

Objectives:

At the end of this chapter, middle schoolers should be able to:

- Understand the relationship between our actions and the formation of our character.
- Understand virtuous behavior is synonymous with truly human behavior.
- Understand the necessity of habit-forming practice for true personal growth.
- Differentiate between the nature of virtue and of vice and their respective effects.
- Appreciate the necessity of grace in the practice of virtue.
- Explore their own good and bad habits (particularly in regard to their use of major cultural forces such as computers, texting, video games, etc.).
- Understand the need for consistency in the practice of virtue, as opposed to having multiple "selves" for different groups and situations.
- Explore the importance of participating in the sacraments.
- Grow in their active participation as members of the Church.

**Tune In:**

Alive Again —
Matt Maher,
Alive Again

The Motions — Matthew
West, *Something to Say*

*Who I Am Hates Who I've
Been* — Relient K, *Hmhm*

More Than Fine —
Switchfoot, *Beautiful
Letdown*

Notes and Nuggets:

This chapter is designed to help middle schoolers see that practicing moral virtue is the means to fulfilling their human identity and, as such, is the means to real freedom and happiness. Often, morality is presented as a set of rules and mandates, but nobody really likes to be told what to do—especially middle schoolers. Moral development requires an understanding that certain actions are in harmony with human nature, while other actions oppose and violate it. God has given us rules and laws, but He has done so for a reason: that we might have life and have it abundantly (see John 10:10). A virtuous life is an abundant life; growing in virtue begets happiness. Unfortunately, we often mistake the purpose of rules as being a test of obedience; in reality, rules exist only to define truly human behavior and thus clarify the path to happiness.

A major strength of Blessed John Paul II's moral vision is his understanding of the connection between human acts and human identity. His doctoral dissertation, *The Acting Person*, emphasized that human acts inform human identity. The Catholic tradition of virtue hinges on this insight. Theology of the Body audiences do not often isolate the topic of virtue but speak often of self-mastery. Undoubtedly, especially in our culture, authentic "virtue catechesis" is very helpful in applying John Paul II's anthropology. Considering the sad underdevelopment of "virtue catechesis" in our culture, this chapter will present a broad understanding of virtue, vice, and grace, which will enable later discussion of the particular virtue of chastity.

Chapter Four

How Should I Act?



Opening Prayer:

Lead an opening prayer service. You can close this prayer with something like the following: "Lord, help us, through this chapter, to better receive Your gifts of faith, hope, and love. May these gifts help us resolve to practice and grow the other virtues needed to be men and women of great love. Amen."

Icebreaker

Habits

Begin by explaining that this activity is about habits. Present several statements about various good, bad, and funny habits that many of us share in common. Students will stand and remain standing if each consecutive statement applies to them.

First, say, "Stand if you have any good or bad habits." (All students should stand as this is a universally applicable statement.)

Next, say, "Remain standing (or stand again) if you have the habit of..." and read the following progression of statements. Some middle schoolers will sit when a particular statement does not apply to them; they should stand again if a later statement does apply to them.

- Brushing your teeth every day
- Saying "please" and "thank you"
- Checking your cell phone the minute school gets out
- Watching TV to fall asleep
- Salting your food before you even taste it
- Calling your grandmother "Granny"
- Biting your fingernails
- Washing your hands after using the bathroom
- Wearing jeans more than once in a row before washing them
- Eating a slice of pizza but leaving the crust
- Saying "God bless you" when you hear someone sneeze
- Going to church every week
- Flossing your teeth every day
- Having dessert after dinner
- Waiting until Sunday night to do your homework
- Having an after school snack
- Updating your Facebook status at least once a day
- Sleeping in on Saturday morning
- Hitting snooze more than once in a row
- Praying grace before meals

Students will probably have running commentary as they perform the icebreaker. Take the opportunity to focus on the general concept of habits and how they are formed.

End by explaining that we all have experience with habits, both the good and the bad, along with the simply quirky. This chapter will show us how we can use habits to help us fulfill our true identity as human persons made in God's image, created for love relationships, and destined for heaven.



VIDEO

Play "Introduction" and "Big Questions" before Story Starter.



Leader: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (*all make the Sign of the Cross*).

All respond: *In the divine image, Lord, You created him; male and female You created them.*

Reader 1: God, You made us good, both body and soul.

Response: *In the divine image, Lord, You created him; male and female You created them.*

Reader 2: God, You saw that it was not good for us to be alone, so You gave us one another for loving relationships.

Response: *In the divine image, Lord, You created him; male and female You created them.*

Reader 3: God, You are love, and You made us for love.

Response: *In the divine image, Lord, You created him; male and female You created them.*

Reader 4: God, You made us without anything to hide from You.

Response: *In the divine image, Lord, You created him; male and female You created them.*

Reader 5: God, You made us to be happy with You forever.

Response: *In the divine image, Lord, You created him; male and female You created them.*

Leader: Jesus, You taught us to address Your Father as You did, and so in the Holy Spirit we pray...

All: *Our Father...*

notes

STORY STARTER

Strings Attached

As I ripped off shreds of Christmas wrapping paper, my heart started beating faster. The shape of the box was right. Could it be ... ? Finally? I tore a huge piece of wrapping off the front of the box and whooped. There it was, in all its ivory-colored glory: My first REAL guitar! I was thirteen and flat-out in love—with a Japanese Fender Stratocaster made especially for left-handers like me.

I had wanted to play the guitar for as long as I could remember. Until now, though, Mom had always given me the same old line: "You have to take piano lessons first." But I hated playing the piano. All those practice drills

notes

killed me. I never moved beyond reading the finger numbers to reading the actual musical notes, mostly because I just didn't want to be a piano player. I wanted to be a rock star. So that bright Christmas morning was like winning a victory.

I felt pumped. I couldn't wait. I plugged in my guitar and ... suddenly realized I had no idea how to play it. I couldn't really do anything other than turn up the distortion and make loud noise. Not quite rock star material.

But wisely, Mom had given me another gift—five lessons with an expert guitar teacher. At my first lesson, I met my teacher, who had huge, curly '80s hair and wore tight, ripped jeans that might have been cool about ten years earlier. He also smelled like he preferred rock and roll to showers. Still, he was the real deal and played the guitar like a genius. He promised that he could teach me to play, too, if I followed his instructions. I sat down in his little studio with my small practice amp and shiny new guitar, expecting him to show me his moves.

Instead, he assigned boring drills. After he showed me how to hold a guitar, he taught me to play a few notes in a few steps. He gave me the "homework" of practicing the drills all week and said that once I had them down, he would teach me more and eventually how to play a song. I was disappointed. He was making guitar as pointless and boring as the old piano lessons: nothing but practice, the same stuff over and over, and definitely not the rock and roll dream I had for years.

Nonetheless, I obeyed. I played the drills over and over and found they were actually pretty hard. That first week, my fingertips started hurting and swelling from strumming the sharp guitar strings. Then, on top of the soreness, my fingertips developed painful blisters, but I kept going because I just wanted to be a guitar player and was willing to do whatever it took.

The next week, my instructor taught me some more boring drills and a few chords. But then, the week after that, he showed me that the chords I had been practicing actually formed a famous Jimi Hendrix song. I'll never forget that moment when it all came together. I had been learning, week after week, bit by bit, the ingredients to a really cool song. Now, I played it over and over until everyone in my neighborhood was sick of it. My sense of rhythm needed work, so I played every day for hours. Then I decided I wanted to sing and play at the same time. It was a rough experiment, especially on Mom, who had to endure my endless attempts to succeed. It took a really long time, but gradually I could tell I was getting better.

Eventually, I found myself playing and singing in front of people who actually wanted to hear me. I played and sang at coffee houses, cafés, local concerts, youth group events, and church. Today, years later, I play for other



Notes and Nuggets:

This "If You Ask Me..." is another great opportunity to set the stage with your own story or sharing.

people several times a week. How did I go from a guy goofing off with a distortion board to someone who gets paid to play and sing?

