

“DISCOVERING THE VIRTUOUS LIFE”

Matthew 15:10-20; 2 Peter 1:1-8 ¹

His name was Jim. He was the second of seven children born to a laborer’s family in a small town in the hill country. The hills were beautiful, and their town wasn’t too far from a wonderful lake, but it was a poor area, and life was hard. Their house had no plumbing, no heating or cooling, no telephone. Actually, the house had only a dirt floor, and maybe that was the reason people said they were “dirt poor.” While this sounds bad, Jim’s family was really no worse off than anybody else in town. The whole town was poor. Nobody had running water. Everyone got water from the one little spring up the “holler.”

For all that, life wasn’t really too bad. There’s something to be said for the country life, even when you’re poor. People got along pretty well and cared for each other in the close-knit way country folks do. The village folk helped each other raise their children, and they walked together through all the ups and downs of life.

People do talk in small towns, though, and Jim’s older brother, Josh, had always been one of the topics of town gossip. Folks said the wedding and that first boy’s birth just didn’t add up right. Some even went so far as to say that nobody really knew who Josh’s father was. It was one of those things you just didn’t come right up and ask about, and their mother didn’t volunteer any answers.

Though Jim’s family already lived on the “raw edges” of life, things got tougher still when his daddy died. As the oldest boy, Josh took over and ran their father’s little business for about ten years. But after a while, Josh took a notion to get into politics, and he turned the shop over to Jim while he pursued a different life.

Josh’s political activities made him a public figure rather quickly. Jim found himself resenting the fact that Josh had left him holding the bag at home, and he resented the fact that Josh was becoming so well known. Jim’s other siblings pretty much felt the same way about it all.

Do you recognize Jim yet? You’re more familiar with Jim by the name James, and Josh . . . well, “Josh” is short for Joshua, which is another name for Jesus. Although this really was Jesus’ story, a very similar story could have happened not far from here.

It really was true that Jesus’ family was not too keen on His public ministry. More than once they tried to haul Him back home, saying, “*He’s out of his mind*” (Mark 3:21), and even Jesus’ mother, who knew things the others didn’t, sometimes thought He was taking things too far (Mark 3:31-35). But early in the book of Acts, just days after Jesus ascended back to heaven, several of His brothers were found among His followers in the upper room (Acts 1:14). And as time went by, James became the unquestioned leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17, 15:1-29).²

What in the world could have caused such a change in James’ attitude toward his brother? We have only a hint about the answer to this question, but Paul told us that, while Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people between His Resurrection and His return to heaven, He made private appearances to only two: first to Peter, and then to His brother, James (1 Corinthians 15:5-7). Wouldn’t you have liked to have heard that conversation?!

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on May 6, 2012.

² One of James’s letters to the churches is in the New Testament, and another brother, Jude, is also a New Testament author. Jesus had two other brothers besides James and Jude, and they had at least two sisters (Mark 6:3).

What we call the Book of James actually sounds more like his brother than does any other letter in the New Testament. Both brothers made a great deal of the fact that observable behavior demonstrates inner attitudes, which are actually the prior concern.

So far in this series of messages we've looked at two of the six character qualities of a Great Commission Christian—a **Prayer-Filled** Life and a **Bible-Centered** life. This week we look at a **Heart of Virtue**, which is the real source of godly living.

The word “virtue” doesn't actually appear in the Bible. The Bible uses the words “righteousness” and “godliness” to refer to the same reality. Paul told Timothy, “*Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come*” (1 Timothy 4:7b-8).

My guess is that the images that first come to your mind about “virtue,” “righteousness,” and “godliness” might not put them on your short list of fun things to do. So what's the purpose of such effort? What's God really about here?

C. S. Lewis wrote that what God is up to is the project of transforming you and me into “dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine.”³ Lewis wrote that God's command to “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Mathew 5:48), “is not a command to do the impossible. [God] is going to make us into creatures [who] can obey that command.”⁴ And you know, I'd really like to be transformed into a person who is able to obey that command. And I'll bet you would, too.

It was this very process of transformation about which Jesus spoke when He gave us what we call the Great Commission: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*” (Matthew 28:18-20).

This process of transformation is sometimes called “discipleship.” Sometimes it's called “spiritual formation.” This morning, I'm going to call it “**Jesus' School of Virtue**,” and the central objective of Jesus' School of Virtue is easily stated. Paul put it this way: “*If you keep yourself pure, you will be a utensil God can use for his purpose. Your life will be clean, and you will be ready for the Master to use you for every good work*” (2 Timothy 2:21, NLT).

But although the concept of virtue is not difficult, in practice it's not all that easy, is it? Paul actually found it pretty hard to do himself.

