

# Jasper



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## Word of the day:

### VIRTUE

Have you ever seen an old picture of men working on the Brooklyn Bridge, eating their lunch while they sit on a girder hanging in mid-air, two hundred feet off the ground? How were they able to do that? They had VIRTUE. I'll explain, but first let me say something about people who think that that's an easy thing to get, this virtue.

Whenever somebody says to you, "I don't need religion to be a good man," you better feel your pocket to make sure your wallet is still there. Mostly he means he doesn't need to go to church to be a half decent fellow. It doesn't take much to be half decent. If he were a cannibal, it would mean that he ate only real enemies of the tribe. He would *never* eat his next-door

neighbor. That would be wrong. If he were a gangster, it would mean that he only ratted on his enemies and not his friends, or he only ratted on his friends when it paid a lot. To rat on your buddy is wrong, unless there's a lot of money to gain. If he were a pig, it would mean that he rolled in mud but not in other stuff. The other stuff smells.

What a hero!  
Why, I'll bet that if he's driving his car and he sees a homeless man begging on the side of the street, he might even roll up a five-dollar bill into a ball and toss it at the poor man's head, and then boast about it later.



But real VIRTUE is difficult to practice and hard to win.

Suppose you are climbing a rickety aluminum ladder. You don't like it. Your mind knows that the ladder is not going to tip over. Your reason tells you that your

weight is going to help fix the ladder in place. You still don't like it. But you climb. You "learn" not to fear. You accustom yourself to the height. Eventually you don't even think about it anymore. Now sit down with those men who built the Brooklyn Bridge. What can you lean against? Air. What do your feet touch? Air. What will catch you if you fall? Air. What keeps you in your place? VIRTUE.

Do you think those men were all human squirrels who did that by *nature*? Not one of them. They learned how to work on girders, to balance their bodies, to walk a straight line, to behave with death all round them as they would behave if those same beams were two feet from the ground. It *became* their nature. It was a habit that they could gain only by determination, discipline, and practice. Anyone who says, "I don't need any discipline at all – let me up on that skeleton of steel," is asking for some trouble. I wouldn't want to be standing next to him. But no one is so silly as to say that.

The older you get, the more you will see that it is not always easy to do the right thing. This is a dangerous and adventurous life you're in! You will need the *habits* of doing the right thing even when everybody around you is doing something else, and when everybody makes fun of you, or even

hates you. You will need the *habits* of saying to yourself, "I have to tell the truth, because that is what a good person does, no matter what." You have to say, "I am going to stand by my friend, because that is what a good person does, even if all these other people will hate me for it." You will find that the habit makes you strong and free. That's the way it is.

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What keeps men on the battlefield when the bullets are whistling past them? Not a couple of slogans, not a nice temper, not looking to your own safety. Only *virtue*, the good strong habit, does it. It gives you power. It moved a man named Joseph de Veustre, whom we call Brother Damien, to leave his homeland of Belgium forever and minister to the

lepers on the island of Molokai, way off in the Pacific Ocean. It moved George Washington and his men to cross the wintry Delaware River in the dead of night, for a surprise attack on the Hessians. It moved an American patriot named Nathan Hale, about to be hanged by the British, to say, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

I like the word VIRTUE. It comes from Latin VIRTUS, and means, literally, the quality of being a VIR – a real MAN. "VIRILITER agite," says Saint Paul to the Corinthians in the Latin version of the Bible.

What does that mean? Be MEN! Not boys, not sheep, not cowards, not half-decent people who never get into trouble, because they never do anything brave enough to make anybody notice them.

The VIR part of VIRTUE, by the way, has a cousin in Old English, which is what you would have spoken if you grew up in England more than eleven hundred years ago. You can hear it if you pronounce the V as a W, which is how they would have done it in Latin when Jesus was born. The Old English cousin is WER, and it means MAN or WARRIOR. You can see it still in the word WEREWOLF, a MAN-WOLF. That may be a bad thing to be, but it sure beats being a WERE-SHEEP or a WERE-WORM. So I think, anyway.



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