

“THE WORLD OF EPICETETUS”

BY JAMES STOCKDALE

Background on the Selection

This *Reading* is an essay on integrity, leadership, adversity, and education by James Bond Stockdale (1923–2005). Stockdale was a philosopher, professor, U.S. vice-presidential candidate, Navy admiral, prisoner of war, and recipient of the Medal of Honor.

Group Discussion Questions

1 Consider the distinction made in the Foreword between core ethics, or character, and “prevention ethics.” What is the difference? Which do you see in your own life? The Foreword was written in 1993; has there been any progress or decline in the cultural arena since then?

2 Read what Stockdale says about his attitude just before he is shot down in Vietnam. What is he saying? Presumably your situation is less dangerous than his was then, but how prepared are you for a trial that will test the depths of your character? What if anything can be done to overcome naïveté like his?

3 What does Stockdale say about civilization and technology as a veneer over our true values? What does this imply in your case? How do we “illuminate” values? Which values does Stockdale suggest are better? How does he distinguish between values and integrity? Is this helpful? Is it correct?

4 Stockdale addresses integrity in the context of corporate and military personnel decisions. Is he correct that people often prefer not to work with “devious geniuses”?

5 Consider the types of abuse that Stockdale suffered at the hands of his captors. What made people vulnerable? What did he draw on to sustain himself? What does he say was not helpful? What would you do in a similar situation?

6 How do you respond to the story of the collaborator who later “came back” to his fellows? What was his weakness? Why did he stop collaborating? Would you have taken him back? Could he or the other prisoners have done anything more or differently to help reconcile the situation?

7 Why does Stockdale place such value on integrity? Are there situations in your life where you feel in danger of extortion, of being used? Have you been in situations where people exploited chinks in the armor your integrity? What do you think Stockdale means by his passing reference to the “wrong gods”?

8 Recap Stockdale’s summary of the lessons of a classical education. Do you agree? Have you studied much history, literature, and philosophy? Which of Stockdale’s three categories of brainwashing candidates would you fall into? Do you think character and integrity can be taught? Do you agree with Stockdale’s distinction between core education and “the so-called practical exercises”?

9 Where does self-respect fit into Stockdale’s thinking? How does this compare with its place in the culture that you live in?

10 How did you respond to Stockdale’s interpretation of the message of the Book of Job? Why did this comfort him? Do you have a different reading of it? Are there other selections from the Bible or other books that might be contrasted to this lesson?

11 What sort of person should *you* be? What steps are you taking to act like and become that sort of person?

Further Reading

- “The Oak and the Calf” by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1992
- “Shantung Compound” by Langdon Gilkey, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1997
- *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* by James Stockdale (Hoover Institution 1995)
- *Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Touchstone 1997)
- *Enchiridion* by Epictetus, translated by George Long (Prometheus 1955)
- *Enchiridion militis christiani*—“The Handbook of the Militant Christian” (or “Christian Soldier,” 1503), by Desiderius Erasmus, in *The Essential Erasmus* (Plume 1964)