I had to correct my initial understanding of what makes a truly great guitar player—it isn't fame or wealth or selling out concerts like I had first thought. The only actual way to become a great guitar player is to play the guitar—a lot. Drill by boring drill. One chord at a time.

Otherwise known as practice.

— Colin MacIver

IF YOU ASK ME ...

1. I had to practice _____ really hard so that I could _____.
2. I don't like practicing _____, but it's worth it because _____.
3. One day I want to be a _____, so I will have to practice _____.

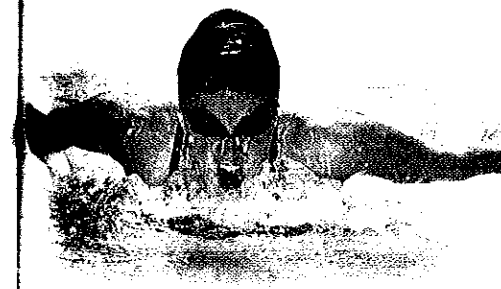
BRIDGING THE GAP

What do a gold medal-winning athlete, a museum-worthy artist, and an honor roll student have in common? It's the same thing that a great rock guitarist, an Oscar-winning actor, and a computer game champ have in common. To become who they want to be, those who excel work and practice hard.

You've heard that old saying "Practice makes perfect." Parents say it when they tell you to remake your bed neatly. Teachers or coaches say it when you complain about solving math problems or running the same old drills for the millionth time. Sometimes practice is so boring and repetitive that you might even wonder, *What's the point of this again?*

Then you get a good grade on a test or win a tough soccer match. And you realize: You couldn't have done it without all those drills or exercises. To become who we want to be, we have to practice.

You have learned a lot about what it means to be a truly free, happy, loving human person. You have learned that your body speaks a language and that it is meant to reveal your soul. You have learned that your ultimate destiny is eternal life in heaven. You have learned that your relationships are meant to reflect God's love. You have learned that, despite sin, God desires you so much that He has given you His very self.



Notes and Nuggets:

This section aims at helping middle schoolers distinguish between knowledge and action. Too often what we know is good differs from what we actually do. At an early age, we learn to excuse this conflict by rationalizing our behavior. At this point in their lives, middle schoolers can begin to recognize such rationalizations in themselves. A good "food-for-thought" activity here is to have your students list in one column some actions they know are good and, in another column, how their actual choices sometimes contradict this knowledge.

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All this knowledge is very important because it shows you who you are meant to be. You need to know how Jesus perfectly lived His humanity in order to know how you, too, should live. But it's not enough just to know these truths. You must practice them.

Think about why this is. You could know the entire history of the Olympics, but that knowledge alone would not make you an Olympic athlete. You could know everything about how guitars are made, but that knowledge wouldn't make you a guitarist. In the same way, just *knowing* that you would be truly free and happy in loving relationships cannot make you truly free or happy. You have to turn that knowledge into practice.

Sadly, our world, broken by sin, encourages us to do the opposite. We are surrounded by stuff that distracts us from knowing the truth and then gobbles up all the time we need to practice it. Even worse, we do or say things that oppose our true human dignity because we want to look cool. We don't practice fulfilling our humanity. We do what Adam and Eve did right after they sinned—we hide ourselves. We try to cover up our true selves with all kinds of social masks.

And all of this lack of practice is like training for a marathon by running in circles.

Becoming a young adult is about being mature enough to see how crazy and ineffective it is to run in circles. Maturity means you know the truth and strive to practice it, even if that means making sacrifices. You know who you are as a human person. You know who you are meant to become. You know where you are headed for eternity.

It's time to get real and start running the race.

IF YOU ASK ME ...

1. I know that I should not _____, but I do it anyway.
2. One thing that I know I should do and really want to do is _____.

TO THE CORE

You will never see a dog stealing a car or a horse shoplifting in a store. Animals don't rob banks or vandalize property. Then why do we sometimes call criminals "animals"? It's because car thieves and shoplifters aren't doing what human persons should do. We have a natural sense that some behavior just isn't appropriate for humans. Still, some behaviors are done by both humans and animals, but the consequences are very different because

Notes and Nuggets:

The word *virtue* comes from the Latin *virtus*, which implies great strength. A virtuous person is a person who is strong and healthy in their humanity.

