

## Chapter 3

### C.S. Lewis as Character Educator for the World

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you

Matthew 7:12<sup>1</sup>

Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.

Analects of Confucius xv:23<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter 1, we drew attention to C.S. Lewis' insight that children learn 'the rule of decent behaviour' from four sources: parents, teachers, friends and books. In Chapter 2, we looked at how families of character and schools of character make a difference and considered Lewis' perceptive critique of teaching and school leadership.

In this chapter, we go further into his thinking about the nature of morality and virtue and how to foster its development. We also consider his views on the similarities and differences between 'good character' of the sort we want all people to develop and 'Christian character', whose formation requires faith and grace.

What is remarkable about C.S. Lewis as a 'character educator'<sup>3</sup> is the twofold nature of his contribution: first, as a children's author, he wrote stories that dramatically depict the clash of good and evil and illustrate character development; and, second, as a world-class scholar, educator and Christian apologist, he wrote non-fiction books that offer important insights concerning human nature and character.

As part of his work as an expert on literature, C.S. Lewis studied the writings of diverse cultures. In *The Abolition of Man*, he reported something that many people today might find surprising: ancient and modern cultures around the world, while differing in many respects, nevertheless agree on matters of right and wrong when it comes to many of the basics. Lewis makes the same point in *Mere Christianity*.

### **C.S. Lewis on Character: Cultures Ancient and Modern Agree on the Moral Basics**

We have been privileged to speak on moral and character education in many different places – from China, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines to Cambridge, Oxford, London, Birmingham, Exeter and Leeds in Britain and Minneapolis St Paul, Chicago, Washington, DC, Boston, Virginia and Texas in the United States. Parents and teachers from different cultures and faiths tell us they want their children to become people of character – to make good choices, show love and kindness, be honest and fair, exercise self-control, persevere in the face of difficulty and have the courage to do the right thing even when it carries a cost.<sup>4</sup>

Across cultures, C.S. Lewis found, there were moral laws commanding justice, condemning greed and cruelty and specifying duties to children, elders and other vulnerable persons. The Golden Rule – ‘Treat others as you wish to be treated’ – is another oft-cited example of a moral principle that can be found, in one form or another, across the world. These moral prescriptions, Lewis pointed out, are set out in the great texts of religions, traditions and cultures as diverse as the ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Old Norse, Chinese, Indian, Roman, Greek, Australian Aboriginal and American Indian.<sup>5</sup>

This still-present, cross-cultural recognition of basic moral laws helps make character education possible in diverse communities and societies today. Public or secular schools serving increasingly pluralistic populations must find common moral ground; they must identify and teach ‘core ethical values’ that are shared by people with different backgrounds who might have opposing moral or religious beliefs about specific value-laden issues.

Moral philosophers have used the term ‘natural moral law’ to describe the widely affirmed moral prescriptions that Lewis

wrote about in *The Abolition of Man*. These moral prescriptions are considered 'natural' not in the sense that we always or 'naturally' obey them (we obviously do not), but that they can be known through a 'moral sense' that appears to be part of our shared human 'nature'.

Natural law was invoked by judges in the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals, who defended their actions by saying they were simply obeying orders from superiors or the laws of the Third Reich. However, the Nuremberg judges rejected such reasoning. They argued that the accused could not justify their conduct by appealing to orders or civil laws that violated self-evident principles of the natural law. The judges were saying, in effect, that the Nazi officers 'should have known better'. They should have consulted the 'moral law within' that any human conscience can consult if there is will enough to do so.

Our make-up as human beings seems to be such that, when we follow natural moral laws like the Golden Rule, we make other people happy and are happier ourselves. By contrast, when we go against these moral laws – when we act maliciously, or just behave in egocentric and selfish ways that ignore the needs of others – we create problems for other people and, sooner or later, problems for ourselves (people react negatively to our behaviour, we begin to think less of ourselves and so on). C.S. Lewis called these moral laws by their ancient Chinese name, the *Tao*.<sup>6</sup> This is how he described the *Tao*:

It is the Way in which the universe goes on. . . . It is also the Way which every man should tread. . . . This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.<sup>7</sup>