Paul wrote the book of Romans after he'd been a follower of Jesus and a world-renowned preacher for about twenty-five years. And in Romans, Paul confessed, “*I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. . . . No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. . . . Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord*” (7:15, 18-19, 24-25, NLT).

And you know, there's really some good news in Paul's predicament. If Paul had a hard time living a virtuous life, then you and I don't have to be discouraged when we have a hard time, too. And, even while sharing his own struggles, Paul gave us some pretty good ideas about how to make progress in virtue ourselves.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Nook Edition (HarperCollins, 2001), p. 175.

⁴ *Ibid.*

For starters, in order to grow in virtue, we have to make some choices about desired outcomes. The story is told that a retired missionary named Jerry returned to the field years later to see how things were going. As Jerry talked with Carlos, a man who had been converted under Jerry's ministry, Carlos said, "Jerry, sometimes life is pretty hard. It's kind of like there are two big dogs inside me that are fighting each other. Sometimes the 'good dog' wins, and sometimes the 'bad dog' wins." Jerry thought about that and asked, "Carlos, which one of those dogs are you feeding?"

Paul was having the same kind of conversation with Timothy when he wrote, "*But you, Timothy, belong to God; so **run** from all these evil things, and **follow** what is right and good. **Pursue** a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness (1 Timothy 6:11, NLT). **Run** from anything that stimulates youthful lust. **Follow** anything that makes you want to do right. **Pursue** faith and love and peace, and **enjoy** the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts*" (2 Timothy 2:22, NLT).

Did you notice the verbs in Paul's instruction? **Run! Follow! Pursue! Enjoy!** Those verbs have to do with **choices**.

Jesus and James both reminded us that **our external behaviors grow out of the inner choices of our hearts**. James warned that "blessings and curses should not come out of the same mouth," and Jesus told us that "whatever is in our hearts determines what we say" (James 3:9-10; Matthew 12:34).

I use what I call "**The Spirituality Test**" to get a sense about the condition of my heart. When I experience something sharply painful or distressing, like hitting my finger with a hammer or sticking myself with a pin, I pay attention to the uncensored exclamation that emerges from my mouth and to the thoughts that erupt unbidden in my mind. Those uncensored events are windows through which I can check out the spiritual shape of my heart.

And God has already told us what He intends to do with our hearts: "*I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart*" (Ezekiel 36:26, NLT). This transformation takes place in "Jesus' School of Virtue" as we run, follow, pursue, and enjoy life with our Lord.

Just as a coach takes new recruits and builds a winning team by running laps, following playbooks, and pursuing excellence, Jesus transforms you and me into "creatures who can obey His command" through similar practices of discipline, and there are really no surprises here.

The personal disciplines that lead to spiritual transformation are well known. They include prayer, study, fasting, solitude, service, and worship, among others. As Richard Foster put it, "By undertaking the Disciplines of the spiritual life that we *can* do, we receive from God the ability to do things that under our own steam we simply *cannot* do, such as loving our enemies."⁵

Foster continued, "Rather than tackle the issues of virtue and vice head-on, we undertake activities of body, mind, and spirit that in time will build spiritual resources within us to act appropriately when the situation demands it. As athletes of God we plan a regimen of spiritual Disciplines that will stimulate our growth in grace.

⁵ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p. 88.

“If we are struggling with pride, we learn service, which leads us into the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves. If we are needing hope, we learn prayer and meditation, which usher us ever deeper into the heart of the Holy. If compulsions of one kind or another obsess us, we learn fasting, which teaches us to control all the senses by the grace of God. If we want faith, we learn worship, which shows us the Lord high and lifted up. And on it goes. Throughout we are training for holiness, planning for perfection.”⁶

While these things are most surely true, I must warn you that this transformation is extremely slow, rather like the polishing running water offers to rocks in its path, and we easily become impatient. In order to make real progress, we must steadfastly choose to continue the Disciplines, whether we perceive progress or not; and there is actually a good reason for the slow pace of our growth.

As Foster noted, “On our own we are not sufficient receptacles to contain the divine Blessing. We would simply blow apart, or something worse. Therefore, we should always value this ordinary way (this intolerably slow way) of growth, for through it God prepares us for things we can hardly imagine.”⁷

As you and I make our way forward toward the virtuous life, we will frequently find ourselves being tackled by the sin within us, just as Paul did. But the important thing about being tackled is whether or not we get back up to run, to follow, and to pursue the Goal.

“For this very reason,” Peter wrote, “make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:8).

That’s what it’s all about, anyway—living for Jesus! So let’s get after it!

⁶ Foster, p. 95.

⁷ Foster, p. 91. In those moments when we are allowed to glimpse our progress, yet another choice is necessary. In those times we must choose to acknowledge that this transformation is God’s work, not ours. Paul reminded Timothy, God “*saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace . . . given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time*” (2 Timothy 1:9).