

Ben Best, co-host

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How are we to live well in a fragmented and confusing world? Facing an overwhelming number of options, how can young adults in particular overcome anxiety and fear of failing to make the one right choice when it comes to things like education, marriage, and vocation. In his latest book, *To Live Well: Practical Wisdom for Moving Through Chaotic Times*, Dr. Allen Noble introduces readers to the cardinal and theological virtues and explains how they can help us navigate the many pressures, decisions, and competing visions of the good life that confront us. In this episode, he joins Dr. Keith Plummer to discuss how cultivating and practicing classical virtues such as prudence, justice, fortitude, faith, and love can form and guide believers to live wisely, confidently, and fruitfully in the present day. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm pleased to welcome to the podcast someone whose work I've read and benefited from for some time, and someone whom I've had the privilege of conversing with in person. He is Dr. Allen Noble, professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University. Allen is a fellow at the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics and author of *On Getting Out of Bed: You Are Not Your Own*, and *Disruptive Witness*. He has published articles at *The Atlantic*, *The Gospel Coalition*, *First Things*, and *Christianity Today*. He's the husband to his wife, Brittany, and the dad to their 3 children. I asked him to join me to talk about his latest book, *To Live Well: Practical Wisdom for Moving Through Chaotic Times*, from InterVarsity Press. Alan, welcome to *Defragmenting*, and thanks for making the time.

Dr. Alan Noble

Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You are in this book trying to introduce people, many people, to the idea of the classical virtues. And you say in the introduction that you want to look at the traditional virtues, the ways of walking that are the natural and proper outcome of the Christian faith. And before we talk about what the virtues are, I'm curious, I know that you have a real burden in some sense, particularly for young people, people in their 20s and 30s. I would imagine that the lower end of that comes from your university work.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But why do you think a book like this is particularly helpful for particularly that demographic, though it's not limited to that demographic?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Sure. Well, I think at that age, there's a number of things going on. You're making a lot of big life choices, and you're getting a lot of messages from different people. And there's a lot of what I would describe as existential pressure to make the right choice, the one right choice, when it comes to careers, when it comes to where you live, when it comes to who you marry, who your friends are, what your identity is, all these sorts of things, how you live. And there's this tremendous pressure. And what can happen is you feel inhibited and you don't make any choices at all, because you're just so overwhelmed, and because you have not been taught how to make good choices, how to make good choices. Society, sometimes parents just haven't taught you how to make good choices. And so, Uh, it—you can freeze up. And so the virtues, I think, are, are habits that can help you, give you guidelines to point you to who you were made to be in Christ, and to ground you as you are making these choices in a world that is telling you, here are more and more and more options. And if, by the way, if you don't choose the right option, you have failed as a human being.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that idea of the one right choice and the paralysis that comes from fearing not making it or having made the wrong one and then a life of despair, that is something that you really emphasize in the book. You start out in the introduction and you quote T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and a line from that work where he says, "you know only a heap of broken images." What is that describing about contemporary life and how do the virtues help us address that?

Dr. Alan Noble

So my argument is I'm taking this image that T.S. Eliot was working with in the early 20th century. For Eliot, he's looking at the post-World War I world, and he's seeing a world that was, especially in Europe, literally fragmented, right? So there are ruins from the war, but it was morally fragmented as well. People believed in nationalism, people believed in the church, people believed in traditions, and now it seemed like those things didn't hold up. And so there are all these voices speaking, as you hear in *The Waste Land*, and there's a question about whether or not these hold up. And so he's saying people born after or during the First World War, you have only known a heap of broken images. You've only known these fragments of a moral universe. And he's pointing to this. He's suggesting that prior there was some moral cohesion to the world, and now we have to kind of go back. And what I'm suggesting is similarly, in the 21st century, we have grown up in a heap of broken images. We have TikTok gurus telling us one thing, experts on YouTube telling us another thing, people on Instagram telling us a third thing, people on television, on podcasts. And it's not just people in technology, you know, on these technical platforms either. You know, people at work are saying, oh, you need to join CrossFit. You know, it's, you know, it's— there's always somebody with something saying, you know, the problem with your life is X and here's the solution to fix it, here's the technique especially to fix it. And this is, you know, this is the answer. And so we're getting these fragmented pieces of existence. And what I want to say is we need to go to something deeper and truer, something grounded in church tradition and in the Bible. Right. Because these virtues are things spoken of in the Bible that ground us, that aren't just fragments, but that give us a whole picture of what it looks like to live, to live well. As the title says.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You've used the word habits with respect to the virtues.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But you seem to be distinguishing that from techniques. So you're not talking about— the virtues aren't techniques.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So let's talk a little bit about what is a virtue, and then let's talk about the virtues that you're covering in the book.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah. So a virtue, as I would describe it, a virtue is a habit that is that points you to who you were created to be in Christ. So I don't want to talk about what exactly they are because that's the next question, but, but, but, but, uh, yeah. So virtue is a, is a habit that is, that is designed to, to cultivate in you who you were made to be in Christ over time with the work of the Holy Spirit, you know, working in you, stirring you up to love and good works. That's what I would say.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay. So when you talk about these as habits, there's obviously— there is behavior involved, but there's also disposition.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah. I mean, so you have to be— there is an element of will involved, of turning yourself toward those things. And that's why I wrote this book, in fact. Right. It's for each of these virtues, there's an element of knowledge about the virtues, even though they are habits and you can't just have knowledge about them. It is valuable to have understanding and then set your disposition toward them, but then you have to act on them. You have to form habits for each of them.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And you say that these practices are going to be hard.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You say in the introduction, "Our ultimate sanctification, including in the virtues, will be brought about by Christ."