While we have free will to disregard the natural moral law, doing so has consequences that are inescapable. Lewis goes on to describe new 'ideologies' as 'a rebellion of the branches against the tree'<sup>8</sup> and points out that: 'the educational problem is wholly different according as you stand within or without the *Tao*.'<sup>9</sup> Clearly, whether one recognises the objective truth of moral law has a determining influence on many areas of life:

This thing which I have called for convenience the *Tao*, and which others may call Natural Law or Traditional

Morality . . . is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained.<sup>10</sup>

Where does the human capacity to recognise the goodness of virtues and the requirements of natural law come from? Christians see this natural moral law as a set of directions written into our created human nature by God in order that we might know how we ought to act. In the New Testament, reference to the natural moral law can be found in the epistles of St Paul. He pointed out that people who were not part of the Judeo-Christian tradition nevertheless grasped the natural moral law that was 'written in their hearts'.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, at about the same time that Paul wrote those words, the Roman statesman Cicero was writing something very similar, that there is a 'true law' that is 'unchangeable and eternal'.<sup>12</sup>

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis asks us to try to imagine a completely different sort of morality 'where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him'.<sup>13</sup> The fact that we would not approve of such behaviour can be taken as evidence that humans have a natural, shared, sense of right and wrong. Giving an example from soccer, he pointed out that 'there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football'.<sup>14</sup> In the 'game' of life, Lewis argued, we instinctively recognise a 'foul' when we see one. Lewis makes this astute observation about the nature of moral values:

The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and new sky for it to move in.<sup>15</sup>

### Children's Understanding of Natural Law

C.S. Lewis observes that even children 'know better'. Listen to them quarrelling; they invoke natural law. They say things like: 'How would you like it if anyone did the same to you?' or 'That's my seat, I was there first', or 'Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm', or 'Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine' or 'Come on, you promised'.<sup>16</sup>

Note, Lewis says, that the person who says such things is not merely saying that the other person's behaviour does not please

him. Rather, he is appealing to some kind of standard he expects the other person to know about. Furthermore, the other person very seldom replies, 'I don't give a hoot about your standard.' Instead, he nearly always tries to show that what he did does not really go against the standard or that, if it does, there is some extenuating circumstance. Both disputants have in mind some kind of law or rule of fair play, or decent behaviour, or morality, or whatever we wish to call it, about which, at bottom, they really agree.

Psychological research confirms what Lewis observed about children's understanding of the natural moral law. For example, children as young as three are able to distinguish between moral wrongdoing, such as unfair or hurtful actions, and actions that might only be prohibited by a social convention, but which do not involve doing anything morally wrong. Here, for example, is an interview of three-year-old 'Suzie', who has just seen one child in the playground intentionally hit another:

*Interviewer:* Did you see what just happened?

*Suzie:* Yes. They were playing, and John hit him too hard.

*Interviewer:* Is there a rule about that?

*Suzie:* Yes. You're not to hit hard.

*Interviewer:* What if there were no rule about hitting hard, would it be right to do it then?

*Suzie:* No.

*Interviewer:* Why not?

*Suzie:* Because he could get hurt and start to cry.

In three separate studies – two with pre-kindergarten (nursery) children and one with elementary (infants) school children – more than 85 per cent at each developmental level said that hitting would still be wrong even if there were no rule against it.<sup>17</sup>

### The Cardinal Virtues

Virtues are another way of talking about natural moral law. Virtues are objectively good qualities of character – good for the individual person and good for the whole of society. We admire and appreciate these qualities when we encounter them in other people. When we act virtuously ourselves – do our jobs well, exercise self-control and treat people with respect and kindness – we make others happy and are happier ourselves. Hence the saying, 'Virtue is its own reward'.

Since the time of Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, four virtues – prudence (wisdom), temperance (self-control), justice (fairness) and fortitude (courage) – have been among those recognised as necessary for all people who wish to live happy and fulfilling lives. They are called the ‘cardinal’ virtues because the Latin word ‘cardo’ means ‘a hinge’ and the quality of our lives ‘hinges’ on these virtues.

