



Reviving the Virtues, Part 3: True Grit

Chuck Colson | First Published: May 17, 1995

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"Mistakes were made," the mayor of Chicago told reporters. He had been asked to comment on city officials recently convicted on corruption charges, and he resorted to the classic dodge: "Mistakes were made" deflects criticism while assigning personal responsibility to no one.

We live in a bureaucratic age that is sorely lacking in moral courage. Fifty years ago, James Burnham foresaw what he called "the managerial revolution," the emergence of a new class of professional bureaucrats who would dominate all our institutions: government, business, education, even the church. These mushrooming bureaucracies have submerged individual responsibility and blunted the edge of personal accountability.

No wonder we have so few heroes to look up to today—so few of what Donald Davidson, in his famous poem, called "The Tall Men." Every age has its characteristic temptations, and today the very structure of modern institutions works against the cultivation of moral courage.

In his book *Back to Virtue*, Peter Kreeft defines moral courage as "the willingness to act on your convictions even if it costs you something, such as convenience or social acceptance." Philosopher Josef Pieper describes courage as the "readiness to die . . . in battle" against evil. That may mean dying physically, as when the church is being persecuted. Or it may mean dying internally—dying to ourselves—which is the more common meaning for you and me. To die to our hopes and ambitions in this world, and to live for God, often requires the practice of genuine moral courage.

How do we develop this kind of courage?

The answer, paradoxically, is by facing up to our fears. As Pieper explains, the essence of courage is not that we are never afraid but that we refuse to be controlled by our fears: that we refuse to allow fear to push us into doing wrong or to keep us from doing right.

Think of the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz* and his quest for courage. The wizard turns out

to be a humbug, of course, but he does offer words of wisdom: "There's no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger," he tells the Cowardly Lion. "True courage is facing danger when you are afraid."

And how do we face danger and overcome fear?

By fearing God more than anything else. When James Calvert went out as a missionary to the cannibals of the Fiji Islands, the captain of his ship sought to turn him back.

"You'll lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages," he cried. Calvert only replied, "We died before we came here." By dying to his own life internally before God, Calvert was prepared to face external dangers courageously.

In today's industrialized mass culture, we are under great pressure to fit in, to conform, to hand over control of our lives to the large bureaucracies that dominate our social institutions. If we want to be men and women of virtue in an age of faceless bureaucracies, we must begin with the courage to face God—to acknowledge Him as the King of the universe and Lord of our lives.

For only when we fear God will we have the power to overcome all our other fears.



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