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

"But our duty today is to be faithful, to heed the call to practice wisdom, even when it's hard." So whatever we're talking about, we will get to what the virtues are, but you're saying these virtues require some volition, effort.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Pain at times.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But with a simultaneous empowering by the Spirit.

Dr. Alan Noble

That's right. Yeah. And I want that to be understood. I want that to be the expectation because I feel like— I don't feel like— I know that sometimes growing up, there's particularly, you know, I come from a Reformed tradition and there's a fear of talking about works, of talking about virtues, even though for example, figures like Calvin talked and said, and I quote this in the book, that there's value in talking about the virtues and that other people should write about the virtues. So it's a part of the Reformed tradition, but there's a hesitancy overall in the contemporary tradition to talk about virtues because you're afraid of suggesting, you're afraid of implying that there might be some kind of work salvation involved, right?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

And I'm very clear on that. I'm very clear in the book on the way that works and how these virtues are coming out of— are not done to earn our salvation or to earn God's favor, but they're out of gratitude and love for God. And so, but we do need— the Bible is clear, is very clear. I mean, Proverbs tells us to pursue wisdom, right? There's a command. We're called to pursue wisdom, right? So like, there's volition. There's this, there's this call to do this, right? We're called to, to turn to God in faith, right? There's this— there's throughout Scripture, there are these commands to be self-controlled.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes.

Dr. Alan Noble
Okay, well, there it is, right? And so I want to be clear that while we are resting in God to do that final work of sanctification, We need to think about these things. What is it that we are doing in our— with our daily habits, and how can we turn from our sin and cling to Christ?

Dr. Keith Plummer
So as I was reading, I thought about— and I don't know who— to whom to credit this, but someone has said "grace is opposed to meritorious work but not effort."

Dr. Alan Noble
That's great. Yeah, that's right. That's right. That's exactly right.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Alan Noble
So, so you do need to think about your life, and you do need to to put in effort. And it is, as you said, is going to be hard and you're going to fail. And that's where that grace comes in and reminds you that because of Christ's final work on the cross that you were saved, not because of your efforts to achieve these virtues or any other works. But you still have this responsibility to strive to be Christlike.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Let's talk about the traditional virtues, the theological virtues. You're dealing with 7 Virtues.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Could you just tell us what they are, and then we can spend some time maybe looking at several of them?

Dr. Alan Noble
Sure. Yeah. So we have prudence, justice, fortitude or courage, temperance, faith, hope, and love.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Okay. And the first 4 that you mentioned are like the cardinal virtues.

Dr. Alan Noble
That's right.

Dr. Keith Plummer
And then the, the faith, hope, and love are called the theological virtues. But you're saying that all of these are Or should be manifestations of life in Christ.

Dr. Alan Noble
That's right. Prudence, for example, is talked about, you know, throughout Scripture, particularly in Proverbs, right? Prudence is spoken of. Justice is one of the most important themes in our Scriptures. Courage is also talked about throughout Scripture. Temperance, if we understand it as self-control, but even if we don't, is a valuable concept in Christian tradition. So I think that these cardinal virtues are valuable and even essential to living a godly life. They help us understand what it means to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel and to live uprightly. And so I think that they are valuable.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, why don't we start with prudence? You say that at its essence, it can be defined as making the right decision at the right time. And you also say that it is not to be conflated with wisdom, which is a broader category. Yeah. Would you say something about that idea of making the right decision at the right time and how that differs from what we, as we said, catches a whole lot of us up in looking for the one right thing?

