

YOU ARE WHAT YOU LOVE

THE SPIRITUAL POWER of HABIT

JAMES K. A. SMITH



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For
John Witvliet,
co-conspirator

In memory of
Robert Webber,
one of my most important teachers,
though we never met

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

—Proverbs 4:23

My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me.

—Augustine, *Confessions*

Lovers are the ones who know most about God; the theologian must listen to them.

—Hans Urs von Balthasar,
Love Alone Is Credible

We in America need ceremonies, is I suppose, sailor, the point of what I have written.

—John Updike, “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car”

Sometimes the smallest things take up the most room in your heart.

—Winnie the Pooh

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PREFACE

You've caught a vision. God has gotten bigger for you. You've captured a sense of the gospel's scope and reach—that the renewing power of Christ reaches “far as the curse is found.” You have come to realize that God is not just in the soul-rescue business; he is redeeming *all things* (Col. 1:20).

The Bible has come to life for you in ways you've never experienced before. It's almost like you're seeing Genesis 1 and 2 for the first time, realizing that we're made to be makers, commissioned to be God's image bearers by taking up our God-given labor of culture-making. It's as if someone gave you a new decoder ring for reading the prophets. You can't understand how you ever missed God's passionate concern for justice—calling on the people of God to care for the downtrodden and champion the oppressed. Now as you read you can't help but notice the persistent presence of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

Now the question is: What does this have to do with church?

This book articulates a spirituality for culture-makers, showing (I hope) why discipleship needs to be centered in and fueled by our immersion in the body of Christ. Worship is the “imagination station” that incubates our loves and longings so that our

cultural endeavors are indexed toward God and his kingdom. If you are passionate about seeking justice, renewing culture, and taking up your vocation to unfurl all of creation's potential, you need to invest in the formation of your imagination. You need to curate your heart. You need to worship well. Because you are what you love.

And you worship what you love.

And you might not love what you think.

Which raises an important question. Let's dare to ask it.

1

YOU ARE WHAT YOU LOVE

To Worship Is Human

What do you *want*?

That's the question. It is the first, last, and most fundamental question of Christian discipleship. In the Gospel of John, it is the first question Jesus poses to those who would follow him. When two would-be disciples who are caught up in John the Baptist's enthusiasm begin to follow, Jesus wheels around on them and pointedly asks, "What do you want?" (John 1:38).

It's the question that is buried under almost every other question Jesus asks each of us. "Will you come and follow me?" is another version of "What do you want?," as is the fundamental question Jesus asks of his errant disciple, Peter: "Do you love me?" (John 21:16 NRSV).

Jesus doesn't encounter Matthew and John—or you and me—and ask, "What do you know?" He doesn't even ask, "What do you believe?" He asks, "What do you want?" This is the most incisive, piercing question Jesus can ask of us precisely because

we *are* what we want. Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow. Our wants reverberate from our heart, the epicenter of the human person. Thus Scripture counsels, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Prov. 4:23). Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love.

So discipleship is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing. Jesus’s command to follow him is a command to align our loves and longings with his—to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all—a vision encapsulated by the shorthand “the kingdom of God.”

Jesus is a teacher who doesn’t just inform our intellect but forms our very loves. He isn’t content to simply deposit new ideas into your mind; he is after nothing less than your wants, your loves, your longings. His “teaching” doesn’t just touch the calm, cool, collected space of reflection and contemplation; he is a teacher who invades the heated, passionate regions of the heart. He is the Word who “penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit”; *he* “judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). To follow Jesus is to become a student of the Rabbi who teaches us how to *love*; to be a disciple of Jesus is to enroll in the school of charity. Jesus is not Lecturer-in-Chief; his school of charity is not like a lecture hall where we passively take notes while Jesus spouts facts about himself in a litany of text-heavy PowerPoint slides.

And yet we often approach discipleship as primarily a didactic endeavor—as if becoming a disciple of Jesus is largely an intellectual project, a matter of acquiring knowledge. Why is that?

Because every approach to discipleship and Christian formation assumes an implicit model of what human beings are. While these assumptions usually remain unarticulated, we nonetheless work with some fundamental (though unstated) assumptions about what

sorts of creatures we are—and therefore what sorts of learners we are. If being a disciple is being a learner and follower of Jesus, then a lot hinges on what you think “learning” is. And what you think learning is hinges on what you think human beings are. In other words, your understanding of discipleship will reflect a set of working assumptions about the very nature of human beings, even if you’ve never asked yourself such questions.