C.S. Lewis is down-to-earth in the way he describes the four cardinal virtues in *Mere Christianity*. He explains that prudence means common sense, or right thinking, whereby we use our intelligence to choose a good way to achieve a good goal. Temperance means doing things to the right degree rather than to excess. Lewis reminds us that people who make clothes or golf or a motorcycle or a dog the centre of their lives can be considered just as intemperate as someone who gets drunk. Justice is treating others with the respect that all people deserve. It is summed up by words like ‘fairness’ and ‘promise-keeping’. Fortitude is ‘guts’ in the sense of moral strength or courage. C.S. Lewis realistically notes that you cannot practise any of the other virtues for very long before ‘bringing this one into play’.<sup>18</sup> Think of a child who sees someone being bullied on the playground; he or she needs some degree of courage in order to practise the virtue of kindness – by telling the bully to stop, reporting it to an adult or comforting the victim after the incident.

The four cardinal virtues make up much of what constitutes good character but not all of it. Lewis, like others who write about character, considered other virtues important as well. Two such virtues are love (which goes beyond fairness and includes sacrificing for the sake of others) and integrity (which includes standing up for what’s right and not lying to others or ourselves). In our *Narnian Virtues* character education research, we included love and integrity – along with wisdom, self-control, fortitude and justice – among the ‘big six’ virtues that play a major role in C.S. Lewis’ Narnia stories<sup>19</sup> and in all our lives.

Human beings, Lewis maintained, do not ‘invent’ these virtues, any more than we invent the natural moral law that tells us what’s right and wrong. Virtues are truly good human qualities, ones that have proven worth in helping us to lead good lives as individuals and to live together harmoniously in our families, schools and communities. The goodness of virtues is objective, with real benefits that we can experience. In *Mere*

*Christianity* C.S. Lewis makes the point that objective morality exists independently of what we might happen to believe by comparing it to New York City: whatever our personal views of the 'Big Apple', it still exists.<sup>20</sup>

It may surprise some Christians to learn that, in *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis declares he is *not* writing from a Christian or even theistic position. He is simply pointing to the evidence of a moral law that can be found in the consciousness of human beings across diverse cultures and through the centuries. This moral law, knowable through reason, provides a basis for character education today in a range of settings. People of all faiths, and people of no faith, can agree on moral basics, like fairness and honesty, that we should teach, model and hold students accountable to as members of their families, schools and communities.

### **Why Don't We Always Do What We Know Is Right?**

If the natural moral law is written on the human heart and knowable through human reason, a question arises: Why don't we always do what we know is right? Answering that question helps us understand why character education is so important.

We will recall from Chapter 2 a big idea that we introduced from character psychology – that character has three interdependent components: knowing what's right, caring about what's right and doing what's right. Head, heart and hand. All three components are essential; moral failure can stem from a deficiency in any one component. In the home and school, character education has the formidable job of developing all three dimensions.

Let's start with character's first component, knowing what's right. Although people young and old appear able to understand and apply natural moral law (such as the Golden Rule) in certain situations, their judgement of right and wrong in other situations can be sorely lacking. Consider, for example, a survey of nearly 2,000 students aged between twelve and fifteen conducted by the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center. This survey asked students, 'Is it acceptable for a man to force a woman to have sex if he has spent money on her?' Twenty-four per cent of the boys and sixteen per cent of the girls said yes. When asked, 'Is it acceptable for a man to force a woman to have sex if they have been dating for more than six months?', 65 per cent of the boys said yes and, astonishingly, so did 47 per cent of the girls.<sup>21</sup> How could so many

young people, who should be capable of grasping the natural moral law, approve of such immoral behaviour?

In a Canadian study, the more often teenage boys viewed internet pornography, the more likely they were to agree that it's acceptable to hold a girl down and force her to have sex.<sup>22</sup> A Middlesex University study of British eleven-to-sixteen-year-olds' judgements regarding pornography, found that 53 per cent of the boys and four out of ten of the girls said they thought hardcore internet pornography was a realistic depiction of sex. By the time they were fourteen years old, four out of ten of the boys said they wanted to copy the behaviour they had seen.<sup>23</sup> These findings point to the power of the surrounding moral environment to impact, for the worse, young people's thinking about right and wrong behaviour.

Character education has the task of trying to prevent and correct this kind of pernicious and corrupting cultural influence on the conscience of our young. Without proper moral teaching – in this case, that rape is a gravely immoral violation of a person's freedom, of a person's body and of human dignity – a kind of moral blindness can set in, preventing a young person from seeing what ought to be obvious from the natural moral law.

Writing about how we acquire moral knowledge, C.S. Lewis scholar Gilbert Meilaender explains: 'If we ask how we *become able* to "just see" [the truth of] these [moral] maxims, the answer is: only as our *character* is well formed by moral education. Without such education, we will never come to know the human moral inheritance.'<sup>24</sup>

C.S. Lewis teaches us the same lesson in *The Magician's Nephew*. When Aslan sings the new world of Narnia into being and 'the great moment came', Uncle Andrew 'missed the whole point'.<sup>25</sup> This, Lewis tells us, was because 'what you see and hear depends a good deal on *where you are standing*; it also depends on *what sort of person you are*'.<sup>26</sup>

Let's turn now to character's second component, caring about what's right. This is the emotional side of character, the 'heart part'. This part of character leads us to want to do what we believe is the right thing and to feel bad when we don't. In many people, the heart part of character is underdeveloped. They know what's right but don't much care. They lack the motivation to be people of character.

A case in point: Some years ago Tom (the co-author of this book) conducted a study of cheating at his college. He and his colleagues



designed a 'Questionnaire on Academic Attitudes and Behaviour' and administered it to a random sample of over 300 graduate and undergraduate students from all 22 academic departments on campus. The questionnaire asked, 'Do you consider the following behaviours to be wrong?' and listed seven types of behaviour, such as using crib notes on a test, copying another student's assignment, submitting another's paper as one's own and cutting and pasting from a source without citing it. Students could respond 'Yes', 'No' or 'It depends'. Only about ten per cent answered, 'It depends'. The great majority of these college students – for some items on the questionnaire, more than 90 per cent of the respondents – judged the various forms of cheating to be wrong.

However, then the questionnaire continued to list the same type of behaviour and asked a different question: 'Would you ever do any of the following things if you were certain you would not get caught?' In this case, more than half of the students said yes, they would. Although most of these students had, on the previous page, judged such behaviour to be wrong, they apparently didn't care enough about academic honesty to refrain from engaging in cheating if they could do so without detection. Asked to give a brief explanation of their responses, these students wrote things like, 'I'm not saying it's right to cheat, but it's a tough world out there, and sometimes you have to cheat to succeed.' By contrast, almost half of the students said they would not cheat even if they could get away with it. For this group, the judgement that 'cheating is wrong' had an emotional dimension: *a sense of obligation* to do what they believed was right.

The caring or emotional side of character does not just spring spontaneously into being. Teachers and parents have to foster its development. They must, through patient and persistent effort, intentionally nurture in children 'stable sentiments'.<sup>27</sup> In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis points out that children will not necessarily have the right responses at first and must be trained – habituated – to feel 'pleasure' at those things which really are 'pleasant' and 'hatred' of those things that truly are 'hateful'.<sup>28</sup> This is a process of cultivating 'virtuous emotions'.<sup>29</sup> Later in this book we will show how the effective use of the Narnia novels can help us a good deal in this process.

Finally, there is character's third component, virtuous action. The ultimate measure of our character is what we do. Empirical research and a moment's reflection remind us that we can know

what is right, want to do the right thing and yet not have the will, skill or courage to do it. The study cited in Chapter 2 of people who engaged in rescue work during Hitler's Holocaust found that rescuers not only cared about those being persecuted by the Nazis but also had a greater 'internal locus of control' than non-rescuers – a stronger feeling that they could shape events and a greater willingness to risk failure. They had also grown up in families where helping others was a strong family value and over time had become an established habit.<sup>30</sup> Developing this third component of character – a reasonable consistency in living out the virtues – takes time and perseverance. The goal is to give children enough practice in doing the right thing – being courteous, fair, honest and kind in their everyday actions – so that it becomes easier, more natural, and even enjoyable to do so. Over time, these dispositions can become more and more of a habit and eventually part of who they are – their character.