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, yeah, that's right. So we all make decisions all day long. Prudence is practical wisdom. So, we practice a kind of prudence all day long. The question is, is it true prudence or is it imprudence? That's the question, right? Making the right decision at the right time. So, sometimes we make wrong decisions or we make right decisions at the wrong time. And, the way I describe prudence in the book I'm pulling from this Quinas philosopher, Josef Pieper, and I think it's very helpful as we think about reality itself. And we think about, you know, do we understand reality? And so we pray for humility and we survey reality so often. And I'm thinking about the growth of AI. Everything seems artificial.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

And so we really need to assess what do we know about reality? What do we really know about reality on the ground? And then pulling in wise counselors, and then understanding what the good is in a situation, and finally making a decision and acting on that decision. So those are the— just very quickly— the steps.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

And what this does is it allows you to make a decision and act resolutely, knowing that because it's done, uh, for the good, for God's will, for God's glory, that it doesn't matter if it's the one right choice. If it's done, if it's, if it's for the good, then it's safe to do, that it's okay to do. So often in life, I think we are given choices. We are actually given multiple good choices, and we just have to know that one of these choices is the one that we're going to pick, and then act on it, and trust that we're going to act faithfully and allow God to work through us and be responsible according to that choice. But what we want is to know that it's the one right choice, that it's the one right choice.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Right.

Dr. Alan Noble

And I think what we have to realize is God gives us the liberty, the freedom to, to use our reason, to use our prudence, to make a good choice. And to be faithful to that choice. And this process of choosing wisely, of choosing decisively, allows us to make that choice, to recognize, okay, what's the good here? How is it glorifying to God? How is it— how is it loving to my neighbor? And then just act with, with decisiveness instead of agonizing over, is this the one right person in the world for me, or is this the one right career for me? And, and, and gnawing, letting that gnaw at you.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Which is so easy to do under the guise of God's will.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And what one of the things that you do in the book is that for each of these virtues, you explain what it is, and then you give some really practical ways that it manifests itself in particular life situations. And in the chapter on prudence, I really appreciated what you had to say about Marriage, for example,

because I think a lot of times the young people, in particular young Christian people, they're searching for the one.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And how do I know when I have found the one? And you have a lot to say there. And you say, well, when you apply this prudence, well, this is what you say. Once you have done all this, will you have found the one right person for you? No. At least not necessarily. Lord willing, you will have discovered someone you can build a beautiful, godly marriage with. But in all statistical likelihood, a better match exists for you somewhere out there in the world. And that doesn't matter.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And I think what traps us oftentimes is FOMO.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah, that's right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Like, if I don't find the right one, what happens if I find someone that I should have maybe waited for. And so when I read that, I thought about something that Richard Baxter says in this work of his, *The Mutual Duties of Husbands and Wives Towards Each Other*. And he talks about those who aren't married and in giving them ideas about what they should be thinking about in terms of a spouse, one of the things he says is, be not too hasty, But know beforehand all the imperfections which may tempt you to despise your future mate.

Dr. Alan Noble
Hmm.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And some of what you were talking about in the prudence section there made me think about that. It also made me think about the disservice that we are doing to young people when we speak of God's will in imprecise ways and kind of set up The expectation for the one right choice. Have you encountered that in your working with students?

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, absolutely. Sometimes it's a spouse, sometimes it's— I find it more often with careers, this anxiety that I've got to find the right career path. And if I don't find the right career path, then all my studies, all my work has been wasted, and I'm going to be on the wrong track, and I'm going to be outside of God's will.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Right.

Dr. Alan Noble

That's the fear. I'm going to be outside of God's will. And that's what I'm trying to push back against is, of course, I don't want anyone to be outside of God's will. But what I want to suggest is that what you think of, of is outside of God's will probably isn't. If the career that you're looking at as an alternative is, is glorifying to God, it's good work, it's honest work, it's, it's providing for you, it's good for your community. Then it's probably— this is probably what you need to be doing. This is probably honoring to God unless you have some clear, you know, explanation of why it's not. Then I think this is honoring to God. But they want this, you know, they want a sign or they want some clear explanation. And they're also afraid that, you know, if they don't have the one thing right from the beginning, then— then

it's over for them, you know. Um, yeah, you know, and so that's why I talk about sunk cost fallacy, especially in regard to careers.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, well, since you brought that up, what is that sunk cost fallacy?

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, so the sunk cost fallacy, which I think is particularly helpful for careers but other decisions, is the idea that— or, or is when you pour yourself into, you invest yourself in something And then you realize you get new information, new data, new information that helps you realize this isn't working, this is not helpful. And the prudent thing to do at that point is reassess and realize this is not actually the path I should be going down. I need to move somewhere else. I need to be doing something else. I need to change what I'm doing. But instead, the sunk cost fallacy is when you say, I've already spent so much money, I've already spent so much time, I've already done so much, I'm just going to continue to invest in this. So I've seen students do this with like majors, right? Well, I've already been, you know, I'm a physics major and I've already spent so much time in this, I might as well just keep doing this. And it's like, well, if you know you don't want to be a physics major, maybe you need to Maybe you need to do something else, you know, or it could be a career.

