

# *Sapientia et Virtus: Wisdom and Virtue and the Formation of Persons*

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Welcome to the beginning of Augustine School's eighth year. We are prepared for a great year, and I am thankful you are here.

One of the things we try to do at Augustine School is to immerse our students in the intellectual tradition of western culture. We are unapologetic about this, and affirm that to be educated simply *is* to be immersed in—and conversant with—the broad sweep of one's own past.

We could spend much time thinking together about why we place such a high emphasis on being grounded in one's own intellectual tradition, and of an education that takes reading seriously: the notion that to be educated simply *is* to be grounded in one's own tradition, that it is important in one's life to know something about one's past. We might even mention that to get into college one has to have some minimal amount of study in history and literature.

But there is another motivation. We speak at Augustine School of forming wise and virtuous young men and women who are learning to submit all things to the universal lordship of Christ. At the heart of our school is the desire to *form* and *shape* a certain *kind* or *type* of person. What *are* we doing in this place?

If we are honest, as parents we want our children to *be* certain kinds of persons. And as teachers and administration we desire to see these children become certain kinds of persons. Over the years, when I have spoken with families considering Augustine School, I often say something like the following to mom and/or dad: "You should look every Head of School, or administrator, in the eye and ask, 'What is your goal for my child when they turn eighteen years old?'" And I counsel families that if the leader of a school cannot answer that question, they should quickly move on to the next school! If the leader *can* answer that question, families need to ask, "Does the goal this school has for my children resonate with my *own* goal for my children?"

At Augustine School our goal is the formation of wise and virtuous persons who are learning to submit all things to the universal lordship of Christ. *Wisdom* and *virtue* are older words and concepts worth recovering. Christians—at their best—have always desired an education where both *wisdom* and *virtue* are central. And if we are serious about *truly* forming a certain kind of person, we must always insist that true education is about leading and inspiring students to become wise, and to become virtuous. And as Christians we have a *particular* way of understanding wisdom and virtue. Wisdom and virtue are *both* gifts. And they are both *in Christ*. According to Paul, the *only* really wise person is the person who has the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2), and in having the mind of Christ we can—at least to a degree—think God's thoughts after Him. And virtue—true virtue—is something that develops in a person—as Paul teaches—as Christ is formed in them (Galatians 4:19).

This way of thinking—where wisdom and virtue ultimately are rooted in, and flow from the gospel—is seen in our school motto—*nullus intellectus sine cruce*—"there is no understanding without the cross." When we are persons who are shaped and changed by the cross, then we will be persons

who—over time—are becoming wise and virtuous. As Christ is formed in us, as we are conformed to the image of the Son, then *true* wisdom and virtue are produced in us.

And we adults can inspire our children and students towards wisdom and virtue by how we act. The children in our charge really do not need us to be hip and cute. They need us to be adults. If you are a dad, your child or children need you to be a dad. If you are a mom, your child needs you to be a mom. Rather than seeing you working overdrive to keep up with whatever the dominant culture is saying is the norm, they need to see you being counter-cultural, and having the spiritual and mental fortitude to resist the cultural trends and moods of the day. Being relevant is highly over-rated. They need to see that when they have the gumption to stand for truth and righteousness, when they desire to do the right thing—even if they are standing against the tide—that you are standing with them. While I do believe that all of us are bound up in Adam’s transgression, and that all of our being is affected by sin, I also suspect that inside each boy is a knight yearning for the chance to rescue a young damsel from a dragon (and to valiantly—and with much gore—kill the dragon in the process). And I suspect that inside each girl is a lady desiring to be honorable and chaste and pure. It is my hope that Augustine School—under God—will form and send out many knights and ladies over the years.

Stories—whether from history or from literature—can also have an almost magical effect in helping students to fall in love with wisdom and virtue. When one reads in *The Lord of the Rings* of Sam Gamgee and Frodo Baggins, and of the danger, adventure, and friendship they share, who can help but want to imitate the character and friendship of these two hobbits? When one reads about the sterling character of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and his unpopular stance for what is right, who can help but want to be a chivalrous—indeed southern—gentleman (even if one does not happen to have the looks of Gregory Peck?).

We need boys who will read *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* with Mrs. Tilleros, and who—when reading about the chivalry of Reepicheep (I know, he is a male *mouse*—but work with me), will be led to imitate such unbounded courage and chivalry. And we hope that these boys—in their own dark moments will recall the heroism and fortitude of Reepicheep. Our boys may be tempted to act like the sniveling “old” Eustace at times—but I hope that time at Augustine School inspires our boys to want to follow Reepicheep to very the end of the world.

