simply aspire to avoid murdering anyone, but to become gentle, generous and merciful people.

When Jesus looks at the old rule about adultery, he tells us that it points beyond the simple prohibition of certain outward actions, towards the virtue of faithfulness as an excellence to be continually pursued.

Jesus seems to be saying that the sort of faithfulness for which Christians should be aiming is deep in the character and informs not only their outward actions but also their reactions, thoughts and feelings. Angela sees that the challenge is not only to avoid unfaithful behaviour but also to become faithful people. For someone who perfectly possesses the virtue of faithfulness, divorce and remarriage will not come into the picture: marriage will be joyfully

exclusive and lifelong. Jesus recognizes in Matthew 19, however, that this is difficult and we all fall short of this sort of perfection.

Angela will be able to see that the hard consequences that Jesus outlines in the section on divorce can be taken in the same way as the hard consequences outlined in the section that precedes it—not about literally gouging eyes out, cutting hands off or condemning people to stoning (or to single parenthood), but as a picturesque emphasis on how important it is, for our physical, social and spiritual well-being, to pursue and possess these virtues.

From a Virtue Ethics perspective, seeing that the virtue of faithfulness is involved in her decision is just a start, for virtues have to be skilfully applied: any one virtue needs to be balanced by others that are also involved. Virtues can go wrong if they are applied inappropriately. High on her agenda will be the virtues of a proper self-regard (a valuing of one's own life) and of being a responsible parent. Loving your self is high on Jesus' agenda (Matthew 22:39) and Angela knows that she needs to find a middle way: too much self-love can turn into the vice of selfishness and too little self-love can turn into the vice of self-deprecation. She discovers that responsible parenting (admittedly, only for fathers) is held up as a virtue by Paul in passages such as Ephesians 6:4.

An ideally virtuous agent, though seeing faithfulness as the most relevant virtue here, can question the practical wisdom of remaining faithful to a man who is a danger to their child, and to a vow made with the best of intentions but inadequate knowledge. Jesus' teaching will cause Angela deep regret over the way her life has gone and an intention not to act so precipitously or foolishly again. She will carefully think through the implications of making another commitment, determining with God's help to become a more faithful person, in the hope that marriage may become more honoured and respected in her community.

ANGELA'S CONCLUSION

Her commitment to pursuing these Christian virtues, her love for Richard, her strong feelings about her own need and her love and responsibility for her child will lead Angela to decide that, in this situation, remarriage is the right option for her.



In recent years, the Church's witness has been overshadowed at times by its struggles with painful ethical controversies, facing apparently stark choices between 'keeping the law' or 'doing what love demands'.

At the same time, in our post-Christian, multi-faith culture, we urgently need to find common ground on which to base shared values for society. Can the Bible help us in these circumstances? Is it the ultimate book of rules to be obeyed—or is it telling us simply to follow 'the way of love'? Can we take the biblical call to holiness seriously without becoming modern-day Pharisees and respond to the awesome responsibility of the Christian's radical freedom from living under the law?

This book looks at people in real, complex life situations and at specific passages from the New Testament, and demonstrates how the teaching of both Jesus and the apostle Paul in fact reveals a third way, transcending both legalism and a kind of hedonism. It shows how the ancient, rediscovered notion of Virtue Ethics can help lead us through hard personal decisions and painful ethical dilemmas. The author argues that in following this third way, we must heed the Bible's challenging call to let God's Spirit change us, so that we learn to 'live well', with the fruit of the Spirit manifest in our lives.

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ISBN 13: 978-1-84101-403-6

ISBN 10: 1-84101-403-6

UK £7.99



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Illustration: Faranak/Arena

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