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what is right for humans is unique. For instance, we wouldn't arrest a wolf for killing a deer. Yet we not only arrest but also imprison someone who kills an innocent person.

We sense that wrong behavior isn't "human." We also recognize that "right" behavior is especially ideal for human persons. A good person is patient, kind, and truthful. A good person is polite and puts others first. These behaviors and attitudes are the ideal ways a human person should act and think.

These ideal human behaviors and attitudes are called virtues. The more we practice virtue, the more truly human we are.

Virtue is defined as "a strong habit of doing what is good." Because virtues are invisible, they are expressed through what we do in the actions of our visible bodies. For example, you cannot literally see the virtue of patience. But you know people are patient when they have a strong habit of doing whatever they do... patiently.

Remember that a **habit** is something you do frequently, a routine you follow almost all the time. So having the "strong habit" of virtue means doing what is good all the time, not just when it's easy. Virtue grows when you practice it exactly when you don't feel like it! For example, if you are kind to people only until they annoy you, then you don't really have a strong habit of doing everything with kindness. The strong habit of kindness develops when you practice doing things kindly at the very moment you want to do something unkind.

Virtues are different from other good habits like brushing your teeth. When you practice a virtue in your actions, the habit eventually becomes so natural that it becomes part of who you are. For example, if you develop the strong habit of telling the truth, you become an ever more truthful person and the language of your body corresponds to your truthful heart.

Habits, of course, are developed through practice. Practice is the only way to become virtuous. It's just like playing guitar. You need to practice over and over again. You need to do drills and exercises, even when you don't feel like it. But in the end, you'll no longer be a guitar student who needs sheet music to know how to play. Because of your practice, when you pick up a guitar, you'll know how to make music.

Practicing virtue makes us free and happy because it fulfills who we are. A fish will never be freer and happier than when it swims in the ocean, because that's what it was made for. You will never be freer or happier than when you do what is good, because that's what you were made for. Original sin knocked everything out of order, but virtue puts our feelings, thoughts, and reactions back in order, allowing everything to work the way it's

Notes and Nuggets:

To get middle schoolers thinking more concretely, have them brainstorm a group list of virtues. For each virtue they name, have them also give an example of someone they believe exemplifies that virtue. After they finish, point out where on their list the students have naturally brainstormed the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) and the cardinal virtues (temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude). If any of these virtues do not surface, add them yourself.

Explain that the theological virtues are gifts from God and why the greatest of them, love, is the only one that remains eternally (see 1 Corinthians 13:13). In heaven, we no longer need faith, because we will see God face-to-face; we no longer need hope, because our hopes will be fulfilled. Explain that the cardinal virtues are the “hinges” upon which all other virtues depend.

Notes and Nuggets:

This may also be a good place to play a simple game of “virtue charades.” Divide the group or simply play as a class. One student will draw a card from a stack, on which is written a certain virtue. The student then mimes the chosen virtue as his/her team attempts to guess its identity correctly.

Notes and Nuggets:

In a discussion of virtue, there can be a tendency to focus on “doing what is right for goodness sake,” or even to state that this is what will make us truly happy. While doing what is good truly does make us more and more free, John Paul II always approached virtue with much more than an “ideal” (i.e., freedom) at stake; for him, it was always the value of the person at stake. Thus, when he tackles the connection between love and virtue, he probes what makes virtue possible: a person with free will. He explains that the human will must be rooted in and directed toward the good of persons.

Here, Blessed John Paul II makes an important distinction that many young people struggle to understand: “Love as experience should be subordinated to love as virtue, so much so that without love as virtue there can be no fullness in the experience of love” (*Love and Responsibility*, pp. 119-120). As a leader, remember that youth are often so caught up in the “emotions” of love that they sometimes seek such experiences even to the detriment of the other person, whom they seek to love.