Dr. Alan Noble

You know, you've invested so much time into a company and you realize it's, it's a dead end. We talk about dead-end jobs, and you know you need to, to retrain and do something else. Then there's a certain point where you need to say, you know, I— when I started this, I believed that this is what God intended for me to do. Now I believe God intends me to retrain and do something else. And What I wanted to do with that section is help people realize that there's no shame in that. That's not a sign of failure. That's not a loss. That's actually using prudence to reassess your situation and to choose wisely again.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. Well, that's helpful. Kind of like the lemon, the car.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That you have put so much money into the repairs and you can't bring yourself to come to the realization, I need to get rid of this car.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, that's right. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's talk about another one, justice. Justice is a word that is prevailing in our society. How does the virtue of justice compare and contrast with some of the commonly held views Of justice?

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, so the virtue of justice is, is the practice of giving each person his or her due, right? This is the traditional understanding of justice going back to Aristotle. It's, it's a Christian understanding of justice. It's a basic fundamental understanding of justice. Now, understanding what a person's due is, as Christians we would say, well, we understand that based on our rights established by God. But the prevailing cultural understanding of justice, I would say, often comes down to what Alasdair MacIntyre describes as emotivism. So it has to do with what each of us, we sort of say intuitively, our inner sense of what justice is. We know justice when we see it. We, you know, we see—

Ben Best, co-host

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

you know, injustice when we watch a terrible clip of something happening and we say, you know, this is clearly an injustice and we often emote about it online too. So there's maybe a little bit of expressive individualism tied in with this, right? We've got to express ourselves to get it out. So it's us being moved emotionally that is largely our understanding of justice. And what I would say is that many of the things that, that people are reacting to are in fact legitimate issues of justice, you know, defined by the, you know, as, you know, as the virtue of justice. But they just lack that strong foundation that, that emotivism just doesn't have.

Dr. Keith Plummer

There's no grounding for it.

Dr. Alan Noble

There's no grounding for it.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Right.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And in that chapter, you address different kinds of justice, legal justice, distributive justice, commutative justice. I wanted to look a little bit at that third one because you have a lot to say about communal justice. It's very easy to think about justice as on an individual basis.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What I owe this particular person. But you bring out the idea that there this sense in which that we should be looking to do justice to the community?

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What does that entail?

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, yeah. So this, this chapter was the hardest chapter to write, and, uh, I feel like it was the riskiest in many ways, um, because I, you know, I kind of make the case— not kind of, but I, I make the case that our gifts are actually part of acts of justice that we owe each other. That, um, you know, if I am a violinist and that's how God has gifted me, then part of what I owe my community is to use that gift well in my community. So I might be maybe serving in the church in, you know, in worship. It might be in the local orchestra. But also that the community owes me resources to mature that. So, ideally, there should be people who can help me learn how to play violin and opportunities for me to perform, and people should show up and listen. And I don't mean that my lesson should be free or anything, but that we owe it to each other to support our gifts.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah.

Dr. Alan Noble

And that this is actually the way communities flourish. Right, is that we support each other's gifts. And, it's not just the arts either. It's like if we do better when, let's say, somebody who's born gifted to be a teacher actually stays in that town and becomes a teacher and supports that community by

becoming a local teacher instead of going off to the big city and becoming a teacher and there's brain drain going on. This hits home to me in Oklahoma where there's a lot of these rural towns where teachers leave and they go to the big city and teach.

Ben Best, co-host
So, yeah.

Dr. Alan Noble

So, this idea that we owe our cities something, we owe our communities something. I'm not saying it in a restricted sense that you have to stay where you were born, but I do think that on some level, we owe our communities something. And that we should at least keep that in mind and nurture our gifts and share it with those around us.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That seems to be related to another concept that you bring up later in the book on magnanimity, which I was very fearful of saying because I can't—

Dr. Alan Noble
I know.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mispronounce it.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah, me too.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But what is it? Because that seems related to this, and I think it's probably something that a lot of Christians may wrestle with.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yes. Yeah. So this was, this was another place in the book where I was going out on a limb because magnanimity is technically, you know, the classic Aristotle understanding of magnanimity is something for great men. So like the elites in society, and I do mean men because it's almost exclusively men. And it means, you know, being generous and being merciful and achieving greatness. That's what it really means. But, I want to make a Christian version of it. I want to use it in a Christian sense because I do think— because the technical definition of it is largeness of spirit. That's what it literally means, largeness of spirit. And, it's under the virtue of courage. And so, the way I use the term magnanimity is This idea that, you know, God has given each of us gifts and skills and abilities, and we need to have the largeness of spirit to pursue excellence in the gifts that he has given us with humbleness and grace for God's glory and the good of our neighbor. And the reason I came up with this or pursued this, and, you know, I'm pulling from some other people as well, including Pieper again. is that it seems to me that we have a problem with ambition as Christians. We don't know how to think about ambition. We either think about it as something toxic, right? You don't want to be ambitious.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

Or we're hyper-ambitious and it is toxic. It's, it's, it's, it's this corroding thing. And so it seemed to me that there has to be some way for Christians to pursue great things in a way that glorifies God. And that's how I sort of framed this virtue.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So magnanimity is interrelated, as all the virtues are interrelated, but it's related to love. This proper largeness of spirit is not a matter of self-aggrandizement.

