

The Cardinal Virtue of Courage

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When I think of courage, two Bible passages come to mind: The first is Psalm 23:4: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” Verse one in this chapter makes it clear that our courage comes from the Lord, who is our Shepherd.

All of Psalm 91 is another passage that speaks of courage, and it’s one that was particularly meaningful to me during Operation Desert Storm in 1991: “...He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day...” These were comforting words as we faced the world’s fourth largest land army entrenched with mine fields and possible chemical weapons.

Courage and fortitude make us effective Christians, as it allows us to put the other cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, and temperance into action. Maya Angelou summed it up well: “Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can’t practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.”

My story contains fear, failure, guilt, restoration, and redemption. In 1966 I was commanding Company “M” of Marines in Vietnam. My zone of action was a hamlet that turned out to be extremely well defended. I tried to supply all the support I could but it wasn’t going to budge. The sun was going down and we still hadn’t achieved our objective. There was no recourse but to give the order, “Fix bayonets.” This was one of the few times a bayonet assault was used in Vietnam. When I gave that order, an unusual calm came over our company as we realized the serious combat situation we faced. We wouldn’t be shooting the enemy from hundreds of yards away. We wouldn’t be dropping bombs on the enemy. We would be going face to face with an entrenched enemy and beating to death other human beings.

We took the hamlet, but later on that night I learned that one of my squad leaders, who was also a friend, had been killed. I told my executive officer that I was going to recover his body. He challenged that decision but I didn’t want to put others at risk and knew I could accomplish it. A couple of Marines helped me find Corporal Miller’s body, I put him on my shoulder, and we brought him back into the lines. The next day the battalion commander saw blood on my flak jacket and asked if I was wounded. “No sir,” I replied, “I retrieved Corporal Miller’s body and that was his blood.” The commander was livid and told me that was the dumbest thing I could have done, and ordered me, “Don’t ever do anything like that again!”

At that moment, I experienced a life-changing situation. I could have remained silent and complied with his order, but I would have felt guilty for the rest of my life if I didn’t speak up. I’ve learned that God gives us golden opportunities to keep our mouths shut, but I did not take that opportunity in this moment. Taking a deep breath, I said, “Colonel, I know what you’re saying but you’ve got to know I’d do the same thing again because I’ll never leave behind a dead or wounded Marine.” He went ballistic and was in the process of relieving me of my command. If you are relieved of command while in combat it means that you are finished in the Marine Corp. As I listened to him start relieving me of my command, I felt all my boyhood dreams of being a Marine come crashing down. I even wondered why God was punishing me.

While the colonel was still screaming at me, a helicopter arrived and the assistant division commander of the first Marine Division got out. He asked where the commanding officer was, and the Marines who were

watching the entire situation started backing up, believing that the brigadier general was going to explode at me as well. As the general walked over toward me, I prayed, “God, isn’t enough enough? It’s enough that I’m being relieved of duty, and now the assistant division commander is going to add to the situation?” Instead, the general walked over to us, grabbed my hand with one hand while beating my back with the other, and said, “Captain, what a great job you did. That’s exactly what we needed.” He then turned to the commander and said, “Colonel, with company commanders like this how can you go wrong?” He then walked away, got into the helicopter, and left.

Now, it took physical courage to carry out the bayonet assault, but the moral courage it took to stand up to the commander was tougher, yet somehow God gave me redemption in the situation. I’ve thought of that situation almost every day since -- it was a defining moment of my life. It reminds me of the third verse of “Amazing Grace”: “Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come. ‘Twas grace that brought me safe this far and grace will lead me home.”

That is my story of courage, but it’s vital to understand that behind every courageous act is love. You can’t have courage without love, or love without courage. The calmness our company felt when heading into battle with bayonets fixed had an underlying love behind it, because we loved our fellow soldiers and wanted to make sure they survived – and we were willing to do whatever it took to ensure our mission was accomplished for their sakes. Love is what causes humans to do what has to be done, even in the face of danger.

How do we train young military personnel to courage, even before they need to exhibit it? For physical courage, history is a great teacher. As a Marine, I’ve read a lot of history of famous battles and military actions. Those taught me what we are capable of doing when things get tough. Learning these stories from our military history, our lore, is important because courage is mandatory in the military, because without physical courage the mission won’t be accomplished. We can also learn about moral courage from the examples of others.

Some officers are willing to risk their lives in combat, but aren’t willing to risk their careers by making the right, ethical decision. We need to set our priorities and prepare to stand up for them ahead of time so that, when faced with terrible choices, we have done our best to follow God.

Training and education are needed for both physical and moral courage. Training is preparation for certainty, education is preparation for uncertainty. In our lives and careers, we will face and need to solve uncertain situations. I recommend a book called “How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living” by Rushworth M. Kidder. In this book the author posits that morality is a choice between right and wrong, while ethics is a choice between right and right. Whenever a leader makes an ethical decision, he is choosing one right decision over another right decision. The author also discusses four ethical decisions we will face: justice vs. mercy, honesty vs. loyalty, short term benefits vs. long term benefits, and the good of the individual vs. the good of the group.

To find what right actions and choices look like, look for an example. Jesus showed courage at multiple stages of his life. He showed courage in choosing twelve disciples who would be the pillars who carried on his message to the world. He showed courage and righteous anger when he went into the temple and overturned the tables of the moneylenders. He showed courage when he spoke to the Roman centurion, a leader of the ruling army, and cared for his needs as a human being. And Jesus showed courage in facing and enduring the horrible pain and torture of the crucifixion. Even though He knew ahead of time what He would face, Jesus was willing to suffer and die for us. His ultimate courage at the cross was linked completely with His love for us.

Discussion Questions:

1. Having courage is a necessary and good thing. Have you seen examples of courageous behavior by others that have inspired you? Share those examples with others as you feel led.
2. Courage is necessary and vital in our military careers. How have you prepared to show courage in your personal life and in your career? Are there other ways in which you can prepare, based on what you've learned in this devotional?
3. As vital as courage is, too much courage can become rashness, often fueled by pride. Courage can also be disguised as reckless ambition. Too little courage can easily become cowardice. How do you maintain a balance at the appropriate time?
4. What are some biblical examples of men and women of courage and fortitude?