### **Christian Character in a Post-Christian World<sup>31</sup>**

If you are a Christian parent or teacher, you will want to communicate a Christian view of the way to live that pleases God.<sup>32</sup> You will want to provide a consistent moral culture for your children where the values and character education at school are congruent with those of your home and your church.<sup>33</sup> Some critics of secular state schools argue that the character education these schools are able to provide is too weak because such schools are limited to teaching only what everyone (in a plural society) can agree upon and cannot promote the role of faith in character development.<sup>34</sup> Yet, we saw in Chapter 2 that state-funded 'schools of character' that effectively model, teach and uphold core virtues in every part of school life can and do have a documented positive impact on their students' character development.

How, then, does 'Christian character education' differ from what a secular school may teach? For one thing, Christian character education places a high value on some virtues that the secular culture gives less attention to, ignores or even actively undermines. Consider chastity. Lewis states, 'Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues.' He points out that the Christian position on sexual relations is very clear:

the Christian rule is . . . [e]ither marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.<sup>35</sup>

For C.S. Lewis 'The Christian idea of marriage is based on Christ's words that a man and wife are to be regarded as a single organism – for that is what the words "one flesh" would be in modern English.'<sup>36</sup> Yet Lewis also points out that Christian *charity*, not *chastity*, is the most important moral virtue for followers of Christ, stating that offences against charity are the worst sins, for:

the cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church  
may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute.<sup>37</sup>

He was also realistic and believed that those people who are not Christians, 'cannot be expected to live Christian lives' and that, for instance, 'There ought to be two distinct kinds of marriage: one governed by the State with rules enforced on all citizens, the other governed by the Church with rules enforced by her on her own members.'<sup>38</sup>

Many Christian parents take their responsibility to teach their children how to lead Christian lives seriously and will nurture their children in Christian homes which adhere to biblical sexual morality.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, much of the relationships and sex education today in secular schools does not present the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of sex as a gift from God reserved for marriage. Such teaching often implies that only non-consensual forms of sex (rape and other kinds of sexual coercion) are wrong. Instead of teaching students how to avoid *all* the risks of premarital sex – including pregnancy, disease and emotional and spiritual harm – such teaching sets a lower bar, settling simply for 'reducing the risks' of sex outside marriage by using contraception.

Rather than being 'outdated', or relevant only to Christians, C.S. Lewis' advocacy of the virtue of chastity finds contemporary support from a large and growing body of scientific evidence on the many benefits of saving sex for marriage and the negative consequences of sex outside that relationship. Teenagers who are virgins are more likely to maintain close ties to their parents and abide by their values. Teenagers who abstain from sex are less likely to become enmeshed in a 'problem behaviour syndrome' of self-harming or anti-social activity. Teenagers who are sexually active, studies find, are significantly more likely to get involved in other risk-taking such as substance abuse and delinquent behaviour. Students who are *not* sexually active get better grades, have higher educational goals and are less likely to drop out of school.<sup>40</sup>

Young people who do not cohabit before marriage experience less marital conflict, are more likely to be faithful, and are less likely to divorce.<sup>41</sup> One of the reasons this is important is that across socioeconomic levels, children are most likely to thrive when they have two parents who are married to each other and mature enough to raise children.

*Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, by University of Virginia Professor W. Bradford Wilcox and a team of eighteen family scholars, reports that children who grow up in a marriage with their biological father in the home, are more likely to: (1) do well in school; (2) achieve a higher level of education; (3) avoid being suspended or expelled from school; (4) stay free of drug abuse; (5) avoid teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, running away and suicide; and (6) have generally better physical and emotional health.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, fatherless families are a leading predictor of virtually every childhood and adolescent pathology. The best way to ensure that pregnancies and births happen within marriage and to increase the odds that children will have two married parents who are committed to raising them is to reserve sexual intercourse for one's marriage partner.

For all these reasons, many Christian parents will want to supplement their child's moral education with specific teaching about sexual relations and to promote Christian marriage as the right context for sexual relations and raising children. Parents will find a helpful resource in *Educating for Sexual Virtue* by Olwyn Mark as it addresses the importance of teaching children that being of good character applies to *every* area of life, sexual and otherwise.<sup>43</sup> The growing scientific support for the wisdom of promoting marriage as the healthiest context for sex is one more indication that C.S. Lewis is highly relevant as a teacher for our time.<sup>44</sup>

## Good Character and Christian Character

A Christian conception of what good character is and how it develops has much in common with other conceptions of virtue, but there are also important differences. Christian character, like the good character we want everyone to possess, includes the four cardinal virtues discussed earlier in the chapter: prudence (wisdom), which enables us to judge what we should do; justice

(fairness), which enables us to respect the rights of others and give them what they are due; fortitude (moral courage), which enables us to do what is right in the face of difficulties; and temperance (self-control), which enables us to control our desires and avoid abuse of even legitimate pleasures. Many people of different faith traditions and of no faith tradition, believe that these virtues develop through effort and practice.