Dr. Alan Noble
Correct.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But it is for the sake of the good of my neighbor and the glory of God. And you say that means being willing to take risks, being willing to put ourselves in situations that we're not guaranteed success for the sake of the good and for loving.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, yeah. And for trying great things. Because one of the things that has been impressed upon me is the reality that the great things in this world, whether it's a great play or a great bridge, a great business, a great school, a great church, a great neighborhood, whatever it is, great things cannot be accomplished if, if, if someone doesn't sit down and imagine them first and, and think through, I want to strive to, to, to create something. They don't imagine it. And so that, that requires this largeness of spirit, this, this ability to be ambitious, to have magnanimity.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

But, But you have to have it with humility and grace and a desire for the common good. And so that's, that's where this comes in. And so, yeah, you're pursuing the common good, you're doing it as an act of love, but you're also imagining these great things and thinking and dreaming dreams and thinking, Mm-hmm. I actually have the freedom in Christ to imagine what would it be like to create this, a great movie? or, or, you know, whatever it is that your, that your skill or ability is, you know. And that to me is exciting. That's relieving. And, and I think it's a message that particularly young people need to hear, that they have the freedom to dream dreams and to pursue those great things in Christ, because they do. That, that's not egotistical, right?

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Alan Noble

That's, that's not, it's not something to be ashamed of. They just need to think about it in terms of, you know, how is that honoring to God and benefiting to my neighbor?

Dr. Keith Plummer

So it's not necessarily selfish or prideful, though we should be, I would imagine, both prayerful and in conversation and community with people who might be able to help us think through whether or not there are less than virtuous motivations going on. But you're making the point that ambition is not inherently wrong.

Dr. Alan Noble

Right, right. Yeah, yeah, that's right. Yeah. Your ambition could be egotistical, but it could be magnanimity. You could be magnanimous. And what I fear more is the opposite, which is pusillanimity, which is even harder to say. And I had to practice that one a lot.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's why I wasn't going to say that.

Ben Best, co-host
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dr. Alan Noble

Pusillanimity. The pusillanimity— oh, I can't get that one. Darn it. The pusillanimity is when somebody folds in on themselves and realizes, I have all these gifts, but I'm afraid to use them because what if I

mess up? And, I've seen so many young people just torn up by this.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Alan Noble
I'm afraid of failing this test. I'm afraid of not getting this job. I'm afraid this person won't. If I ask them out, they'll say, no, I'm afraid of this. And so they don't try. And so they're inhibited. And that to me, pusillanimity is actually— I've seen this very common. And so that's why I want to say magnanimity is what you want to strive for. It's godly. It's good. You have the freedom to do this. Go out, try it.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah, I see it on a smaller scale, in the classroom, where, when there's like discussion and someone will say something like, you ask a question and someone will say, well, this might not be what you're looking for.

Dr. Alan Noble
Oh yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
But, or, but I'm grateful that at least they're putting themselves out there.

Dr. Alan Noble
Right.

Dr. Keith Plummer
But it's like, I'm going to preface it with, I might be wrong. Right. One of the virtues that you wrote about that I thought you did so well with was that of fortitude. Okay.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
And it's not that I don't think you did well with the others, but this one I was just like really struck by because you're dealing with persevering through suffering. You talk about how it is that there are so many things systemically that work against the idea that there could ever be a need or ability to endure suffering.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Could you address that some?

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah. So this is one of the challenges, I think, of— and I do this with each of the virtues. I talk about why it's difficult today to practice these virtues. And I think for fortitude or courage, whatever you want to describe it as. There are 2, I think, big challenges. One is what I would call technique or efficiency, and that is we have decided that to go to war against all of our problems. If there is a problem, then we should design a product or service that efficiently addresses that problem. So that you do not have to suffer. Now, some of this is fine and even appropriate, right? So if I have a headache, it's nice that I can take an Advil or whatever and relieve myself, relieve that that suffering. That's I'm not saying that that's a bad thing, but when you have an entire system that is designed to fix every problem that you have, it does instill in you this idea that you shouldn't have to suffer, that you should not have— that suffering is wrong. When you go to war against suffering, it instills in you the idea that you should never have to suffer.

