

# *VIRTUE AND VICE: THE PERSONAL APPLICATION OF EPISTOLARY ETHICAL LISTS IN THEIR HISTORICAL, CANONICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL CONTEXTS*

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## **SUMMARY**

Interpretation of Scripture is not complete until it has been applied. *Virtue and Vice* examines the personal application of New Testament ethical lists.

Catalogues of virtue and vice were common modes of instruction for both Greco-Roman philosophers and the rabbis of Hellenistic Judaism. New Testament writers also used this method to teach Christian morality. Their theological perspective and worldview, however, came from the Old Testament and its fulfilment in Jesus, the Messiah.

In context, the NT ethical lists instruct, motivate, warn, and guide Christians toward right behaviour and harmonious relationships. The lists occur as one mode of instruction in larger paraenetic material. They must therefore be studied as sub-genres of these larger units. The classic list of Philippians 4:8 provides a guide to moral discernment (and action) that preserves the unity of the congregation in the humility of Christ.

Personal application takes place in a biblical theological framework. The interpretation of a passage is viewed within the overall biblical progress of God's redemptive purposes. Biblical theology also assists the student to position himself/herself in relation to the passage under study. The literary nature of scriptural texts makes it necessary to distinguish the abiding theological principles from the merely cultural or occasional. A principle can be re-applied in a parallel contemporary context. Different genres (such as ethical lists) suggest ways to apply the text. For instance, ethical lists serve as ideals and examples of Christian conduct. The personal dynamics of faith in Christ, dependence upon the Holy Spirit, and a continual process of obedience contribute to the relevance of the text. These three together give the confidence that God's Word may be both understood and lived with fresh power for today.

Several of the catalogues occur in contexts of Christian unity in the midst of ethnic and social diversity (Gal. 5:16-25; Eph. 4-6; Phil. 4:8; Col. 3:1-17). They depict an ideal of oneness in Christ between Jew and Gentile. This new identity in Christ does not remove, but transcends ethnic and status differences in local congregations. Models for intentionally implementing Christian unity are assimilation, diversity, and networking.