



— *the* —  
GLORIOUS  
PURSUIT

*Becoming Who God  
Created Us to Be*

Gary Thomas

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*The Glorious Pursuit: Becoming Who God Created Us to Be*

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The Team: Don Pape, Publisher; Elizabeth Schroll, Copy Editor; Lindsey Bergsma, Designer

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Published in association with **Alive Literary Agency, [aliveliterary.com](http://aliveliterary.com)**

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ISBN 978-1-64158-284-1

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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# INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

WHILE VACATIONING IN COLORADO, my wife (Lisa) and I spent an early evening at the Iron Mountain Hot Springs. We heard a group of women in another pool discussing a surprising number of medical options to keep women looking young. What they did to their faces, injected into their bodies, paid to undergo treatments, and the effort they spent investigating and researching new options (“This is what all the Kardashians are doing now,” one woman opined) astonished us.

As we climbed into another pool, Lisa asked me if I wished she were more into that stuff. “What were you thinking listening to them?”

“All I could think of was William Law’s admonition”—Law was an eighteenth-century Anglican writer. “Women and men should earnestly pursue humility, patience, generosity, faith, compassion,

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courage, kindness and forgiveness with the same intensity that those in the world pursue wealth, fame, worldly achievement, and physical beauty.”<sup>1</sup>

The deception is that looking like you’re twenty-five when you’re fifty, or fifty when you’re seventy, is somehow worthy of more time and money and attention than growing in Christlikeness, whatever your age may be. But in all honesty, most of us as Christians can fall into seasons where we spend far more time and energy trying to look our best, lower our golf handicap, increase our social-media followers, lose weight, regrow hair, and increase the size of our financial investments far more than we think about growing in humility, surrender, discernment, and patience.

This, even though Scripture teaches us:

For this very reason, 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. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.<sup>2</sup>

Linguistically, it is nearly impossible to define “make every effort” apart from an affirmation of human cooperation in spiritual growth. That understanding is buttressed in Romans 6:11-14 and Philippians 2:12-13, among other places.

*The Glorious Pursuit*—that is, the spiritual call to practice the virtues in the same way that a body builder lifts weights to

shape his or her physique—is a cherished ancient practice in the Christian tradition, though it has grown out of favor as of late. Growing in the virtues won't save us; but salvation must lead to growing in the virtues or one could question the reality of our salvation experience.

Elsewhere William Law tells the sad tale of a man who wore himself out so that he could die with a thousand pairs of boots and spurs. He sacrificed his health, relationships, sleep, recreation, everything, in a zealous pursuit to finally obtain one thousand pairs of boots and spurs. Eventually, he reached his goal—and when he died, everyone remarked how utterly ridiculous, foolish, and misguided his life turned out to be. Who could wear a thousand pairs of boots and spurs to begin with?

But then—and this is where it gets convicting—Law asks what the difference is between socking away a thousand pairs of boots and spurs or a thousand dollars. You can no more spend a dollar in eternity than you can don a pair of boots and spurs.

*The Glorious Pursuit* is a call to live the truly abundant life *as God defines it*—a life made possible by God's grace, empowered by God's Spirit, and modeled by God's Son. It's a pursuit that matters in every age, without regard to "fashion." When Christians become more concerned about demonstrating generosity, compassion, and kindness than we are about gathering a huge pile of money, impressing others with our looks, or getting lost in non-stop entertainment, we witness to the reality of another world. In fact, it's a *competing* worldview altogether. If we take the virtues seriously, we should be more concerned with humility than fame, even fearing the fame that could jeopardize humility, which is far more valuable in the sight of God. We must pursue compassion and kindness and patience, even being thankful for the opportunities to grow in these virtues, rather than resent the frustrating

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people who are necessary in order for us to display and grow in compassion, kindness, and patience.

Practicing the Christian virtues is an ancient journey, well attested to in Scripture and in the most beloved Christian classics, yet it is also a modern highway to spiritual growth and discipleship. Though I first wrote this book two decades ago, ancient Christian practices have a way of finding new relevance with every generation of believers who embrace the glorious opportunity of growing in Christlikeness. I pray you will find freedom, direction, and inspiration in the pages that follow.