Dr. Alan Noble

So that's one thing. When you have an entire market that is at war against suffering, that shapes your imagination. The other thing is, particularly for younger people, there's a shift in parenting that happened where we have overprotected our children. And Jonathan Haidt has been, you know, the one at the forefront talking about this. And, you know, his famous saying is that we've overprotected our children in the real world and under protected them online, which I think he's absolutely right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Dr. Alan Noble

And so, you add those 2 things together, right? So, you should have a pill or a service or a product that will fix whatever is ailing you and you're overprotecting your kids in the real world so that I wrote a Substack about this. When I was a kid, from 11, maybe 10, probably 11 on, I rode my BMX bike all over the desert. I would just leave my house after I was homeschooled, very homeschooled, I like to say. I would leave my house at 12 o'clock and just wave goodbye to my mom. I had no phone, no pager, and I would just ride my bike. Sometimes with my friends, sometimes not, and I would just leave for hours. And now thinking about— I've got kids, I'm thinking about that. That's crazy. That's just like, I can't imagine. I've got kids that age. I can't imagine just saying goodbye to them for hours and just allowing them to roam the neighborhoods or whatever. That, that seems wild to come back 3 hours later. Anyway, so that's the world then, and we live in a different world now. And so, what happens is these are moments where you can develop or not develop fortitude when you're faced with an opportunity to suffer or to risk the opportunity to suffer and then choose to endure for the sake of the good.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

And, that's a rough definition of fortitude. And, when you're not given those habits, those opportunities to form those habits, Then you're going to grow up and it's going to be harder to, to, to develop.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And you also point out how there is an element, there's an inevitable element of suffering in the process of sanctification. Self-denial.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Could you just say just a word about that? Yeah.

Dr. Alan Noble

I mean, I think saying no to our sins is, and our desires, our inordinate desires, our sinful desires is is a form of suffering. It's a mortification of the flesh. It's a blessed form of suffering because it's making us who we were created to be. So it's a, it's a purgatorial suffering in a very Protestant way, I'll say, um, uh, in the sense that it's purging us of, of this, of this dross. But it still hurts. It still it's still, it's still hard to let go of things that are bad for us.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah.

Dr. Alan Noble

Even though it's good for us. And we know this. We've known this since we were kids, right? When your mom was like, you know, you were like, I want another cookie. And you and your mom was like, no, you can't have another cookie. It still hurt, right? Well, you know, that continues to today when you say, you know, I want this thing and God is telling you, no, that is bad for you. That, that's still, that's still a form of of suffering, even though it's good for you.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. Well, let's pause here, and on the other side, we'll come back and talk about some of the other virtues, particularly the theological virtues.

Ben Best, co-host

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Dr. Keith Plummer

I am back speaking with Dr. Alan Noble about his book *To Live Well. Practical Wisdom for Moving Through Chaotic Times*. And we're discussing the virtues, the cardinal and theological virtues. And common to all of these, and you have used this term quite frequently, is there is a recognition that there is such a thing as the good.

Dr. Alan Noble

Hmm.

Dr. Keith Plummer

The good is something that is outside of us, it is objective, and that all of these virtues are revolving around that and for the sake of the good. I wonder sometimes if even amongst Christians that is a hard idea to grasp because our times are so, as you spoke about before, emotivist, subjectivist, relativistic, the idea that there really is a good. Do you think that this makes some talk about the virtues maybe difficult for people to grasp?

Dr. Alan Noble

That's a great question. I have not thought about that. That's a great question. I, you know, maybe what I'm hoping through this discussion of the virtues is partially apologetic even to Christians themselves to show that There's something beautiful when you believe, when you acknowledge— not just believe, but acknowledge— that there is a good, which is God's glory, glorifying God and enjoying him forever. That when you have that framework, Eliot's heap of broken images is no longer this heap of broken images, right?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

And I think sometimes what we need to do apologetically is less arguing for something than painting a picture of something and offering a counter-narrative. And so that's part of what I'm doing is offering a counter-narrative saying, you've known the heap of broken images. Here's what a cathedral stained glass window looks like. Isn't this beautiful? Do you see how this order is beautiful?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

Maybe this is true. Maybe you should consider why this beauty is true. And so, I would hope that a Christian reading this book who may be skeptical about what the good is would see that believing in the good is actually maybe the missing piece that they need to have order in their lives and the kind of, you know, yeah, the kind of order in their lives that they're missing.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

But that's a hope. I don't know.

Dr. Keith Plummer

When we think about the theological virtues, faith, hope, and love, you just touched on something that I wanted to ask you about. Another portion of the book that I really was affected by was the chapter on faith, which you call Believing Soundly. And you make some observations about what faith is. You, you say that it's both assurance and conviction about something which is not immediately evident, and you draw a lesson from the Jesus cry of dereliction.

Dr. Alan Noble

Hmm.

Dr. Keith Plummer

From the cross about that idea of assurance and conviction about something which is not immediately evident. What do we learn about faith from that cry?

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah. So, you know, this, this famous cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Sometimes we read this and we read this as a, as a, as a cry of, of hopelessness, a lack of faith. And if I remember, it's been a long time since I've read my own, my own work. But if I remember correctly, what I do is I show that, that the, that the psalm that he's working in actually goes on to reaffirm the faith that God actually is listening and actually is faithful. And so that contextually, Jesus is— what he's doing there is not— he is expressing his emotions and his feelings in the moments of frustration, of struggle, of— despair is not the right word because there's some theological meanings to despair and philosophical that I don't want to— put on as baggage, but of just burden, burden, tremendous burden. But there's faith there still, knowing that God is faithful, because that's what the psalm ends with. That's what he's referencing. That's the allusion that he's referring to.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Dr. Alan Noble

And so that's what we can do in faith. That's what we can do in faith ourselves, is that we can be in a place where we also cry, you know, why, why is this happening to us? And yet still hold on to the faith that God is sovereign, that he loves us, that, that he's the one providing for us, that he's the one taking care of us, that he's going to, that he's going to raise us from the dead as well. And so I think that's a powerful, a powerful lesson.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes, it is. And you speak about faith ultimately being in a person.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

There is a passage in which you, you say this: "This focus on faith in the person of God is a helpful corrective to a logic-focused account of Christianity that seeks to prove the rationality of the religion to make faith more reasonable and appealing to the world. Instead, we are called to believe in the one who created rationality and allow that faith guide us." And so the question that I had for you is this: you're a fellow at the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Is the quotation that I just read contrary to the apologetic endeavor? In light of it, what, if anything, is

the place of apologetics? And you started to address that somewhat.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, no, I mean, I think, I think there still is a space for, for using logic and reason. What, what I want people to see is that what we ultimately have faith in is the person of Christ.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

What I, what I think can happen is people get so wrapped up in debates and arguments and logic and words that they lose the Word. And that is a shame. And that is a distraction. I wanted to try to parse that. I worked that sentence and worked that passage quite carefully multiple times because I, I don't want to denigrate or deny the use of reason because reason is valuable. Logic is valuable. Those words are valuable. I work with words all the time. It's my job. So I want to acknowledge all those things. But I do think that, you know, there have been times in my life where sometimes the thing I'm giving my worship to, it might be a set of abstract doctrines instead of the person of Christ.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes.

Dr. Alan Noble

And doctrines are important. They embody who the teachings of Christ. And so, again, I don't want to diminish doctrines. And so that's why I had to work that passage carefully. But if I abstract those doctrines from the person of Christ, then I've crossed a line.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Hmm.

Dr. Alan Noble

And so I guess that's what I was trying to get at, is that there's a way of, of becoming Christian where you're, you're not giving your worship, your assent, your, your faith, your belief to, to Christ as a person, a living person, but to this abstract faith thing.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that makes me think about— have you ever read C.S. Lewis's, uh, "An Apologist's Evening Prayer"?

Dr. Alan Noble

I have not, no.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, I can't quote it. People listening, you should go look for it. It's online. But he, he is— that prayer is essentially capturing what you're talking about. He's asking God to turn his heart toward him and not his cleverness and his arguments and so forth.

Dr. Alan Noble

Oh yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It's a short piece, but it is, I think, brilliant and helpful. You conclude in terms of the virtues with love, which is the greatest of these. And you again bring this idea of the good to the fore. "You say to love someone is to desire their good, their ultimate good, not what the individual envisions as the good, but what is objectively the good. And the good is always union with Christ. The good is always growing into fullness of our nature, and our nature is to be in communion with God. The good is always becoming our full humanity, which involves the cultivation of virtues. So to love someone is to desire that they live in communion with God, in union with Christ, on a path of self-denial and growth

in the virtues." And this in itself is, especially in our time where, you know, we have this idea that, well, if I love you, I'll just leave you to yourself.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
But this is so dramatically opposed to that. Because again, it's the recognition that no one of us is the determinant of the good.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. As you were reading that, I forgot I wrote that and I agree with it.

Dr. Keith Plummer
I'm glad you still do.

Dr. Alan Noble
Sometimes somebody reads me a passage that I wrote and I'm like, I don't know about, you know, not that I disagree, but I'm like, I could have read, you know, written that better. And then sometimes it's like, wow, I'm glad I wrote that. That was— I agree with myself. Yeah, this is— it is a radical thing, and it sounds arrogant to say, frankly, you know. It sounds arrogant to say that there's an objective good and that we can know it and that we can project it on someone else and say, I desire your good, and your good is union with Christ. But I think there are a couple things we can understand that we can note is, first of all, that, that doesn't mean that we have knowledge about, you know, the particulars necessarily, the particulars about what that means for that person's life. You know, there are some things that we can know where there is obvious sins, then we can know that God would desire them to turn from those sins. There are a lot of other things that, that we don't know. You know, we probably don't know whether that means they need to change jobs or move to another state or something like this.

Dr. Alan Noble
So there's still a lot of, you know, a lot of freedom there. But it is, it is a confident thing to say. It is a challenging thing to say. But, but it's also a true thing to say. And it's a thing that, that church, the church would believe, has believed for thousands of years because it's, it is love. It is love to believe that the good news is so good that it's good for everybody.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. And this goes back to the idea of fortitude and suffering, that because there is a good, it's worth even being ridiculed for the sake of saying that to people.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
It's even worth suffering for saying that to people.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
And, you know, one of the things that I really enjoyed about reading this, having read your other works, is it kind of reminded me of a movie. I thought of *Star Wars*, you know, the, the *Star Wars* theme, the, the theme, it takes various forms throughout the movie, but you can recognize it. And so one of the things that I had fun doing was seeing the threads of some of your other books.