As a leader, it is important to help young people recognize that it is not enough to *want* what is “good and best” for someone, but actually to *pursue* what is “good and best” for someone. In other words, we must always prioritize the other person in our search for love, making sure that the good of “us” (the couple) is never pursued at the expense of the perceived good of “you” (man or woman), the other whom we are trying to love. What is good for the individual we love must be pursued ahead of the common good of the couple. In fact, mutually seeking first the beloved’s true good will naturally lead to the true common good of both.

If the only proper response to another human person is love, then respect for that person must be the foundation of any relationship. John Paul II teaches us that the only way to “experience” love authentically is to order our hearts toward virtue.

supposed to. Virtue makes what we do on the outside match who we really are on the inside. Virtue is telling the truth with the language of your body.

IF YOU ASK ME ...

1. Three virtues I would like to grow in are _____, _____, and _____.
2. If I _____ every day, I think I can grow in the virtue of _____.

Grace Defeats Vice

Virtue has an enemy: vice. **Vice** is the strong habit of doing what is not good. If a strong habit of telling the truth is an example of virtue, a strong habit of telling lies is an example of vice. Vices have all the opposite characteristics and effects of virtues. Just as with practicing virtues, the more you practice a vice, the stronger the bad habit becomes. And just as virtues can become second nature, vices can also become so natural that they become part of your character, distorting the truth told by the language of the body.

For example, the more you give in to using bad language, the more comfortable you will become using bad language. This will eventually make you even more comfortable using even worse language. And so on.

But being comfortable with your vices is like being comfortable in a hungry lion’s den. Even if a vice seems like no big deal at first, all vices are dangerous because they ensnare us in sin. You see, habits are like seeds that grow and spread quickly. As plants in a garden grow, they produce new seeds that grow into new plants. Each new plant takes up more garden space. And where one plant is growing, another plant can’t.

This is why good habits—virtues—are so wonderful. They produce even more goodness and crowd out vices! But it’s also why bad habits—vices—are so deadly. The more evil increases, the less room there is for good.

Vices enslave us. There is no such thing as a bad habit that makes us freer. Let’s say you lie to your parents about disobeying them. Then you often need to tell another lie to hide the first one. Then you may need to tell even more lies to keep your cover. Sooner or later, your whole mind is too busy keeping track of the lies to do anything else. You were trying to avoid punishment, but now you’re anything but free. And usually, when your parents find out about your lies, you get a worse punishment than if you would have just told the truth in the first place!

In Your Faith

There are two kinds of virtue we recognize in our faith: cardinal virtues and theological virtues. The cardinal (the word literally means “hinge”) virtues—temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude—are like hinges that a door hangs upon. When we work to practice the cardinal virtues, we open the door to other natural virtues as well.

The theological virtues are faith, hope, and love. They are called theological because they have been given to us by God and direct us toward God. God gives us the theological virtues as gifts at Baptism; we choose to accept and develop them through our thoughts, words, and actions. With faith, we believe in God’s love. With hope, we are confident in God’s help and His promises. With love, we give the gift of ourselves in relationships.

You may not have as much faith, hope, and love at this point as you would like. Ask God to give you more of these gifts.

Notes and Nuggets:

As you prepare for this discussion, you could prepare a brief presentation on your own patron saint or a saint to whom you have a special devotion. What heroic virtues did your saint possess? Share with your middle schoolers and ask if any of them have a favorite saint.



In Your Faith

"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." – Philippians 4:8

"A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions. The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God" (CCC 1803).

Everyone struggles with personal vices because of original sin. Remember why this battle takes place—you are valuable and precious to God, so Satan wants to destroy you. But God's love is more powerful if you accept it. Yes, vice is difficult to overcome. Yes, practicing virtue can be hard. In fact, practicing virtue is impossible on our own. Think about how hard it is to break even the smallest bad habit, like biting your fingernails. It's like you just can't stop doing it!

We know virtue is how we should act because of who we are as human persons. We know it takes lots of practice to overcome strong vices by developing the strong habit of virtue. So to make virtue possible, God—who is always there to help us—empowers us with a special gift called **grace**. Won for us through Jesus' death and resurrection, grace is like spiritual electricity for your soul. Without grace, your soul would be lifeless. Grace cranks up your soul with power.