Christians specifically believe that God's grace (or more specifically, 'Common Grace') makes the process of acquiring and consistently practising these virtues *possible* for all. For Christians, the call to character is nothing less than God's commandment: to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love one another. Christians believe that to learn to love in this way is a lifelong process of being 'transformed in Christ' through our relationship with God. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis emphasises that this is a very challenging process, one that demands we consciously and deliberately seek to overcome the weakness of our fallen selves by 'putting on Christ' anew each day.

Further, to develop Christlike character, we need more than the 'natural' human virtues of prudence, justice, self-control and fortitude. From a Christian perspective, we also need the help of three 'supernatural' virtues that are sometimes called the 'theological virtues'. These are: *faith in God*, which enables us to believe in God and His revelation; *hope in God*, which leads us to view eternal life as our most important goal and to place total trust in God; and *love of God*, which enables us to love God above all things and our neighbour as much as we love ourselves.

The three Christian virtues of faith, hope and love are considered supernatural because they come from God. These Christian virtues can, by God's grace, grow stronger through practice. The supernatural virtues animate the natural virtues, give them their Christian character and provide the ultimate motive for all Christian moral activity. The Christian is prudent, just, courageous and self-controlled out of faith in God, hope in God and love of God.

In his book *The Case for Character: Looking at Character from a Biblical Perspective*, Drayton Nabers, former Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, describes devotion to God as the foundation for Christian character development: 'God builds and shapes our characters upon this devotion . . . which is the work of God's grace in us.'<sup>45</sup> Nabers explains:

our source of power is the Holy Spirit, or God's grace. We cannot be people of strong character merely by trying hard; we become people of character who live by God's rules and fulfil God's ultimate purpose for our lives only if we have God's grace in us by his Spirit.<sup>46</sup>

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul describes the sort of character that will be seen in those who are transformed in this way by the Holy Spirit:

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance.<sup>47</sup>

This is not a complete list but it does describe what Jesus is like. Those who 'live' in Christ, who live in close relationship with him, produce good fruit: 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.'<sup>48</sup> The recent Church of England discussion paper on character education is aptly titled *Fruit of the Spirit*.<sup>49</sup> Nabers argues that in his own evangelical Christian faith tradition, a 'character ethic' has often been misunderstood as somehow being 'opposed to the doctrine of grace' and its emphasis on the saving action of God.<sup>50</sup> To show that faith and character work together in a way that is described in the New Testament, Nabers quotes Peter's exhortation to the first Christians: 'add to your faith virtue'. It is God's grace, Nabers reminds us, that enables us to lead virtuous lives. Christians are saved by God's grace<sup>51</sup> and are God's 'workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works'.<sup>52</sup>

To show that both 'faith' and 'works' matter in the Christian life, in *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis compares them to different blades of a pair of scissors and explains:

The Bible really seems to clinch the matter when it puts the two things together into one amazing sentence. The first half is, 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' – which looks as if everything depended on us and our good actions: but the second half goes on, 'For it is God who worketh in you' – which looks as if God did everything and we nothing. I am afraid that is the sort of thing we come up against in Christianity. I am puzzled, but I am not surprised. You see, we are now trying to understand, and to separate into water-tight compartments, what exactly God does and what man

does when God and man are working together. And, of course, we begin by thinking it is like two men working together, so that you could say, 'He did this bit and I did that.' But this way of thinking breaks down. God is not like that. He is inside you as well as outside: even if we could understand who did what, I do not think human language could properly express it. In the attempt to express it different Churches say different things. But you will find that even those who insist most strongly on the importance of good actions tell you you need Faith; and even those who insist most strongly on Faith tell you to do good actions.<sup>53</sup>