We need girls who will read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and will act like Lucy Pevensie. Remember Lucy Pevensie? She had courage. When Tumnus the Faun admitted that he was planning on handing her over to the White Witch, she in effect told him, “No you will not. You are a better Faun than that.” She—in fact—*scolded* him, and simultaneously called him to be the person (or faun!) he ought to be. When her siblings refused to believe that she was telling the truth about Aslan, she stuck to her word. She believed in Aslan even when all those around her thought she was foolish.

Do we want our children to look “foolish?” In one sense that is the dream of every Christian parent. We want them to be marked by a commitment to the gospel—the good news—that the unbelieving world sees as “foolishness.” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18: “<sup>18</sup>For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” And a few verses later: “<sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” We are seeking for our children to be considered fools. If Augustine School—and those families that make up

the Augustine School community—are truly committed to forming wise and virtuous young men and women who submit all things to the universal lordship of Christ, then to the extent that we “succeed,” we are committed to forming fools. We are committed to sending young men and women into the world who will—if they are faithful—be looked down upon and who will have never-ending opportunities to be men and women of character. If our Lord Jesus had “nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20), and if he was “despised and rejected by men” (Isaiah 53:3), then we should expect—and even hope for—this same treatment to at least in some sense mark the lives of our children.

We might even say that while some see education as a means by which boys and girls are taught to be “adjusted to life,” we seek nothing of the kind. For as Richard Weaver has written, “It is far from likely that the greatest men of the past, including not only famous ones but also great benefactors of humanity, have been ‘adjusted’ in this sense.” Rather, writes Weaver, great men “were filled with toil, strenuousness, anxiety, self-sacrifice, and sometimes a good bit of friction with their environment.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the wisdom and virtue portrayed in virtually all great literature, and taught clearly in Scripture is wisdom and virtue that helps us to be faithful, but does not promise immediate earthly gain, power, prestige, or popularity.

In short, at Augustine School we do not take as our charter document Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, but we rather look to the scrolls of Holy Scripture, which outline a life of discipleship in which we follow our Lord wherever he goes—which inevitably will mean suffering, persecution, and appearing to be—in a sense—*not* adjusted to the world. Indeed, if we appear to be *too* adjusted to the world, we are probably not being faithful to our Lord, for as Robert Jenson has written, “Since the message we have for the world contradicts everything the world could possibly suppose, argument is guaranteed whenever we show up—unless we have forgotten ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

Let us follow Jenson—and of course more ultimately Jesus—and not forget ourselves. We are training children to think God’s thoughts after Him, to interpret and make sense of the world in light of who God is and what He has spoken to us. We are training them to use their minds for the glory of God. We are also preparing them for life of counter-cultural activity. And—as hard as it is to think about—we are training them to suffer for the gospel’s sake. If we are serious about forming wise and virtuous young men and women, we are hoping that they will be men and women who run the race of life to the glory of God, and we hope and pray that our Lord’s words to them at the last day will be “well done good and faithful servant.” All of our studies, relationships, and efforts at Augustine School are engaged in against the grand backdrop of the full flowering of the city of God. From the youngest Pre-K students to our faculty member with the most experience in living, all of us—if we are followers of the risen Lord Jesus—are pilgrims traveling to the celestial city. We seek wisdom and virtue because these are the traits that characterize those persons who make up the Christian church—the church that

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Weaver, “Education and the Individual,” in *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard Weaver, 1929-1963* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2000), 189.

<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “On the Renewing of the Mind: Reflections on the Calling of Christian Intellectuals,” in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Eerdmans, 1995), 170.

will one day be presented to the Lord Jesus as His bride. Wisdom and virtue—rooted in and flowing from the gospel, and pictured beautifully in the best of literature—should characterize us as Christians.

I pray that you Augustine School students will seek wisdom and virtue, that you will be satisfied with nothing less, and that when the surrounding culture is calling you to be unwise, and calling you to laugh at, and mock, and to reject virtue, that you might recall the stories of Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee, of Lucy Pevensie and Reepicheep, of Atticus Finch, and ultimately of Jesus. And that—following the Lord Jesus—you will set your face toward the city of God, and seek wisdom and virtue with all of who you are. May God be pleased to bring it about.