Dr. Alan Noble
Oh, yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Throughout this one.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
I, you know, all of them were recognizable. *You Are Not Your Own*.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yep.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Disruptive Witness.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yep.

Dr. Keith Plummer
On Getting Out of Bed. I mean, it was, it was, it was kind of like fun.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
To see those. And in the chapter on Love Applied, one of the ways that you talk about love, the virtue of love being applied in daily life is that of Attention.

Dr. Alan Noble
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Which really made me think about *Disruptive Witness* in particular. But what is the relationship between love and attention, and why is that virtue so critical, especially now?

Dr. Alan Noble
When I thought about love, when I thought about giving a practical example of what it means to love, you know, there are so many ways you could come up with a million different examples. But when I thought about what it means today to love, Attention came to mind because we live in this attention economy, which I talk about in *Disruptive Witness*. You're right. And, since *Disruptive Witness*, which I think was 2018, things have only accelerated. People just want more and more of our attention. Devices are just more and more successful at capturing our attention, and so are our apps and websites. And now, people are turning to chatbots and things to distract themselves and turning their attention that way. And what we're missing is face-to-face attention, you know. And it seems to me that attention is this powerful way to show your love to someone else, because what it does is it says, I have limited time on this earth, and I'm choosing to sacrifice my limited existence to offer it to you as a— yeah, as a sacrifice, because I love you. Because, because sort of the working definition of love in this chapter is how wonderful you exist; it's good that you are. That's a paraphrase. I'm not getting exactly right. And it's an affirmation of their existence. And when you attend to somebody, when you give them your attention, you are affirming their existence. You are saying you matter. It is wonderful that you exist. And I'm paying attention to you. I'm giving you my eyes. I'm giving you my attention. And that matters. I could be doing so many other things, but I'm choosing to be with you right now because I care about you. And as time accelerates, as our pace of life accelerates, this is going to just matter more and more. And I would love the church to be a space known for their attention, known for people who give attention to people, who take each other out for coffee, who just look each other in the eye, who give time to one another. That's a great act of love.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, you say in that chapter, "To practice the virtue of love in the contemporary world means fighting to keep your attention focused on what is worthy of your love." Now that was really, really good. Well, as we wind down, I did want to give you an opportunity to talk a little bit about— we've talked about these virtues as these cultivated habits, But you make plain in the conclusion of the book that we're not just talking about the cultivation on an individualized basis, but that community is critical for this cultivation. So could you say a word or two about that?

Dr. Alan Noble

Right. So all these virtues have to be done in community. They can't be done in isolation. You can't love in isolation, right? You've got to love. Even if you're loving God, you're loving in community. You can't do justice in isolation. You've got to do justice to somebody. Prudence is always done. You're making decisions in some kind of community. So all these, all these are done in community. And so the challenge is finding communities of virtue to practice these in that will help you develop these, cultivate these virtues.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Right.

Dr. Alan Noble

And so this is where I think families need to work together to practice these virtues, where I think groups of friends need to practice these virtues. I have a quote in there that I think is— I'm not sure if I placed it in this part of the book or not, but from C.S. Lewis, where he's talking about people who want to save Western civilization. And he says, what's going to be a lot more effective than trying to save Western civilization is groups of friends getting together. And I would say groups of friends getting together and acting virtuously. That's That's the most meaningful work that we can do, you know, not having these grandiose plans, you know. And churches, of course, you know, churches that do this work. And so I think community is absolutely important.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, I just want to let folks know a lot of our discussion has been on young people, and you have, you know, directed this largely at 20 and 30-year-olds.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But I am considerably out of that demographic and I have benefited greatly from this. So I don't want people to hear this and think, well, you know, that's just for young people. But I would say, if you know someone like a high school student or someone in college, someone who's nearing graduation, this is definitely something that I think would profit them greatly. As I've told Alan, my own son, has really, really benefited from this. And so I'm grateful not only for the benefit that it has done me, but as a dad, to see what it has meant to my, my child. I'm very grateful for you and your laboring over thinking through these things and taking the pains to articulate them. If people want to read more from you, where can they do that?

Dr. Alan Noble

Probably the best place to go is my Substack, You Are Not Your Own Substack. You could just search my name, O. Alan Noble, and find me there. I publish twice a week and writing a lot there.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Great. Well, the book again is *To Live Well: Practical Wisdom for Moving Through Chaotic Times*, published by IVP, by Alan Noble. And Alan, thanks again for taking the time to talk with me today. It was a pleasure. And, uh, I'm really thankful.

Dr. Alan Noble

Yeah, me too. It's been wonderful. Thank you.

Ben Best, co-host

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