This hit home for me in a tangible way several years ago. While paging through an issue of a noted Christian magazine, I was struck by a full-color advertisement for a Bible verse memory program. At the center of the ad was a man’s face, and emblazoned across his forehead was a startling claim: “YOU ARE WHAT YOU THINK.” That is a very explicit way to state what many of us implicitly assume. In ways that are more “modern” than biblical, we have been taught to assume that human beings are fundamentally *thinking things*. While we might never have read—or even heard of—seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes, many of us unwittingly share his definition of the essence of the human person as *res cogitans*, a “thinking thing.” Like Descartes, we view our bodies as (at best!) extraneous, temporary vehicles for trucking around our souls or “minds,” which are where all the real action takes place. In other words, we imagine human beings as giant bobblehead dolls: with humungous heads and itty-bitty, unimportant bodies. It’s the mind that we picture as “mission control” of the human person; it’s thinking that defines who we are. “You are what you think” is a motto that reduces human beings to brains-on-a-stick. Ironically, such thinking-thingism assumes that the “heart” of the person is the mind. “I think, therefore I am,” Descartes said, and most of our approaches to discipleship end up parroting his idea.

Such an intellectualist model of the human person—one that reduces us to mere intellect—assumes that learning (and hence discipleship) is primarily a matter of depositing ideas and beliefs into mind-containers. Critical education theorist bell hooks, echoing

Paulo Freire, calls this a “banking” model of education: we treat human learners as if they are safe-deposit boxes for knowledge and ideas, mere intellectual receptacles for beliefs. We then think of action as a kind of “withdrawal” from this bank of knowledge, as if our action and behavior were always the outcome of conscious, deliberate, rational reflection that ends with a choice—as if our behavior were basically the conclusion to a little syllogism in our head whereby we *think* our way through the world. In all of this, we ignore the overwhelming power of habit.¹

So we assume that a disciple is a *learner* who is acquiring more information about God through the Scriptures—that serious discipleship is really discipleship *of the mind*. And of course that’s true. Scripture enjoins us to take every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5) and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). A follower of Jesus will be a student of the Word, one “whose delight is in the law of the LORD” (Ps. 1:2). If you’re serious about following Jesus, you will drink up every opportunity to learn more about God, God’s Word, what he requires of us, and what he desires for his creation. You don’t just show up for worship and the sermon: you’re there for adult education classes; you join a small-group Bible study; you read your Bible every day; you attend every conference you can; you devour books that help you further understand God and his Word; you drink up knowledge. You want to *learn*.

Ironically, this is true even for versions of Christian faith that are proclaimed “anti-intellectual.” Many modes of Christian piety and discipleship that are suspicious of formal theology and higher education are nonetheless “intellectualist” in how they approach discipleship and Christian formation, narrowly focused on filling our intellectual wells with biblical knowledge, convinced that we can *think* our way to holiness—sanctification by information transfer. Indeed, that’s precisely the conviction behind the ad for the Bible verse memory program mentioned above: If “you are what you think,” then filling your thinking organ with Bible verses

should translate into Christlike character, right? If “you are what you think,” then changing what you think should change who you are, right?

Right?

The Power of Habit

Do you ever experience a gap between what you *know* and what you *do*? Have you ever found that new knowledge and information don’t seem to translate into a new way of life? Ever had the experience of hearing an incredibly illuminating and informative sermon on a Sunday, waking up Monday morning with new resolve and conviction to be different, and already failing by Tuesday night? You are hungry for knowledge; you thirstily drink up biblical ideas; you long to be Christlike; yet all of that knowledge doesn’t seem to translate into a way of life. It seems we can’t think our way to holiness. Why is that? Is it because you forgot something? Is there some *other* piece of knowledge you still need to acquire? Is it because you’re not thinking hard enough?

What if it’s because you aren’t just a thinking thing? What if the problem here is precisely the implicit model of the human person we’ve been working with in this whole approach to discipleship? What if Descartes was wrong and we’ve been hoodwinked into seeing ourselves as thinking things? What if we aren’t first and foremost “thinkers”? Then the problem isn’t just our individual resolve or our lack of knowledge. The problem is precisely our thinking-thingism.

But what’s the alternative? If we question the primacy of thinking and knowledge, aren’t we going to slide into an anti-intellectualist embrace of emotion and feelings? And isn’t that precisely what’s wrong with contemporary culture? We’ve embraced an “if-it-feels-good-do-it” rationale that encourages us to “follow our passions” and act on whatever whim or instinct or appetite moves us. Isn’t that precisely why Christians need to focus

on *thinking*—to acquire the *knowledge* necessary to counter the culture of impulse?

Well, how's that working out for you? Aren't we right back to our problem? Has all of your new knowledge and information and thinking liberated you from those habits? As anyone who has ever attended a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous well knows, "Your best thinking got you here."²

To question thinking-thingism is not the same as rejecting thinking. To recognize the limits of knowledge is not to embrace ignorance. We don't need *less* than knowledge; we need more. We need to recognize the power of habit.

