

Practice Makes Perfect? Exploring the Relationship between Knowledge, Desire, and Habit



by MICHAEL R. EMLET

Do you ever struggle knowing exactly *how* to grow in Christ? Do you wonder about the relationship between knowing and doing? Must you *think* correctly before you can act correctly? Why does knowing the right thing so often *not* translate into doing the right thing? Which is more foundational for growth—how you feel, or how you think, or what you do? Your affections, your beliefs, or your habits? What helps you redirect and transform unruly desires in a more Christ-ward direction? How do the regular (and sometimes seemingly mundane) practices you engage in day to day actually shape your spiritual life, both for better or for worse? What role does corporate worship play in shaping your loves and desires? How, really, is worship supposed to “work”? These are critical questions, affecting the way you live. And if you are tasked with the spiritual oversight of others—as a pastor, counselor, teacher, mentor, parent—how you answer these questions is critical for their welfare, too.

Desiring the Kingdom by James K. A. Smith (a philosophy professor at Calvin College) plumbs the depths of these questions.¹ Christian educators are Smith’s stated audience, but his work has huge implications for pastors and counselors providing in-the-trenches pastoral care. This is why I have pored over, marked up, and recommended *Desiring the Kingdom* more than any book other than the Bible over the last two years. This may surprise you since it is a book that on first glance has nothing to do with interpersonal ministry. Yet, more closely considered, it has everything to do with counseling.

What follows is not a typical book review. Consider it an extended pastoral meditation

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¹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

on the interrelationship of habits, beliefs, and desires, using Smith's ideas as a springboard. Because I believe *Desiring the Kingdom* is such a thought-provoking resource, I'm going to spend significant time describing, unpacking, and interacting with Smith's approach. First, I will walk you through the basic content of the book's six chapters without many evaluative comments, although throughout this section I will suggest some immediate practical payoffs. (Stay with me through this. Smith's material is dense and requires focused attention, but you will benefit by taking the time to savor a full-course meal rather than grabbing a few fast food comments.) Then I will interact more extensively with Smith's material, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, I'll close by more fully discussing applications for counseling and pastoral practice.

Overview of *Desiring the Kingdom*

Smith begins with this question:

What if education, including higher education, is not primarily about the absorption of ideas and information, but about the *formation* of hearts and desires? . . . What if education wasn't first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love? (pp. 17-18).

What Smith says about education applies equally to counseling. Counseling is pointedly about the formation (and re-formation) of hearts and desires, of words and deeds.

Smith's question directly challenges me as a teacher of biblical counseling students. Of course I want my students to learn ideas and information—but there's something I want even more. I want my students to *love*. I want them to love Jesus Christ. I want them to love the people to whom they minister the word of Christ. And Smith's question challenges me not only as an educator, but also as a counselor. Counseling is not first and foremost about what counselees know, but about what they love. All the Scriptures turn on two great commandments, summoning love from people who do not love well.

Smith's thesis—education is about the formation of hearts and desires—has far-reaching implications. Think about it—when are you *not* in the role of a student? If education (whether in a classroom, on the street, or in a counseling conversation) is primarily a desire-shaping process, then this schooling and shaping of our loves occurs every day in multiple contexts, for better or for worse. We never step out of the roles of learner and lover, whether at home, at church, at work, or at the mall (a location that Smith will later demonstrate to be a prime location for deviant worship!).

Our heart's desires are shaped and molded by the habit-forming practices in which we participate daily and weekly. Smith describes these habitual practices as "liturgies." By the word "liturgies" he does not mean just the elements of a formal order of worship, but the practices we engage in daily. He shows how these habits

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*The Journal of Biblical Counseling
(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:
Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation
1803 East Willow Grove Avenue
Glenside, PA 19038
www.ccef.org*

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