

Shrinking Moral Vocabulary

In an article for the *Atlantic Wire*, correspondent Jen Doll summarizes the findings of a study published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, which used “the power and scope of the 5.2-million-strong *Google Books* archive to track the way we use language.”

It specifically focused on the appearance and frequency of words “related to moral excellence and virtue” in American books from 1901 to 2000.

The researchers, Pelin and Selin Kesebir, predicted that “morality and virtue terms” would appear in our cultural writings less and less frequently over the course of the last century “considering the well-established cultural trend in the United States toward greater individualism.” Their predictions were definitely evidenced in their findings from two separate studies:

- In the first, they looked at 10 words denoting the general moral worth of a person – character, conscience, decency, dignity, ethics, morality, rectitude, righteousness, uprightness and virtue. Obtaining word frequency data from *Google Ngram Viewer*, the Kesebirs found in both studies overwhelming declines in the use of the selected words.
- In the second study, there was a statistically significant decline in 74 percent of the words they studied, including honesty, patience, honor, truthfulness, kindness, sincerity, courage, generosity, mercy, wisdom, humility, faithfulness, charity, humbleness, bravery, thoughtfulness, grace, helpfulness, courtesy, love, perseverance, modesty, politeness, fidelity, justice, gratitude, diligence, thankfulness, gentleness, sacrifice, benevolence, fortitude, purity, temperance, faith, hospitality and appreciation.

Words related to care and concern for others declined the most.

The Kesebirs wrote in an abstract for their paper, “Overall, our findings suggest that during the 20th century, moral ideals and virtues have largely waned from the public conversation.” They go on to say, “People simply do not think/talk/write about morality and virtue as much anymore. The vocabulary for talking about issues of good and bad, right and wrong thus seems to be shrinking.”

What should we do about these findings? A couple of observations ...

1. It is incumbent upon the church and the broad Christian family to make sure that such biblical concepts as mutual accountability and responsibility and moral certitude do not disappear from the vocabulary – or from the hearts – of this and future generations.

(more)

2. More particularly, we in Life Care and Century Park, because of the mission in which we are engaged, should demonstrate by our words and our actions that care and concern for others are appropriate considerations for every human being.

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves
(Romans 12:10)

– Beecher Hunter