That's why we need to reject the reductionistic picture we've unwittingly absorbed in the modern era, one that treats us as if we're only and fundamentally thinking things. Instead we need to embrace a more holistic, biblical model of human persons that *situates* our thinking and knowing in relation to other, more fundamental aspects of the human person. We've become so used to reading the Bible with Cartesian eyes—seeing the world through Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" lens—that we see it confirming our intellectualism and thinking-thingism. But on a closer reading, when we set aside those uniquely modern blinders, we'll find a very different model assumed in the Scriptures.

Consider, for example, Paul's remarkable prayer for the Christians at Philippi in the opening section of his letter to them: "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9–11). Notice the sequence of Paul's prayer here. If you read it too quickly, you might come away with the impression that Paul is primarily concerned about knowledge. Indeed, at a glance, given our habits of mind, you might think Paul is praying that the Christians in Philippi would deepen their knowledge so that they will know

what to love. But look again. In fact, Paul's prayer is the inverse: he prays that their *love* might abound more and more because, in some sense, love is the condition for knowledge. It's not that I know in order to love, but rather: I love in order to know. And if we are going to discern "what is best"—what is "excellent," what really matters, what is of ultimate importance—Paul tells us that the place to start is by attending to our *loves*.

There is a very different model of the human person at work here. Instead of the rationalist, intellectualist model that implies, "You are what you think," Paul's prayer hints at a very different conviction: "You are what you *love*."

What if, instead of starting from the assumption that human beings are thinking things, we started from the conviction that human beings are first and foremost *lovers*? What if you are defined not by what you know but by what you *desire*? What if the center and seat of the human person is found not in the heady regions of the intellect but in the gut-level regions of the heart? How would that change our approach to discipleship and Christian formation?

Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Christians

This ancient, biblical model of the human person is just the prescription for a church that has swallowed the bait of modern thinking-thingism. As Robert Webber liked to say, the future of the church is ancient: Christian wisdom for a postmodern world can be found in a return to ancient voices who never fell prey to modern reductionism. Consider, for example, the work of St. Augustine, a fifth-century philosopher, theologian, and bishop from North Africa who captured this holistic picture of the human person early in the life of the church. In the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*—his spiritual autobiography penned in a mode of prayer—Augustine pinpoints the epicenter of human identity: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it

rests in you.”³ Packed into this one line is wisdom that should radically change how we approach worship, discipleship, and Christian formation. Several themes can be discerned in this compact insight.

Augustine opens with a design claim, a conviction about what human beings are made for. This is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it recognizes that human beings are made *by* and *for* the Creator who is known in Jesus Christ. In other words, to be truly and fully human, we need to “find” ourselves in relationship to the One who made us and for whom we are made. The gospel is the way we learn to be human.⁴ As Irenaeus once put it, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”⁵ Second, the implicit picture of being human is *dynamic*. To be human is to be *for* something, directed toward something, oriented toward something. To be human is to be on the move, pursuing something, *after* something. We are like existential sharks: we have to move to live. We are not just static containers for ideas; we are dynamic creatures directed toward some *end*. In philosophy we have a shorthand term for this: something that is oriented toward an end or *telos* (a “goal”) is described as “teleological.” Augustine rightly recognizes that human beings are teleological creatures.

A second theme worth noting is Augustine’s locating of the center or “organ” of this teleological orientation in the heart, the seat of our longings and desires. Unfortunately, the language of the “heart” (*kardia* in Greek) has been co-opted in our culture and enlisted in the soppy sentimentalism of Hallmark and thus equated with a kind of emotivism. This is not what the biblical language of *kardia* suggests, nor is it what Augustine means. Instead, think of the heart as the fulcrum of your most fundamental longings—a visceral, subconscious *orientation* to the world. So Augustine doesn’t frame this as merely an intellectual quest. He doesn’t say, “You have made us to *know* you, and our minds are ignorant until they understand you.” The longing that Augustine describes is less like curiosity and more like hunger—less like an intellectual puzzle to be solved and more like a craving for sustenance (see

Ps. 42:1–2). So in this picture, the center of gravity of the human person is located not in the intellect but in the heart. Why? Because the heart is the existential chamber of our *love*, and it is our loves that orient us toward some ultimate end or *telos*. It's not just that I "know" some end or "believe" in some *telos*. More than that, I *long* for some end. I *want* something, and want it ultimately. It is my desires that define me. In short, you are what you love.