Imagine being stranded in the wilderness and trying to start a fire, caveman-style, by rubbing two sticks together. You would need perfect weather conditions, a specific kind of stick, and very strong hands. Even if all those requirements came together, it still could take hours to produce a spark, which then may or may not grow into a flame, and you'd probably get some nasty blisters. But without fire, you would not survive, so you would be forced to try to do what is almost impossible. Much of your time would be spent on starting and maintaining your fire.

Now imagine how matches would have radically changed your (or a caveman's) life. Instant, reliable, powerful fire! When we accept God's gift of grace, it is like we are cavemen who suddenly discover a box of matches. Our lives change. What once seemed so hard to do before now becomes possible.

Saints and Sacraments

We can look to thousands of examples of saints who have accepted God's grace and triumphed over vice in their lives. There are saints of every kind: male and female, young and old, rich and poor, popular and outcast, ancient and modern. Some saints were outstanding students, while others struggled in school. Some were married and some were in religious orders. But just like great athletes, musicians, and artists, the saints shared in common practice—in their case, the practice of virtue by accepting God's grace.

The greatest way we receive God's grace is through the **sacraments**, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist. The sacraments are outward expressions of invisible truths which give us God's grace—that sounds familiar, doesn't it? When you go to confession, for example, you see the outward sign of the priest, but what is actually happening is much more

than an awkward conversation. The sacrament is like the spout on a faucet that allows grace to flow into your soul as Jesus absolves your sins.

In the Eucharist, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is really present in what looks like simple bread and wine. The bread and wine become the actual Body and Blood of Jesus. When you receive communion, you don't receive a little piece of unleavened bread. You receive Jesus Himself. That's right, Jesus, the same Jesus who died and rose for you. And the closer you are to Jesus, who always did the right and virtuous thing, the more grace you'll have to do the same.

Them Bones, Them Bones...

Remember that song about how bones connect to each other? "The hip bone is connected to the thigh bone; the thigh bone is connected to the knee bone..."? Through that song, you learned one of the basic truths of human life: the body's many different parts must be connected to survive. If one part breaks down, the whole body is affected.

This truth about your body reveals a similar truth about your soul. Who you are as a human person is not divided into independent parts. You don't have one self for your friends, another self for your family, and still another self for church. But sometimes we act exactly that way.

Be honest with yourself. Do you sometimes say disrespectful things to your parents that you would never dream of saying to your school principal? Do you ever post statements online that you would never say to someone's face? Do you pretend to like movies or music that you really don't, just so no one thinks you're weird?

Any personal trainer will tell you that you cannot make progress toward a certain goal if other areas of your life undermine the goal. Even if you run ten miles every day, you will never win a marathon if all you ever eat is cotton candy.

Once again, this truth about your body reveals a truth about your soul. An important part of practicing true virtue is being consistent in all areas of your life. If you want to become your true self, you can't be a different "you" depending on who you are with. Your character as a human person is deeply affected by your actions. We must make sure our actions match who we are and who we want to become.

The Whole You

You are not a random creature wandering the earth. You are a child of God. How well do your actions match this true identity? Do your actions reveal that you are truly God's child, destined for something far greater than earth?



In Your Faith

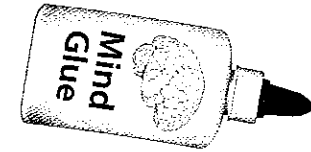
The Catechism says that "grace is a participation in the life of God" (CCC 1997). Wow! Grace is actually a share in God's life.

God is free; He is perfect. He is all-powerful and infinite. It is no wonder, then, that God's life in us is exactly what we need to be free and happy.

Notes and Nuggets:

Some informal discussion questions may bring out some good insight into the common adolescent phenomenon of having different "selves" for different parts of one's life.

1. Who is someone you know who is "true" to himself/herself no matter who is watching?
2. How many of you hate being lied to?
3. Why do you think people act one way with one group of friends and then differently with a different group? Is living this way a form of lying?
4. Why do we respect people who are "true" to themselves no matter who is around?
5. In what situations do you think it is hardest to "be yourself"?
6. What ways are you and your friends tempted to live as different selves?



