

“Real Desire”

*John 1:35–38a; Luke 18:35–41a; Romans 7:15;
Colossians 3:12–14*

Do we become more like Jesus merely by trying?

As Jesus walks along the bank of the Jordan River, he turns and sees that two men are following him. His question to them is a simple one, or so it seems, “What are you looking for?” Much later, in response to a blind man’s shouts for mercy, Jesus asks him much the same question, “What do you want me to do for you?” Still later, the apostle Paul will wonder why it is that we don’t do what we want and, at the same time, do what we don’t want to do. It is a rhetorical question, but one we can all echo.



What do you want? Really want? What is your heart’s desire? Sin is a disordered heart and, thus, disordered desire and love; we love the wrong things or we love the right things the wrong way. We can think of our hearts as disoriented compasses that don’t point to magnetic north, but instead lead us in the wrong direction—too often right over a cliff. That is the essence of Christian teaching on sin – our hearts are disordered; we pursue what we love, but our wants and desires, our loves, are distorted.

So, the obvious question is this: What can we do to re-orient our hearts so that we desire the right things and pursue them? What can we do to reset our moral compass? The answer lies in our habits—developing better habits, moral habits, aka virtues. Developing habits of compassion reorients our hearts so that we seek compassion. Developing habits of kindness reorients our hearts, so that we are reflexively kind. If I always have to stop and think about being kind, there is a good chance I often won’t be. The same is true of all the virtues. Paul writes:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8-9).

Paul is urging the believers in Philippi toward a virtuous life, becoming people of good character, for he knows that the virtues reflect the character of God. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul lists fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Such is the character of Jesus and it is to be our character as well. As James K. A. Smith put it in his excellent book, *You Are What You Love*:

Virtues, quite simply, are good moral habits. (Bad moral habits, as you might guess, are called “vices.”) Good moral habits are . . . character traits that become woven into who you are so that you are the kind of person who is inclined to be compassionate, forgiving, and so forth. Virtues thus are different from moral laws or rules In fact, as Thomas Aquinas points out, there is an inversely proportionate relationship between virtue and the law: the more virtuous someone is—that is, the more they have an internal disposition to the good that bubbles up from their very character—the less they need the external force of the law to compel them to do the good. Conversely, the more “vicious” [as in “vices”] a person or group of people is, the more they need the “stick” of the law to compel them to do what they ought. Anyone who has raised children is intimately familiar with these dynamics. Early on, we need to constantly tell (and compel) our children to do the right thing. We are training their moral

sense. But the goal and hope is that, in the process, they are internalizing a sense of the good and will become the kind of people who do this without the “stick” of rules compelling them to do so.¹

If we put in the hard work to build good moral habits, then the hard choices, the better choices, won't seem so hard at all. So the question becomes this: How do we acquire these; what sort of hard work does it take? It isn't by doing what comes naturally, for our hearts are disordered by sin. We will develop good moral habits, the virtues, by imitation and practice. Dr. Smith again:

First, we learn the virtues through imitation. More specifically, we learn to be virtuous by imitating exemplars of justice, compassion, kindness, and love. In our culture that prizes “authenticity” and places a premium on novelty and uniqueness, imitation has received a bad rap, as if being an imitator is synonymous with being a fake (think “imitation leather”). But the New Testament holds imitation in a very different light. Indeed, we are exhorted to be imitators. “Follow my example,” Paul says, “as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Similarly, Paul commends imitation to the Christians at Philippi: “join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do” (Phil. 3:17). Like a young boy who learns to shave by mimicking what he sees his father doing, so we learn to “put on” the virtues by imitating those who model the Christlike life.

Second, acquiring virtue takes practice. Such moral, kingdom-reflecting dispositions are inscribed into your character through rhythms and routines and rituals, enacted over and over again, that implant in you a disposition to an end (telos) that becomes a character trait—a sort of learned, second-nature default orientation that you tend toward “without thinking about it.” . . . It's like we have moral muscles that are trained in the same way our biological muscles are trained when we practice a golf swing or piano scales.²

And so we do not merely try to be more like Jesus, more patient, generous, and faithful, we train for it, just like we train for any other challenging goal in our lives.

Are you ready...?

¹ Smith, James K. A. (2016). *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (p.16-17), Brazos Press

² Ibid., p. 18-19.