Indeed, we could say that human beings are fundamentally *erotic* creatures. Unfortunately—and for understandable reasons—the word "erotic" carries a lot of negative connotations in our pornographied culture. Thus Christians tend to be allergic to *eros* (and often set up stark contrasts between *eros* and *agape*, the latter of which we hallow as "Christian" love). But that cedes the

In the dynamic relationship between love and knowledge, head and heart, the Scriptures paint a holistic picture of the human person. It's not only our minds that God redeems, but the *whole* person: head, heart, hands. Christ takes captive our minds but also our *kardia*, even what Paul calls our *spilagchna*, our "inner parts" that are the seat of our "affections."

Contemporary science is starting to catch up to this ancient biblical wisdom about the human person. Scholars at UCLA and McMaster University have been conducting experiments that are shedding light on our "gut feelings." Their studies point to the way microbes in our stomachs affect the neural activity of the brain. "Your brain is not just another organ," they report. "It's . . . affected by what goes on in the rest of your body."^a In fact, *Scientific American* reports that there is "an often-overlooked network of neurons lining our guts that is so extensive some scientists have nicknamed it our 'second brain.'"^b

No wonder Jesus invites us to follow him by eating and drinking (John 6:53–58). Discipleship doesn't touch just our head or even just our heart: it reaches into our gut, our *spilagchna*, our affections.

a. <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2013/11/18/244526773/gut-bacteria-might-guide-the-workings-of-our-minds>.

b. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/gut-second-brain/>.

goodness of desire to its disordered hijacking by contemporary culture.⁶ In its truest sense, *eros* signals a desire and attraction that is a good feature of our creaturehood. Instead of setting up a false dichotomy between *agape* and *eros*, we could think of *agape* as rightly ordered *eros*: the love of Christ that is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5) is a redeemed, rightly ordered desire for God. You are what you *desire*.

This teleological aspect of the human person, coupled with the fundamental centrality of love, generates Augustine’s third insight: because we are made to love the One who made and loves us—“we love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19)—we will find “rest” when our loves are rightly ordered to this ultimate end. But Augustine also notes the alternative: since our hearts are made to find their end in God, we will experience a besetting anxiety and *restlessness* when we try to love substitutes. To be human is to have a heart. You can’t not love. So the question isn’t *whether* you will love something as ultimate; the question is *what* you will love as ultimate. And you are what you love.

This brief foray into the Scriptures and the ancient wisdom of St. Augustine reveals a very different model of the human person than we typically assume. This model provides a framework for thinking about the task of discipleship, the nature of sanctification, and the role of worship. Let’s unpack this through a metaphor that provides a way to “picture” what we’re talking about.

Orienting Desire: The Quest to Be Human

To be human is to be on a quest. To live is to be embarked on a kind of unconscious journey toward a destination of your dreams. As Blaise Pascal put it in his famous wager: “You have to wager. It is not up to you, you are already committed.”⁷ You can’t *not* bet your life on something. You can’t *not* be headed somewhere. We live leaning forward, bent on arriving at the place we long for.

The place we unconsciously strive toward is what ancient philosophers of habit called our *telos*—our goal, our end. But the *telos* we live toward is not something that we primarily know or believe or think about; rather, our *telos* is what we *want*, what we long for, what we crave. It is less an ideal that we have ideas about and more a vision of “the good life” that we desire. It is a picture of flourishing that we *imagine* in a visceral, often-unarticulated way—a vague yet attractive sense of where we think true happiness is found. It is the vision of which Cosette sings amidst the squalor of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, her “castle on a cloud.” Most of us travel through life with less fanciful visions luring us onward, but such tacit, unconscious visions are no less powerful. To be human, we could say, is to desire the kingdom—*some* kingdom. To call it a “kingdom” is to signal that we’re not talking only about some personal, private Eden—some individual nirvana—but that we all live and long for a *social* vision of what we think society should look like too. That’s why there’s something *ultimate* about this vision: to be oriented toward some sense of the good life is to pursue some vision of how the world *ought* to be.