# GETTING YOUR LIFE BACK

*Once you let God into you, you have  
God in you. And God is a dynamo.*

PETER KREEFT

ON AUGUST 20, 1949, a rather bizarre headline appeared on the front page of the *Washington Post*: “Priest Frees Mt. Rainier Boy Reported Held in Devil’s Grip.” Though the exorcism took place in St. Louis, the story made top billing in the *Post* because the thirteen-year-old boy was from Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C.

The boy, “Robbie,” had developed a close relationship with a spiritualist aunt. After the aunt died, objects started flying around the room in Robbie’s presence. Robbie’s family turned to their pastor, Luther Miles Schulze of St. Stephen’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Washington, D.C., for help. Somewhat skeptical, Schulze took Robbie into his own home for observation. In Schulze’s presence, the bed that Robbie was lying on began to shake. Schulze put the mattress on the floor. With Robbie still lying on top of it, the mattress glided back up onto the bed.

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Rattled, Schulze referred the family to the St. James Catholic Church, also in Washington, saying that Robbie's situation was something "the Roman Catholics understand."

A young Roman Catholic priest undertook the rite of exorcism and paid dearly for his inexperience. During the rite, Robbie ripped a spring from the bed and slashed the priest from shoulder to wrist, a wound requiring over one hundred stitches to close. The young cleric gave up in frustration.

Robbie's family eventually took him to St. Louis, where he was placed under the care of Father William B. Bowdern, who was granted permission to initiate the rite of exorcism. Six weeks of grueling spiritual battle ensued, but on Easter Monday, April 18, 1949, Robbie was freed.

Too many reputable priests and medical professionals testified to Robbie's situation for us to dismiss it as one man's hallucination or as religious sensationalism. Father Bowdern would later be consulted on over two hundred cases of alleged demonic possession. He didn't find a single one valid, ample evidence that he was not frivolous in citing demonic influence.

Though Robbie lost all memory of the events, the same is not true of his former Maryland neighbors. The house that Robbie's family had lived in soon became known as the "Devil's House," and after Robbie and his family moved on to St. Louis, the city had an unsalable eyesore on its hands. No one went near the place.

Eventually, local officials decided to turn the place into a park and build a children's gazebo. Aware of the fear and superstition that follows such events, the city demolished the house and even dug deeply around it, then leveled the hole with trucked-in new dirt.

On the spot where a young man lived in spiritual darkness, children now run and play tag as families take walks and eat picnics. A place once forsaken, unusable, was given new life.

## GETTING YOUR LIFE BACK

In a sense, this gives a vivid picture of what God wants to do for us. We need not be possessed by demons to require deliverance from the imprisonment of a self-centered life. Many have hoped for this change to come in a moment in time we call “conversion.” Yet most of us have found that we need more than initial conversion because the hoped-for freedoms and changes did not come. Or they showed themselves briefly and then slid away from us.

The truth is, we need a process of renewal, a deep digging and infilling of our souls with something new so that on the site of our former life, a new life stands. We want God to take us as people who are stuck in old habits, trapped in the living death of boredom or irrelevance, possessed by our own possessions, and to deliver us from ourselves by a long miracle of spiritual transformation. We need Him to dig out those abrasive aspects of our character and replace them with a refreshing vitality, ultimately creating a new personality, the promised life of Christ in us.

God designed us to be His image bearers, each of us reflecting a particular aspect of Himself. He is eager to deliver each of us from ourselves and create a new man in us, as C. S. Lewis points out in his modern classic, *The Screwtape Letters*. As Screwtape, the mentor demon, explains to Wormwood, his protégé,

When [God] talks of their losing their selves, He only means abandoning the clamor of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever.<sup>1</sup>

Pause a moment and try to imagine yourself as a person who acts with the compassion of Christ; who has the patience of God Himself; who is discerning, gentle yet confident, and surrendered

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to the will and purpose of God. This is the life Jesus wants you to inherit, transforming you into a person who is motivated by the beautiful, not the lustful; the generous, not the selfish; the noble, not the conniving; the creative, not the destructive; the encouraging, not the malicious.