E.R.

Where do you go in a medical emergency? You go to the E.R.—the emergency room—where doctors heal your body of its sickness or injury. Where do you go when your soul needs healing? You go to the "E.R."—the two powerful sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation, where our souls are healed of vice and sin.

E: The **Eucharist** is the source and summit of the entire Christian life (CCC 1324). If you want the power to grow in virtue, go to Mass where you can receive Jesus, the source of all virtue. First, you need to go to Mass at least every Sunday. Also, when you are at Mass, don't just be a warm body in the pew—be really there by focusing and participating! Let the language of your body speak about your inner love for Jesus. After all, Jesus is truly present at Mass. Are you?

R: **Reconciliation** is good medicine for when we fail to grow in virtue. It calls us deeper and deeper into conversion, which is turning our hearts toward Jesus (CCC 1423). We all need forgiveness and healing. We all need help to keep growing in virtue. Reconciliation helps us remain aware of the sins that have turned us away from Jesus and gives us the grace we need to move toward Him again. If we have committed a mortal sin, we should always receive Reconciliation before receiving the Eucharist.

Or do your actions say that you don't care about God? Do you forget about God as soon as the church door closes behind you every Sunday?

It is common at your age to question your faith. Why should you believe in God just because your parents have always told you to? Of course, you should listen to the wisdom handed on to you from your parents, but your faith must be your own to be real. How do you make it more and more your own? By studying it, by being open to it, and mostly by living it. Because who you are is revealed by what you do, the only way you can really be a believer in God is to do what a believer does: choose to believe in God, accept His grace, and follow His commandments. This is how you daily become a person of virtue. This is how you daily become a person of true love.

Following God by practicing virtue is not always easy. You may fear that you'll be labeled a "Jesus freak." You may worry that you won't be able to have any fun. But remember that even Jesus Himself faced fear and anxiety when He had to do what was right and virtuous. Sometimes people rejected or made fun of Him. Yet His great love defeated fear and anxiety every time.

God's love will also defeat any of the fear or anxiety you face when you try to do what is right and virtuous. God's love is always complete and always consistent. God's love is not divided into parts. It doesn't change depending on who's watching. He doesn't think some people are cooler or more popular or more worthy of love than others. God always loves, which is why we can say that God is love itself. You form yourself by what you do. God loves totally, absolutely, constantly—so He is love.

As you grow toward high school, you're at a point in life where you are starting to fill in the blanks about yourself: I do _____, which reveals that I am _____. How will you respond?



VIDEO

Play "Man on the Street" and "Trivia" before Work It Out.

VIRTUE BEADS

Have the students make Virtue Beads to help them to remember their resolutions and to track their progress. This craft activity will help middle schoolers complete either "Work It Out" option at the end of this chapter.

You will need short segments of leather cord, beads, and crosses. Each student gets a pre-cut cord and a cross. The cross should tie onto one end of the cord, and the beads should be strung behind it.

Then have them tie a knot in the center of the cord so that beads can, with some effort, slide over the knot from one side to the other.

Instruct your students that the cross is to remind us that growing in virtue requires God's grace, not just our own effort. The goal is for middle schoolers to seek out ten actions every day that can help them grow in their particular chosen virtue (as described in the two "Work It Out" assignments.)

Whenever an act is accomplished, have them slide a bead over the knot. At the end of the day, they are to say a prayer using the cross at the end of the cord as they pray for grace to continue growing the following day.

WORK IT OUT

A. Practically Speaking

There are many things in our daily lives that can lead us either to virtue or to vice, depending upon how they are used. Look at the items listed below and think about how you use each one. Next to each item, draw a "plus" (+) sign if you believe your usage of each item is leading you to virtue, or draw a "minus" (-) sign if you believe your usage is leading you to vice. Pick one that seems to be leading you to vice and focus on turning the (-) to a (+) in the upcoming week. Use your virtue beads to track your progress.

