

Production or Virtue?

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We are fanatics for productivity. Some of us are like miniature corporations ticking off our project objectives and meeting our target points. And for many, productivity is the canon for self-evaluation.



I started to realize this about myself early in my marriage when I would get flustered by changed plans. A late wife, a crying baby, a crashed computer. When these things kept me from accomplishing my goals, I would grind my teeth and try to quell rising frustration.

If I could remain active in the things that I had planned and produce the things that I had intended, I felt better. I felt more successful, more pleasing to God, more respected by those around me. When I didn't, I felt guilty, lazy, or even judged.

But my evaluative criteria were distorted. Yes, there is no doubt that we need to be setting and achieving godly goals. And there certainly are times when we need to examine our productivity. However, should we act as if our production were God's chief concern? I think not. What he cares about far more is *virtue*.

By virtue I mean the kind of person we are, our character, the carefully-cultivated dispositions of our heart that manifest themselves in our everyday actions and reactions. It is not always *what* you accomplish that matters, but *how* you do it, *why* you do it, and ultimately *who you are* even when you can't do it.

Paul was a champion of this kind of virtue orientation. You get a taste of this in the following one of many examples:

... that you lay aside the old man, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, which in the likeness of

God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Eph 4:22-24)

For Paul, the Christian is one who leaves behind her identification with the old, corrupt, humanity (the "old man," in Paul's language) and joins herself to a new humanity (the "new man") which is being created in righteousness after the image of God. God effects this transformation through the death and resurrection of Jesus (Eph 2:1-10) and the work of the Spirit (Gal 5:15-24).

The end result is a new kind of person. She has transitioned from being a corrupt person to a righteous person by an inward transformation of mind and heart. This inward change then expresses itself in new behavioral patterns. The liar becomes truthful, the thief becomes generous, the destructive person becomes edifying, the bitter becomes forgiving, and so on (Eph 4:25-5:16). Put together, we can call this inward change and the resulting behaviors *virtue*.

Now observe how this affects our fanaticism about productivity. If we emphasize the kind of person we are—loving, patient, kind, content, worshipful, just—more than the goals that we accomplish, we step into a very different lifestyle.

I may set a goal, even a small one (like, write this article), but what happens when it is interrupted? Maybe my wife needs me to take care of our son for an hour while she goes grocery shopping. This is where my priorities change the outcome of the situation. If I prioritize production, I end up frustrated, actually abandoning virtue and toying with anger or bitterness. If I prioritize virtue, I recognize that these changing circumstances do not hinder me from continually becoming a new person in Christ. I embrace the interruption as a way to cultivate the heart attitudes and behavioral patterns of love and service.

You see, a virtue orientation weathers the storms of changed plans and shifting goals. Life stops being about doing something and begins to be about being someone. We are not corporations, we are new creations. That is what God loves to make of us.