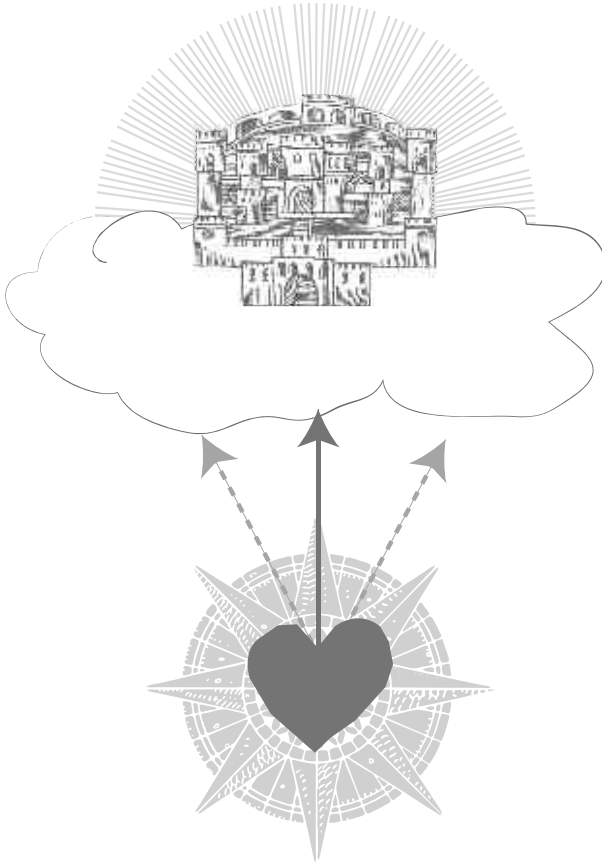
To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as “flourishing.” And we *want* that. We crave it. We desire it. This is why our most fundamental mode of orientation to the world is love. We are oriented by our longings, directed by our 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.”⁸ 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,



To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of “the good life.”

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. Such a *telos* works on us, not by convincing the intellect, but by allure.

So again, it’s a question not of *whether* you long for some version of the kingdom but of *which* version you long for. This is true for any human being; it is a structural feature of human creatureliness. You can’t not love. It’s why the heart is the seat and fulcrum of the human person, the engine that drives our existence. We are lovers first and foremost. If we think about this in terms of the quest or journey metaphor, we might say that the human heart is part compass and part internal guidance system. The heart is like a multifunctional desire device that is part engine and part homing beacon. Operating under the hood of our consciousness, so to speak—our default autopilot—the longings of the heart both *point* us in the direction of a kingdom and *propel* us toward it. There is a resonance between the *telos* to which we are oriented and the longings and desires that propel us in that direction—like the magnetic power of the pole working on the



The human heart is a compass, orienting us to some vision of "the kingdom," our *telos*.

existential needle of our hearts. You are what you love because you live toward what you *want*.

Augustine gives us another metaphor to understand this dynamic: love is like gravity. Augustine wrote centuries before Newton's insight, so the language he uses is slightly different. He puts it this way:

A body by its weight tends to move towards its proper place. The weight's movement is not necessarily downwards, but to its appropriate

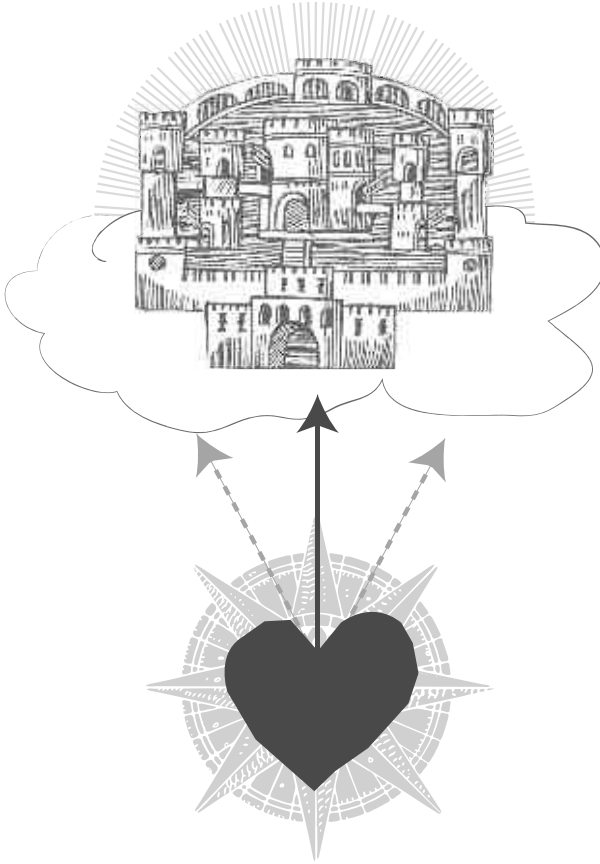
position: fire tends to move upwards, a stone downwards. They are acted on by their respective weights; they seek their own place. Oil poured under water is drawn up to the surface on top of the water. Water poured on top of oil sinks below the oil. They are acted on by their respective densities, they seek their own place. Things which are not in their intended position are restless. Once they are in their ordered position, they are at rest.⁹

We all know the principle Augustine is talking about. Have you ever played in a swimming pool and tried to hold a beach ball under the surface? Its tendency—you might even say its penchant and desire—is to rise to the surface. It is “restless” when it is held under the water. It keeps trying to sneak up from under your feet or hands, bursting toward the surface. It *wants* to be floating. Conversely, when *I* try to placidly float on the surface of the pool, my weight wants to take me to the bottom.

Augustine goes on to unpack the analogy: “My weight is my love,” he says. “Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me.” Our orienting loves are like a kind of gravity—carrying us in the direction to which they are weighted. If our loves are absorbed with material things, then our love is a weight that drags us downward to inferior things. But when our loves are animated by the renewing fire of the Spirit, then our weight tends upward. In Augustine’s striking picture, “By your gift we are set on fire and carried upwards: we grow red hot and ascend. We climb ‘the ascents in our heart’ (Ps. 84:7) and sing ‘the song of steps’ (Ps. 121:1). Lit by your fire, your good fire, we grow red-hot and ascend, as we move upwards ‘to the peace of Jerusalem’ (Ps. 122:6).”¹⁰ Discipleship should set us on fire, should change the “weight” of our love.

An Erotic Compass: Love Is a Habit

In this alternative model of the human person, the center of gravity of our identity is located in the heart—in the visceral region of our longings and desires, the gut-level region of *kardia*. It is our



Love is like autopilot, orienting us without our thinking about it.

desires that orient and direct us toward some ultimate *telos* we take to be the good life, the version of the kingdom we live toward. To be human is to be a lover and to love something ultimate.

But we will only fully appreciate the significance of this for discipleship if we also recognize that such love is a kind of subconscious desire that operates *without our thinking about it*. In order to fend off the reductionistic cliché that love is a feeling, we sometimes (rightly) emphasize that love is a choice or that, as Clint Black crooned, love is “something that we do.” In a certain

sense, that's true. But in another sense, love as we're talking about it here—love as our most fundamental orientation to the world—is less a conscious choice and more like a baseline inclination, a default orientation that generates the choices we make.

This is a very ancient and biblical way of thinking about love. In fact, when we look again at Paul without the blinders of thinking-thingism, we'll note something interesting about how he describes love. Consider how he exhorts the Christians in Colossae: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Col. 3:12–14).

Paul uses a clothing metaphor to describe the Christlike life. To "put on" Christ is to clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (cf. Rom. 13:14). And over all of these things we are to "put on" love. It's like love is the big belt that pulls together the rest of the ensemble. But then notice how Paul describes all of these Christlike character traits: they are *virtues*. While we have a vague sense that virtue is an ethical category, we don't have a classical understanding of the concept anymore, and so we miss some of the force of what Paul is saying here. So let me briefly unpack the basics of virtue so we can then consider the implications of Paul's exhortation with respect to love.

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:¹¹ 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” 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.

In a sense, then, to become virtuous is to internalize the law (and the good to which the law points) so that you follow it more or less automatically. As Aristotle put it, when you’ve acquired a moral habit, it becomes second nature. Why do we call things “second” nature? Our “first” nature is the hardwiring that characterizes our biological systems and operates without our thinking about it. At this very moment, you are not *choosing* to breathe. You are not thinking about breathing. (Well, maybe now you are. But 99.9 percent of the time, you breathe and blink and digest your breakfast without thinking about it.) “Nature” simply takes care of a process that hums along under the hood of consciousness. Those habits that become “second” nature operate in the same way: they become so woven into who you are that they are as natural for you as breathing and blinking. You don’t have to think about or choose to do these things: they come naturally. When you have acquired the sorts of virtues that are second nature, it means you have become the kind of person who is inclined to the good. You will be kind and compassionate and forgiving because it’s inscribed in your very character. You don’t have to think about it; it’s who you are. (In fact, if I have to *deliberate* about whether to be compassionate, it’s a sure sign I lack the virtue!)

A key question then: How do I acquire such virtues? I can’t just think my way into virtue.¹² This is another difference between

laws or rules, on the one hand, and virtues, on the other. Laws, rules, and commands specify and articulate the good; they *inform* me about what I ought to do. But virtue is different: virtue isn't acquired intellectually but affectively. Education in virtue is not like learning the Ten Commandments or memorizing Colossians 3:12–14. Education in virtue is a kind of *formation*, a retraining of our dispositions. “Learning” virtue—becoming virtuous—is more like practicing scales on the piano than learning music theory: the goal is, in a sense, for your *fingers* to learn the scales so they can then play “naturally,” as it were. Learning here isn't just information acquisition; it's more like inscribing something into the very fiber of your being.

Thus philosophers and theologians from Aristotle to Aquinas have emphasized two aspects of virtue acquisition. 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).¹³ 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. This is part of the formative power of our teachers who model the Christian life for us. It's also why the Christian tradition has held up as exemplars of Christlikeness the saints, whose images were often the stained-glass “wallpaper” of Christian worship.

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 important to recognize that such dispositions are not “natural.” We’re not talking about biological hardwiring or natural instincts. 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.

Now why is all of this important for our project of sketching an alternative model of the human person? Because if you are what you love and if love is a virtue, then love is a *habit*. This means that our most fundamental orientation to the world—the longings and desires that orient us toward some version of the good life—is shaped and configured by imitation and practice. This has important implications for how we approach Christian formation and discipleship.

Calibrating the Heart: Love Takes Practice

In short, if you are what you love, and love is a habit, then discipleship is a rehabilitation of your loves. This means that discipleship is more a matter of *reformation* than of acquiring *information*. The learning that is fundamental to Christian formation is affective and erotic, a matter of “aiming” our loves, of orienting our desires to God and what God desires for his creation.

If I am what I love and my loves are aimed at a *telos*—oriented toward some version of the good life—then the crucial question I need to ask myself is: How does my love get aimed and directed? We’ve seen so far that to be human is to be a lover, a creature whose way of inhabiting the world is directed and governed by this erotic orientation to what we long for. We’ve also seen that, in fact, every human creature is designed to find his or her erotic *telos* in the Creator himself, in the King who has met us in Jesus. However, this

structure of human existence is no guarantee that we are pointed in the right direction. While being human means we can't *not* love something ultimate—some version of the kingdom—it doesn't mean we necessarily love the right things, or the true King. God has created us for himself and our hearts are designed to find their end in him, yet many spend their days restlessly craving rival gods, frenetically pursuing rival kingdoms. The subconscious longings of our hearts are aimed and directed elsewhere; our orientation is askew; our erotic compass malfunctions, giving us false bearings. When this happens, the results can be disastrous.

In 1914, not long after the sinking of the *Titanic*, Congress convened a hearing to discern what happened in another nautical tragedy. In January of that year, in thick fog off the Virginia coast, the steamship *Monroe* was rammed by the merchant vessel *Nantucket* and eventually sank. Forty-one sailors lost their lives in the frigid winter waters of the Atlantic. While it was Osmyn Berry, captain of the *Nantucket* who was arraigned on charges, in the course of the trial Captain Edward Johnson was grilled on the stand for over five hours. During cross-examination it was learned, as the *New York Times* reported, that Captain Johnson “navigated the Monroe with a steering compass that deviated as much as two degrees from the standard magnetic compass. He said the instrument was sufficiently true to run the ship, and that it was the custom of masters in the coastwise trade to use such compasses. His steering compass had never been adjusted in the one year he was master of the Monroe.” The faulty compass that seemed adequate for navigation eventually proved otherwise. This realization partly explains a heartrending picture recorded by the *Times*: “Later the two Captains met, clasped hands, and sobbed on each other's shoulders.” The sobs of these two burly seamen are a moving reminder of the tragic consequences of misorientation.¹⁴

The reminder for us is this: if the heart is like a compass, an erotic homing device, then we need to (regularly) calibrate our hearts, tuning them to be directed to the Creator, our magnetic north. It is

crucial for us to recognize that our ultimate loves, longings, desires, and cravings are *learned*. And because love is a habit, our hearts are calibrated through imitating exemplars and being immersed in practices that, over time, index our hearts to a certain end. We learn to love, then, not primarily by acquiring information about *what* we should love but rather through practices that form the habits of *how* we love. These sorts of practices are “pedagogies” of desire, not because they are like lectures that inform us, but because they are rituals that form and direct our affections.

Now here’s the crucial insight for Christian formation and discipleship: not only is this learning-by-practice the way our hearts

In the Kingdom of Ice is Hampton Sides’s compelling account of the failed nineteenth-century polar expedition of the USS *Jeannette*, captained by Lieutenant George De Long. It is another cautionary tale about **the hazards of misorientation**—not because of a faulty compass but because of a mistaken map. De Long’s entire expedition rested on a picture of the (unknown) North Pole laid out in the (ultimately deluded) maps of Dr. August Heinrich Petermann. Petermann’s maps suggested a “thermometric gateway” through the ice that opened onto a vast “polar sea” on the top of the world—a fair-weather passage beyond all the ice. De Long’s entire expedition was staked on these maps.

But it turned out he was heading to a world that didn’t exist. As perilous ice quickly surrounded the ship, Sides recounts, the team had to “shed its organizing ideas, in all their unfounded romance, and to replace them with a reckoning of the way the Arctic truly is.”^a

Our culture often sells us faulty, fantastical maps of “the good life” that paint alluring pictures that draw us toward them. All too often we stake the expedition of our lives on them, setting sail toward them with every sheet hoisted. And we do so *without thinking about it* because these maps work on our imagination, not our intellect. It’s not until we’re shipwrecked that we realize we trusted faulty maps.

a. Hampton Sides, *In the Kingdom of Ice: The Grand and Terrible Polar Voyage of the USS Jeannette* (New York: Doubleday, 2014), 163.

are correctly calibrated, but it is also the way our loves and longings are *misdirected* and *miscalibrated*—not because our intellect has been hijacked by bad ideas but because our desires have been captivated by rival visions of flourishing. And that happens through practices, not propaganda. Our desires are caught more than they are taught. All kinds of cultural rhythms and routines are, in fact, rituals that function as pedagogies of desire precisely because they tacitly and covertly train us to love a certain version of the kingdom, teach us to long for some rendition of the good life. These aren't just things we do; they do something *to* us.

This means that Spirit-led formation of our loves is a recalibration of the heart, a reorientation of our loves by unlearning all the tacit bearings we've absorbed from other cultural practices. We need to recognize how such rituals can be love-shaping practices that form and deform our desires—and then be intentional about countermeasures.

You Are What You Worship

If you are what you love, and your ultimate loves are formed and aimed by your immersion in practices and cultural rituals, then such practices fundamentally shape who you are. At stake here is your very identity, your fundamental allegiances, your core convictions and passions that center both your self-understanding and your way of life. In other words, this contest of cultural practices is a competition for your heart—the center of the human person designed for God, as Augustine reminded us. More precisely, at stake in the formation of your loves is your religious and spiritual identity, which is manifested not only in what you think or what you believe but in what you do—and what those practices do *to* you.

In order to appreciate the spiritual significance of such cultural practices, let's call these sorts of formative, love-shaping rituals "liturgies." It's a bit of an old, churchy word, but I want to both revive and expand it because it crystallizes a final aspect of this

model of the human person: to say “you are what you love” is synonymous with saying “you are what you *worship*.” The great Reformer Martin Luther once said, “Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your god.”¹⁵ We become what we worship because what we worship is what we love. As we’ve seen, it’s not a question of *whether* you worship but *what* you worship—which is why John Calvin refers to the human heart as an “idol factory.”¹⁶ We can’t not worship because we can’t not love *something* as ultimate.

Our idolatries, then, are more liturgical than theological. Our most alluring idols are less intellectual inventions and more affective projections—they are the fruit of disordered wants, not just misunderstanding or ignorance. Instead of being on guard for false teachings and analyzing culture in order to sift out the distorting messages, we need to recognize that there are rival liturgies *everywhere*. These pedagogies of desire (which we’ll explore further in chapter 2) are, in a sense, cultural liturgies, rival modes of worship.

To be human is to be a liturgical animal, a creature whose loves are shaped by our worship. And worship isn’t optional. Even a writer like David Foster Wallace, who had no theological agenda, recognized that to be human is to worship. In a famous commencement address at Kenyon College, he put it this way:

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things—if they are where you tap real meaning in life—then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already—it’s been codified as myths, proverbs,

clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness. Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart—you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

The insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful; it is that they are unconscious. They are default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.¹⁷

Wallace sees the inescapability of worshipping but fails to recognize an important feature of human desire: that you can't just *think* your way to right worship. Becoming conscious isn't the only—or even an adequate—solution to the challenge he rightly recognizes. A more holistic response is to intentionally recalibrate the unconscious, to worship *well*, to immerse ourselves in liturgies that are indexed to the kingdom of God precisely so that even our unconscious desires and longings—the affective, under-the-hood ways we intend the world—are indexed to God and what God wants for his world. Through Spirited worship, the grace of God captivates and orients even our unconscious.

We can see hints of this intuition if we go back to Paul's letter to the Colossians. After his exhortation in 3:12–14, Paul turns to a consideration of worship: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Col. 3:15–16).

What Paul describes sounds a lot like, well, the worship of the church, that “body” into which we are called. Now we are in a place to see the connection: we clothe ourselves in Christ's love (vv. 12–14) and “put on” the virtue of love *by* letting the word of Christ

dwell in us richly; *by* teaching and admonishing one another; *by* singing psalms, hymns, and songs of the Spirit. The practices of Christian worship train our love—they are practice *for* the coming kingdom, habituating us as citizens of the kingdom of God.

Christian worship, we should recognize, is essentially a *counter*formation to those rival liturgies we are often immersed in, cultural practices that covertly capture our loves and longings, miscalibrating them, orienting us to rival versions of the good life. This is why worship is the heart of discipleship. We can't counter the power of cultural liturgies with didactic information poured into our intellects. We can't recalibrate the heart from the top down, through merely informational measures. The orientation of the heart happens from the bottom up, through the formation of our habits of desire. Learning to love (God) takes practice.