Is this the person you want to become? If so, there is an ancient and biblical practice by which the image and nature of God are restored in you. For centuries, Christian teachers spoke about “the practice of the virtues of Christ,” meaning the process of growth in the spiritual character qualities of Christ. Thomas à Kempis’s fifteenth-century work, *The Imitation of Christ*, became a classic “handbook” for spiritual growth, as did Francis De Sales’s *Introduction to the Devout Life*, John Owen’s *Mortification of Sin*, and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* by William Law. It was not assumed that the “new life” from above would come to instantaneous fruition, but that it would result gradually from the reshaping of the inner man. Conversion is just the *beginning* of the Christian life. Spiritual formation—rooted in the virtues—must follow. As we put our faith in Christ and walk with Him, He changes us from within. That’s what spiritual formation means—being *formed*, spiritually. While salvation is a work that is done entirely within God’s mercy and without human effort (Romans 9:16), growth in Christ involves cooperation between God and His children (1 John 3:3; Philippians 2:12-13). And just as body builders use weights to shape their physiques, so Christians of the past “worked out” by practicing the virtues. They didn’t expect holiness to suddenly appear just because they had prayed a prayer of salvation. Instead, they understood spiritual formation as an intentional process. This is what James was talking about when he wrote, “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:4).



Plato argued that there were four virtues—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice—to which medieval teachers added the three “theological” virtues: faith, hope, and love. Past Christian teachers often preferred to speak of the “virtues” of Jesus rather than aspire to abstract ideals of goodness. To them, virtues meant a certain set of spiritual attributes, or heart attitudes, that describe the inner life of the Lord.

We’re going to take the classical Christian approach and define the virtues as the inner orientations and behaviors evidenced in the life of Jesus while He walked on earth. A virtue is displayed when we choose to serve rather than dominate or manipulate; when we choose to encourage rather than lust or harm; when we choose to be gentle rather than abrupt. Choosing virtue is choosing to submit our will to God and to act like Jesus would act.

Practicing a vice means being ruled by the power of self. A vice-ruled life is prone to chaotic outbursts of anger, selfishness, and destruction, the opposite of the orderly and disciplined life that God calls us to. Vice enthrones the self—“I’ll act however I *want* to act, making myself in my own image.” This life, as we’ll see, is a self-defeating life. While the virtues bring spiritual health, the vices are a spiritual cancer, destroying us from within.

The list of virtues chosen for this book is based on the virtues recognized throughout the ages, though I make no claim that it is anywhere near exhaustive. Some well-known virtues (hope, for one) are not addressed. But the ones discussed here will certainly suffice to help you begin your exploration into the life-changing and spirit-transforming world of the virtues.

The virtues we will discuss were readily seen in the life of Jesus. Chief among the virtues was *humility*, for Jesus left His position beside the Father and humbled Himself, taking the lowest position of all as the suffering servant for the whole human race. The

practice of humility was, and is, the lifelong, arduous work of remembering our place beneath the authority and sovereignty of God—who, though He has welcomed us as beloved children, is still God.

Other virtues of Jesus we can strive to attain include *surrender* to the will and purposes of God; *detachment* from our dependence on worldly securities; *love* that's clear of self-interest; *chastity* that springs from purity of heart; *generosity*; and keeping *vigilance* over our souls (for out of the heart come the forces that determine our life). Also *patience*, or enduring with ourselves and others in the long haul of growth and challenge; *discernment*, by which we learn to perceive God with the eyes of the soul; *thankfulness* in all things; *gentleness*; and *fortitude* to continue in spirit when people and circumstances turn against us. And along with these, *obedience* as we cooperate with God's unfolding will; and *penitence*, by which we actively correct the errors we've made and redress the harms we've caused. (Though it is true Jesus was without sin, we are not. Therefore, penitence was counted among the list of classic Christian virtues for the sake of fallen men and women, which includes each one of us.)

The virtues were understood to be the heart attitudes by which Jesus showed us how to stay in right relationship with God and others. As Christians grew in these spiritual attributes of Jesus, real change took place in their character. And so spiritual growth was measured in the maturing of a person's character, not only in, say, his or her knowledge of Scripture or doctrine. And change, to be real and lasting, was known to proceed from a transformed heart.

## **POLLUTED VIRTUES**

Unfortunately, "practicing the virtues of Christ" has a polluted history. In some centuries, virtues were used as measuring sticks

to make Christians feel guilty and inferior. In other times, practices like humility and penitence were imposed on people as obligations. And so we look back and see garish things in church history—people flogging themselves in public as acts of so-called humiliation and repentance. What a tragic misunderstanding of practices that were meant to empower us from within to find freedom from our old self-centeredness and sin.

In better times, Christians understood that they could learn to practice the virtues as part of a time-tested school in godliness. There was no mystery to this, no esoteric knowledge to uncover. It did require a fundamental understanding of the basic patterns of spiritual growth. Our spiritual ancestors understood that, at the time of conversion, there is a gap between our ideals and the reality of our behavior. Today, we may want to hide from, or deny, this fact. We may believe that a Christian should change instantly at conversion (or shortly thereafter). We may want to skirt the long, arduous process of real spiritual growth and development. The ancients weren't fooled; they saw the hard but rewarding work of character transformation as the normal pathway of every Christian's experience. Common sense tells us that bad habits take time to lose and good habits take time to develop. If someone is willing to learn and to be transformed from the inside out, they will eventually see true, long-lasting changes.

If you mention “virtues” today, however, many people—even some Christians—assume you are talking about a sexless, pleasureless, colorless existence. Just as our understanding of Puritanism has been distorted into a ridiculous caricature of what it really was, so virtuous living has been defined by what it is *not*: “Virtue means you can't do this, that, or the other.” The ancient reality, however, presents biblical virtue as a positive example of what you can *become*.

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The life Christ wants to grow in you is not founded on a list of dos and don'ts, and it cannot be accurately measured by our current yardsticks of spiritual-performance standards: how much you do or do not witness, or read your Bible, or attend church. It is most definitely not a life of striving as you compare yourself to someone else. It is the slow dawning of the life and characteristics of Jesus Christ, who lives in you and who wants to grow more evident in you. Learning how to grow in the spiritual characteristics of Christ does not take your life from you. In ancient times, it was understood as God's preferred method of giving you your life back. The virtues are, quite literally, God's sculpting tools, by which He shapes us into the image of His Son. To experience His life in us is to find our way into the life Jesus promised when He said, "I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full."<sup>2</sup>

No, we'll never experience *all* of eternal life on this planet. Sinless perfection and complete transformation are not possible here. But it *is* possible for us to radically reflect the very nature of Jesus Christ, and in this sense, live life "to the full."

### **A LIFE MISSPENT, OR WELL SPENT?**

"Jennifer" looked horrified when I told her about a college reunion I was planning to attend.

"What?" I asked.

"There's no way I could face all those people again, considering the way I behaved. I wish I could wipe those four years off the pages of history."

Because Jennifer lived without regard to virtue, she created a season of regret rather than memories to treasure. This is what we're talking about when we suggest that God wants to give us our life back.

How sad it would be to say at the end of your life, as does a

character in one of C. S. Lewis's novels, "I now see that I spent most of my life in doing *neither* what I ought *nor* what I liked."<sup>3</sup> Instead of spending your days with regret, growing in the virtues of Christ will help you to live a meaningful, focused, and selfless life.

Virtue allows us to live with an intact reputation, an energizing sense of zeal, and an abiding enjoyment of life. Peter Kreeft refers to the life of godly virtue as "health of soul."<sup>4</sup> Isn't that a marvelous thought? God wants you to have a healthy soul! Learning how to practice the virtues of Christ won't get you from earth into heaven, but it will bring the life-giving power of heaven to earth.

In the next two chapters, we'll explore the dynamics and nature of how we are transformed from the inside out through the virtues and presence of Christ. Later, we'll explore the individual virtues one by one, examining their importance and demonstrating simple ways to practice them in daily life.

In this, we seek to recover a lost art—the time-tested, life-proven, rock-solid knowledge, practiced by the ancients, that the school of virtues really works.

Have you been looking for change? Life from within? Spiritual strength to face life's demands and challenges? The knowledge of God's presence with you . . . and in you?

Transformation and growth in Christ are possible. They are the promise of God and your heritage. They are the new life for the soul you have been hoping for, the proven method through which God will give you your life back.