

Do the Hard Thing

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a six-part series

April 22, 2018

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Proverbs 1:7 (CEB)

⁷ Wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD,
but fools despise wisdom
and instruction.

Proverbs 8:10–11 (CEB)

¹⁰ Take my instruction rather than silver,
knowledge rather than choice gold.
¹¹ Wisdom is better than pearls;
nothing is more delightful than she.

Proverbs 2:12–15 (CEB)

¹² Wisdom will rescue you from the evil path,
from people who twist their words.
¹³ They forsake the way of integrity
and go on obscure paths.
¹⁴ They enjoy doing evil,
rejoicing in their twisted evil.
¹⁵ Their paths are confused;
they get lost on their way.

Matthew 7:13–14 (CEB)

¹³ “Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. ¹⁴ But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.

Philippians 4:8–9 (NRSV)

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

Don't bit that easy button . . . it isn't the Way.

We've all known friends and family who always seem to take the easy way, to drift along with the crowd, letting the rivers of life carry them along. Sadly, we also know that such drifters usually wake up one morning asking themselves how they got there. How did their life turn out to be such a mess? They realize only then that a life of easy choices is not the way to build a life any of us would seek.

This is Jesus' point in the above passage from Matthew. In this excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is contrasting two ways – the narrow way and the broad way. The hard way and the easy way. The way that too few choose and the way of the easy button. These few sentences from Jesus the Wisdom Teacher are a warning, one not often heeded, speaking to both our choice to put our faith in Jesus *and* our decision to follow his way. Leon Morris writes:

“ . . . Matthew's Jesus is appealing *both* for an evangelical decision (the gate) *and* for an ethical endurance (the way). Taken together, then, the narrow gate and the tough way are simply the difficult choice for Jesus *and* the constantly challenging decisions for discipleship to him” (pp. 282–83).¹ It appears that in asking our questions we are trying to make Jesus more precise than he chose to be. We may profitably reflect that both the initial commitment to Christ and the subsequent journey of faith are important, and that we may see them both indicated here. But

¹ Quoted by Leon Morris, from F. Bruner's book, *The Christ Book, Matthew 1-12*.

we can scarcely say more. Perhaps we should notice that the word for *road* is that used for the Christians in Acts, namely “the Way” (Acts 9:2, etc.).²

And so we are back to the two paths offered us in Proverbs: Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly, God’s way and the world’s way. The question before us this week is: “How do we stay on the narrow path, the path of God’s wisdom? How can we make better choices, which are often the harder choice?” Here’s how:

Build good moral habits, aka virtues.

That’s it. If you are always trying to be kind or compassion or patient or joyful, it is going to be hard to sustain. But turn those efforts into habits and they become your effortless way of dealing with the world around you. Your heart becomes re-oriented to God’s way rather than the way of folly.

The problem is that good moral habits don’t come “naturally” to us. This would be a way of describing “original sin,” the flaw in our moral DNA that makes our hearts chase after what it doesn’t even really want. And what do our hearts want? Augustine got it right when he wrote, “You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” The problem is that sin causes our heart to be disoriented, distorting our desires and wants. Our hearts become like a broken compass, leading us in the wrong direction, chasing that which, in the end, disappoints and even ruins us.

In his excellent and important book, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, James K. A. Smith helps us to unpack all this.

To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as “flourishing.” And we want that. We crave it. We desire it. This is why our most fundamental mode of orientation to the world is love. We are oriented by our longings, directed by our desires. We adopt ways of life that are indexed to such visions of the good life, not usually because we “think through” our options but rather because some picture captures our imagination. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of *The Little Prince*, succinctly encapsulates the motive power of such allure: “If you want to build a ship,” he counsels, “don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” We aren’t really motivated by abstract ideas or pushed by rules and duties. Instead some panoramic tableau of what looks like flourishing has an alluring power that attracts us, drawing us toward it, and we thus live and work toward that goal. We get pulled into a way of life that seems to be the way to arrive in that world.³

What picture of the world really gets you going? What does “flourishing” look like to you? What do you most desire out of life? Your answers to those questions will go a long way to telling you what you really love. Of course, answering those questions is not as straightforward as we might think. First, there are the answers we tell everyone. Then there are the answers we admit to ourselves in our private chambers. And, finally, there are the answers that lie so deep within our hearts, we hardly know they are there. For the truest answers, the ones that really matter, are the ones that come from the heart, the ones we don’t think about. And because our hearts are distorted by sin, rather than seek God, we chase all the pretenders: money, fame, the big job, amazing vacations, sex, power, even family.

Reorienting the heart

If our “natural/sinful” heart is going to lead us astray, urging us to run with the crowd and hit the easy button of popular choices, what are we to do? And that question brings us back to building good moral habits, the virtues, or what we might call in Christian parlance, training in righteousness. Back to Dr. Smith:

² Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (pp. 175–176). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

³ Smith, James K. A. (2016). *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (p.11-12), Brazos Press

Virtues, quite simply, are good moral habits. (Bad moral habits, as you might guess, are called “vices.”) Good moral habits are like internal dispositions to the good—they 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, which are external stipulations of the good. 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.⁴

There is irony here. 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, but 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.” . . . Virtues are learned and acquired, through imitation and practice. 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.⁵

Paul and good moral habits

In today’s passage from Philippians, Paul begins by urging the believers to find the peace of God and shed worry through prayer, and then goes on to point his readers toward a list of virtues, the good moral habits. There is nothing particularly Christian about his list. The Greeks certainly advocated the virtuous life. The Greek philosophers urged people toward honor and truth and justice and purity and goodness. They understood that such virtues were essential to a truly fulfilling life. They would speak of the supreme Good and the importance of humans resembling the Good.

We, of course, speak differently. We proclaim that God is not only the Good, but also personal and fully revealed in Jesus Christ. We don’t talk about our resemblance to the Good, but we do talk about our own pursuit of Christlikeness. When we dwell upon the virtuous, we are dwelling upon God and the things of God. And it is there that good moral habits, infused with God-purpose and God-awareness, will lead us.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16-17

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18-19

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The discussion questions for this study are drawn from the curriculum for our Connection Groups, which will be meeting throughout the series. The questions were written by Rev. Allison Jean.

1. Share about a “hard thing” or a habit that you do on a regular basis, even if you don’t enjoy it. How is this better for you in the long run, even if it is difficult?
2. What are some “hard things” that your parents taught you to do growing up? How did these “hard things” turn into larger life lessons for you? How have you tried to share these “hard things” with others in your life, whether children, friends, or coworkers?
3. When do you see the Christian faith going against our culture, what is typically expected or accepted? Is this easy or hard for you to go along with? Why? Do you think Christianity is counter-cultural? Why or why not?
4. Share about a time when you made a choice to go through the “wide gate” or take the easy way out. Why did you make this decision? What happened as a result of this decision? How were your faith or your relationships with others impacted because of this choice?
5. Share about a time when you chose to go through the “narrow gate” or to go against what is expected because of your faith. Why did you make this decision?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More on building good moral habits, aka training in righteousness

Monday, Deuteronomy 18:9-16 Don’t imitate the pagans. Instead, obey God.

Tuesday, Proverbs 10:5-6 No sleeping in!?

Wednesday, Romans 12:10-21 Overcome evil with good.

Thursday, Galatians 5:13-26 Live by the Spirit.

Friday, 1 Corinthians 4:16, 11:1 Imitate me, Paul tells the Christians.

Saturday, Hebrews 13:1-8 “Imitate your leaders.”

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Jewish History*, a six-week series with faculty from UTD’s Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies.