



The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ

James Bryan Smith

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"I have never met a person whose goal was to ruin his or her life. We all want to be happy, and we want it all of the time." So begins James Bryan Smith in *The Good and Beautiful Life*. The problem is, he tells us, we have bought into false notions of happiness and success. These self-centered decisions lead us further into the vices that cause ruin: anger, lust, lying, worry and judging. Eventually we find ourselves living a beautifully packaged life of self-destruction. Following the Sermon on the Mount, this follow-up to *The Good and Beautiful God* guides us to look behind these character flaws and to replace our false beliefs with Jesus' narratives about life in the kingdom of God.

The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ Details

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From Reader Review The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ for online ebook

Leslie says

This book was disappointing to me in several respects. First because Smith's ideas were often lacking in scriptural support. This doesn't mean that his ideas were against scripture, but that he often didn't lead the reader back to scripture to support what he was arguing for. Whenever I read a Christian book, I expect the author to lead me to a greater appreciation for the adequacy of scripture and to grow my dependency on scripture's sufficiency. This book inadvertently grows one's dependency on Smith and his opinions. I believe in assuming the best of people so I'll assume this was not the author's intention, but it was the effect nonetheless.

Secondly, I was disappointed with the therapist slant this book took on. The church at large can be sadly influenced by the world's trends when it does not saturate itself in scripture. This often happens by stealth. One of the most prevalent influences the world has on the church of late is to view Jesus not primarily as my savior, but as my therapist. Of course, few would say it in those words, but the practical outworking of their teaching on scripture takes on a therapeutic slant.

One such example of this is Smith's teaching on the beatitudes in chapter 3. He names the chapter "The Grand Invitation," and goes on to write that the main point of the beatitudes is to teach us that everyone is invited into the kingdom: what he calls the inclusivity of the gospel. Quite frankly, this is a grievous misuse of what the beatitudes are actually teaching! I was at a complete loss as to how one even comes to such a conclusion until I thought of it through the therapist's lens. Of course it is true that anyone from any nationality and any sin background may come into the kingdom, but what the beatitudes is teaching us is what we must become to receive the kingdom. We must be poor in spirit, we must hunger and thirst for righteousness, we must mourn for our sin, we must be meek, we must become peacemakers and pure in heart--for to such belongs the kingdom. As long as we cling to our pride, love of sin, love of impurity, love of dissension instead of peace, the kingdom cannot be ours. That is what the beatitudes are plainly teaching. Smith writes: "The beatitudes are radical because they teach that these people (poor, meek) have the same access to the kingdom as the rich and happy." The poor, the weak can come to God as well as the rich and strong. Of course that's true, but I'm sorry, it's not at all what the beatitudes are teaching.

Furthermore, piggy backing on the last paragraph, this book is full of sloppy thinking, which is so prevalent in Evangelical writing today. I'll just cite a couple of examples to give a flavor for what I'm talking about. On chapter 4 about lust, Smith gives a blanket criticism of couples who decide they are going to save their first kiss for marriage. He argues that this comes from a negative worldview that teaches that all sexual sin is inherently evil. He then states that they won't know how to enjoy sex in marriage because they have been so repressed. I wouldn't have been as upset if he would have stated that couples who save their first kiss for marriage should make sure they are not abstaining because sexual desire is inherently wrong but out of a love of purity and devotion for Christ. But he doesn't even allow for that option. This is so sloppy. I know of several couples who have saved their first kiss for marriage because they believe sex to be such a good thing. They did not struggle with intimacy once they were married.

In another example, he completely undermined Jesus' statement that if your hand causes you to sin, chop it off. A plain reading makes it abundantly obvious that Jesus is calling his followers to go to all lengths in their battle with lust, because their souls are at stake. They should do anything it takes to win: gouge out your eye, or even not kiss your fiance till your wedding day, (gasp) imagine that! Nothing is too far. Smith instead

interprets this passage thus: "Jesus was not speaking literally but was using a rhetorical device called *reductio ad absurdum*, meaning to reduce the argument to its logical absurdity. He was attacking the commonly held notion that sin resides in the offending part of the body." Yes, Jesus was using a rhetorical device, obviously, but the device that Smith wants to claim he was using brings us to exact opposite of what Jesus intended. Instead of Smith encouraging us to go to all lengths in all battle with lust, we are encouraged to be "properly connected with God and his kingdom [so we] find that the void is filled."

To be charitable, there is truth in Smith's statement, that lust is often trying to fill a void that was meant to be filled by God. If I were to be uncharitable, I would have to say that this a bunch of cliched, sappy, therapist-speak, but that might be taking it a bit far. However, Jesus is calling us to decisive action in our battle with lust. If our computer causes us to sin, we should launch it on a 20-foot trajectory to the nearest dumpster--or at least put Covenant Eyes software on it. If your TV causes you to sin, take it outside and sledgehammer it, or at least cancel cable. If your friends are all flocking to see *Fifty Shades of Perversion*, and if you don't have the gall to refuse to see one of the most perverse blockbusters of our time, at least feign a headache. Better yet, poke yourself in the eye and then you can truthfully tell your friends that you can't go because your eye hurts. These are the steps Jesus begs us to take, with heaven and hell at stake. Smith's wisdom is to "stay connected to the kingdom," whatever that means. A lot Christianese, not a lot of sound, biblical advice. I will give Smith this though: his advice sure tickles the ears in a much more pleasant way.

Even though Smith's vague statement about lust may have some truth, that simply was not the specific point that Jesus was trying to make when he spoke to us on lust. I'd like to read a book where the author respects scripture enough to uphold it and not undermine it at every turn, even if the points he's using to undermine scripture are actually true. It's still undermining Jesus' words. There are many more examples of sloppy thinking that I could give!

I don't want to come across as nitpicky, but I believe it's wrong for writers to abandon the language of scripture in order to promote their own categories and terms. Smith loves to speak of the hip and oh-so-urbane topic of narrative. The biblical term is actually belief, as in what we believe determines our actions. But Smith loves to harp on "false narratives." Although the significance of this change in terms may not be immediately apparent, it is yet another example of failing to point the readers back to scripture, and therefore pointing them to Smith and his "valuable insights on kingdoms narratives." He even comes up with acronym. Trendy!

Lastly, I was completely blown away by a sloppy and irresponsible analogy in the chapter on lust. When Smith's 12 year old son asked him if it was okay to kiss a girl, he told him to envision a triangle with the point on top. The bottom two corners were to represent commitment and physical intimacy. The higher up you go on the commitment side, the higher you can go in the physical intimacy. Finally, the point at the top represents sex in marriage. I sincerely hope that Smith does not believe that right before you get to marriage it is fine to go right up to the point of sex, but that is what the triangle is saying. It's a really bad analogy, an unhelpful visual, and another example of extremely sloppy and unwise thinking.

Although this review is negative, I hope that it can be seen not as a rant, but as a desire to see better things for the church and to hope better things for Christian writers. Although there are true things that are said in this book, I believe that one's time would be much better spent picking up your Bible itself and writing down your thoughts on what you read. There are many Christian books that would help one to understand scripture better but this is not one of them. This runs much deeper than me not agreeing with a few things he said, for there are practically no authors where I agree 100% with everything they teach. Instead, it is that I fundamentally disagree with the way the book is written, its hermeneutic, and its handling of scripture. Any book that does not increase my reliance on scripture will necessarily foster immaturity.

I find myself increasingly disillusioned with Christians' abilities to discern good and helpful writing. I'm almost tempted to run in the other direction from any best-selling book that has 66 5-star reviews of Amazon.

Bob says

None of us really WANTS to ruin our lives. Yet we often do, James Bryan Smith contends, because we don't build our lives on the teaching of Jesus and let him shape our character. In this book, the second in his Apprentice Series, Smith takes us through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. His foundational contention is that the gospel of the kingdom Jesus preaches is not about getting us into heaven but rather getting heaven into us, the transformation of our lives as Christ's new creations, which is what this sermon is all about.

Along the way, Smith takes some reads on the sermon that might be different than you've heard before. This begins with the beatitudes, which he argues describe the people who are included in the kingdom. In the command concerning murder and anger, he argues we often live with False Imperative Narratives such as "I need to be perfect all the time" that are sources of fear and anger and that trust in Christ in our brokenness is key to being liberated from anger's destructive power. Similarly, living in the joyful gratitude for our desires liberates us from lust's power. Our trust in the security of the kingdom's promises means we needn't lie but can tell the truth. We love and forgive our enemies as the apprentices of a Savior who did the same thing from the cross.

One of the most challenging chapters for me was the chapter on vainglory--the practice of doing things to be seen by people. In this, as all chapters throughout the Apprentice Series, Smith includes Soul Training exercises. For this one it was the exercise of secret service, of serving others without letting other, or even the person served, know if possible. The Soul Training exercises throughout provide very practical ways to begin allow Christ to form his character in our lives. In his chapter on avarice and the choice of two masters, money or Jesus, we are encouraged to practice de-accumulation by getting rid of five things. In the chapter on worry, he gives a very specific exercise for turning worry into prayer and releasing this to God. His challenge in the chapter on judgment is to live a day without gossip!

The concluding chapter comes back to where he began, the vital importance of building our lives on the teaching of Jesus in intimate fellowship with him. He shares with us Madame Guyon's advice to her daughter on living a day devotionally as a means of helping us to develop a "rule" for our days--practices that help us remain in the presence of Jesus throughout each day.

I worked through this book with a group, which is Smith's recommended way to use this book. I actually had previously read the book but found that working through this deepened my engagement with the practices he commends and provided for many significant conversations with each other on living the good and beautiful life that drew me closer to five others as well as to the Lord whose teaching we were considering.

I also reviewed the first book in this series, The Good and Beautiful God.

Allysen says

great book for a small group - really like the practical tips and variety of topics - leads to great discussion.

Fran says

I thought that James Bryan Smith's first book was wonderful. It really spoke to me. I thought this book was terrible. It was very negative (learning to live without things - lying, lust, anger). While certainly, living without those things is good, I would have appreciated a more positive approaching (learning to live with whole and healthy relationships, respect, etc.). I also felt that his spiritual practices didn't relate well to the issues. Our group stopped reading.

Crissi says

This book didn't speak to me as much as The Good and Beautiful God did, but it was an extremely easy read with good nuggets in each chapter. I love the soul exercises at the end of each chapter but really helped to drive the lessons home and apply them to my life. A few chapters really tugged at me, pointing out certain aspects in my life that need working on no especially loved the final chapter, how it pulled everything together.

I read this book as part of a yearlong leadership training. We aren't required to read the final book in this series, The Good and Beautiful Community. But I think I'll pick that book up and read it anyways, since these last two books have been so great at bringing me closer to God and working on my soul.

Chris says

Amazing advice and clear guidance through the Sermon on the Mount. I loved the practical applications called Soul Training. A brilliant and essential read for anyone interested in living in the Kingdom.

Eric Holman says

You need to read this! And read it how it's suppose to be read. I did 1 chapter a month and actually did each activity at the end of each chapter. Trust me, you won't regret it.

Karla Osorno says

Our Bible study group went through this (and the first book in the series) together. Each week we discussed the reading, biblical principles, and application. It was effective. This book is well written, based on truth, and provides powerful application suggestions (without being legalistic). Highly recommend as a group read for accountability. Friends can provide encouragement in understanding and practicing the disciplines - while God performs the inner transformation.

Jason Kanz says

The Good and Beautiful Life is an exceptional book. I found it to be accessible, engaging, and thought-provoking. I've read a lot of books on discipleship, and this is certainly one of my favorites. Built around the sermon on the mount, Smith explores what putting on the character of Christ looks like. I cannot wait to read the other two books in the series.

Stephen says

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Second in the "Good and Beautiful" series. The author continues to contrast the false narratives with alternatives that make for a good and beautiful life.

Megan says

Our small group just finished this book over the last 6 months. It is book #2 in the series. Very practical tips for following God in your daily life. It starts with a good night's sleep and ending your day in prayer. We starting book #3 next week. Great book for a group to read together.

Diana Davis says

Very inspirational and great ideas and perspectives on developing a relationship with God. I have put a lot of his tips to use and love the changes I have seen in myself. I look forward to reading the other books in this series.

Kenneth says

Read for adult discussion group in my church. Excellent for discussion!

Tamara Murphy says

We read this together with our Sunday morning small group at church. It's the second title in a trilogy of "Good and Beautiful" books by James Bryan Smith. I continue to appreciate his balanced approach to embodying a healthy theology of God in daily spiritual practices. The Good and Beautiful Life approaches this conversation through the lens of the Sermon on the Mount.

Amy says

This is an amazing series. Wow. I am impressed with the author James Bryan Smith. Now I love any and all works by Dallas Willard. Sometimes Willard's work is hard to digest and apply to daily life. This author has clearly taken the works of his mentors and done just that. Clearly laid out in accessible and applicable chapters, this little book is packed with helpful insights and suggestions to apply the teachings of Jesus to your daily life. It is appropriately titled "The Apprentice Series" and it truly is. One of the best guides on Christian discipleship I have read. I will be reading this one many times. And when my kids are older, I will read it to them as well. I also want to buy this for friends, it's so good!