Nabers points out that, after someone 'accepts Christ', much spiritual work lies ahead. There are many practical things a person can and must do in order to become a disciple and be more Christlike in the practice of virtue. It is 'what we practice repeatedly', Nabers says, that has the potential to create 'Godly habits, or stable dispositions, which enable us to live excellently into God's purpose'.<sup>54</sup> The formation of these godly habits is gradual: 'Because the Holy Spirit engraves all virtues in our soul through our practice, virtues are not acquired overnight . . . the engraving that transforms our character into Christ-likeness takes much time.'<sup>55</sup>

Particular Christian practices can provide much-needed help in this character journey. In *The Silver Chair*, Aslan, as a patient teacher, tells Jill Pole to repeat the 'four signs', the directions he has given her, every morning and evening.<sup>56</sup> If she does not forget them and follows them exactly, her journey will go well. In a similar spirit, C.S. Lewis offers this advice to those who want to live the Christian life:

The next step is to make sure that, if you have once accepted Christianity, then some of its main doctrines shall be deliberately held before your mind for some time every day. That is why daily prayers and religious readings and churchgoing are necessary parts of the Christian life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe.<sup>57</sup>

Lewis knew that because of our fallen nature, the life of virtue would not be easy. He urged us to 'make some serious attempt to practise the Christian virtues' – over an extended period of time. He warned that falls would be frequent. In *Mere Christianity*, he wrote:

A week is not enough. Things often go swimmingly for the first week. Try six weeks. By that time, having fallen back completely or even lower than the point one began from, one will have discovered some truths about oneself. No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.<sup>58</sup>

For Lewis, 'The main thing we learn from a serious attempt to practise the Christian virtues is that we fail.'<sup>59</sup> One way to respond to that experience of failure is to try harder. However, for the Christian, Lewis believed, real progress ultimately requires realising the limits of human effort and the need for a radical dependence on God. In *Mere Christianity*, he explains:

Thus, in one sense, the road back to God is a road of moral effort, a road of trying harder and harder. But in another sense it is not trying that is ever going to bring us home. All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, 'You must do this. I can't'.<sup>60</sup>

What leads us to this deeper dependence on God, Lewis believed, is a deeper sense of our sinfulness. In *Mere Christianity*, he gives a very personal example from his own life:

We begin to notice, besides our particular sinful acts, our sinfulness; begin to be alarmed not only about what we do, but about what we are. This may sound rather difficult, so I will try to make it clear from my own case. When I come to my evening prayers and try to reckon up the sins of the day, nine times out of ten the most obvious one is some sin against charity; I have sulked or snapped or sneered or snubbed or stormed. And the excuse that immediately springs to my mind is that the provocation was so sudden and unexpected; I was caught off my guard, I had not time to collect myself. Now that may be an extenuating circumstance as regards those particular acts: they would obviously be worse if they had been deliberate and pre-meditated. On the other hand, surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth?

If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not



make me an ill-tempered man; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am. The rats are always there in the cellar, but if you go in shouting noisily they will have taken cover before you switch on the light.<sup>61</sup>

C.S. Lewis came to see a deeper problem – the ‘rats in the cellar’ of his soul. As a Christian, he was aware of his sinfulness, a lack of sufficient love for his neighbour, an absence of the kind of Christlike love that would make him a more patient man in the face of provocations. Once he recognised this deficiency as the root cause of his ill-tempered reactions, he was able to see how much he needed God’s grace. He says that, once he humbly and earnestly sought that help, he was able to become a more loving person. In the New Testament, Paul exhorts Christians: ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’<sup>62</sup> but also encourages believers that: ‘He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to completion.’<sup>63</sup>

It is helpful for readers of the Narnia novels to realise that the development of character we see portrayed there, while offering life lessons with universal applicability, is written by an author who had personal faith in Christ and was willing to have his own character changed as a result.

To sum up: The quest for character, for Christians, is not a ‘do-it-yourself’ affair. It is a journey of faith, of humble, dependence on God. Christians see themselves as fallen creatures but redeemed by Christ. Therefore, we ask God for the help we need to avoid and repent of sin, overcome our weaknesses, and grow in virtue. When we fail, we go to God again to receive forgiveness and the grace to change.