- Texting
- Social networking (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Video gaming
- Paying attention in school
- Being honest with parents
- Prayer
- Homework
- Language
- Weekend activity

B. The Virtue Project

Pick one particular virtue that you would like to grow in. Write it here: _____ For the next ten days, you will focus on practicing this virtue. Although it will definitely take more than ten days to establish this virtue deeply, ten days is a good start.

Pick someone whom you consider a good enough friend to help you grow in your chosen virtue. Write his/her name here: _____. Once a day for the ten project days, this friend will remind you about your virtue and ask how your practice is going. You can call, text, email, or have a good old-fashioned face-to-face chat with your partner.

Pick three specific actions you can do every day to help you grow in your chosen virtue. Don't choose vague actions like "Be nice to puppies and bunny rabbits." Choose actual concrete actions, for example: "Fold my laundry when I get home from school"; "Take out the trash every morning"; "Get up when my alarm rings so my mom doesn't have to yell"; or "Stop texting during school."



Notes and Nuggets:

The following assignment is a significant undertaking, but it is well worth the effort. It is a personal experiment in practicing a chosen virtue. The goal of the project is to help your middle schoolers experience firsthand that growth isn't easy—but that it is possible. It can be implemented differently depending on how often you meet with your students. If you meet daily, you will be able to monitor their participation and progress easily. If you meet less often, you may want to send daily email reminders, post it on a group/parent online interface, or ask parents to help keep middle schoolers on task at home. When introducing the project, help your students make a list of virtues on the board. You may want to give them some examples such as patience, kindness, generosity, courage, joy, love, cleanliness, chastity, responsibility, forgiveness, peacefulness, etc.

Throughout the day, use your virtue beads as a reminder and a help for tracking your progress.

For the next ten days, take five minutes each day to reflect on your progress. Fill in the checkbox below once a day.

| Day | Successes | Challenges | Strategies for tomorrow |
|-----|-----------|------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | | | |
| 2 | | | |
| 3 | | | |
| 4 | | | |
| 5 | | | |
| 6 | | | |
| 7 | | | |
| 8 | | | |
| 9 | | | |
| 10 | | | |

On Day 10, answer the following questions and discuss your experience with your class or youth group.

- What grade would I give myself if I were going to grade myself on how much I grew in my virtue?
- From this experiment, what did I learn about myself?
- In the future, what should I do to grow in my virtue?
- How much did my accountability partner help me?
- What are my overall feelings about doing this project?



Let us thank God for the Good News we have heard in this chapter as we pray:

Instruct me, O LORD, in the way of Your statutes, that I may exactly observe them.
Give me discernment, that I may observe Your law and keep it with all my heart.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

– From Psalm 119

Got It?

1. Practice
2. Virtue
3. Practicing
4. Vices
5. Grace, virtue
6. sacraments

GOT IT?

1. _____ makes perfect.
2. _____ is defined as "a strong habit of doing what is good."
3. _____ virtue makes us free and happy because it fulfills who we are.
4. _____ enslave us.
5. _____ is like spiritual electricity for your soul, which makes _____ possible.
6. The greatest way we receive God's grace is through the _____.

V̄O·CAB'·U·LAR'·Y

HABIT: An act repeated so frequently that it becomes a natural part of one's character.

VIRTUE: A good habit that empowers human persons to love God and others freely.

VICE: A bad habit that enslaves us to selfishness. Vice robs us of the power to love.

GRACE: God's free gift of divine life given to us through Jesus Christ, especially through the sacraments. Grace both inspires us and gives a powerful spiritual impact to our good efforts toward virtuous living.

SACRAMENT: Sacraments are visible signs of invisible realities. Jesus gives us the sacraments to bring grace to our souls. Sacraments are administered through the Church.

RECONCILIATION: Sometimes called confession, this sacrament allows us to express sorrow for our sins and have our souls wiped clean. Priests have the special gift of being the instruments of Jesus in confession. When we confess our sins to a priest, it's like we're talking directly to Jesus Himself, who truly forgives us.

EUCCHARIST: Sometimes called Holy Communion, the Eucharist is the greatest of all sacraments because it is literally Jesus' own Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. When the priest says the prayers of consecration at Mass, the appearance of bread and wine remains, but the bread and wine truly become Jesus Himself.