

SHAPING VIRTUES AND OUR WITNESS

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Years ago I was leading a Bible study with an eclectic group of new Christians as well as some non-Christians. The last study was on the importance of the local church. After the meeting, I wasn't sure where one of the participants stood with everything, so I asked, "Bill, are you planning on coming to church now that the Bible study is over?"

"It ain't gonna be that easy!" he responded.

When I asked him why, he simply replied, "Spring and all." Bill wasn't a farmer, so I am not sure what he was referring to, but it probably had to do with mulching and tending his yard.

"It ain't gonna be that easy" is a true assessment of many things that God calls us to, but it's especially true when it comes to reaching out to others with the message of the gospel. It ain't gonna be that easy because we live in a rapidly evolving, post-Christian world. Christian beliefs seem increasingly strange in a culture that doesn't understand our values. It's almost like we're living in a different universe. Our neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and family members don't know the Bible and don't understand the gospel. They don't see it as relevant to their lives. Some go further and view Christianity as a tool of oppression, with sharing the gospel qualifying as hate speech.

This is where our Shaping Virtues play a key role. They're meant to testify to the power of the gospel which has changed our lives.

Joy, Gratitude, Humility, and Service

Take joy for example. The world does not and cannot know the joy that we do. How could they? It's very difficult to experience true joy when this life is all there is. It's even harder when you don't have a relationship with Christ. Believers know the joy of being united to Christ, secure in his love, with eternity in front of us. Unbelievers should see the joy of Christ in our lives. When they do, they'll take note.

Consider gratitude. Most people aren't naturally very grateful. Complaining abounds in traffic, at work, and even in conversations about the weather or the preacher. It almost feels like ingratitude is a "shaping virtue" in our culture. This should not be the case with Christians. We should be the most thankful people on the planet. Do you express gratitude when you're chatting with a co-worker or talking to a neighbor? Or do you

instead complain? Gratitude to God is counter-cultural and a powerful way to demonstrate the difference Christ has made in our lives.

One of the rarest virtues we can embody is humility. The message of the gospel is infinitely important, but how we say it can affect whether someone hears us or not. Humility should mark our interactions with others, just like it did for Jesus. When we listen well, ask good questions, and respect those we're talking to, we show people what Christ is like. In a world that has thrown listening and respect out the window, let's be known for demonstrating humility, even when it's not being demonstrated to us.

Our differences with others don't need to be hindrances. They can shine forth the light of Christ! Let's say you have a neighbor you want to reach out to but you don't know how. Maybe they seem a little intimidating or unfriendly, or maybe you're afraid that they will reject you. What should you do? Try looking for ways to serve them: make a meal, watch their dog, or mow their lawn when they're away.

During the pandemic, my family and I helped our neighbors build a new deck on the back of their house. We were all trapped at home anyway, so it was a perfect time to do something like this. Our time together forged a strong relationship with them. A week after we finished, they had us over (on their new deck) for a thank you dinner. They said what we did was the nicest thing that anyone had ever done for them. It wasn't that big of a sacrifice for us, but it meant the world to them. If our goal is to show people the power of the gospel, then let's show them the servant heart of Christ by finding meaningful ways to serve them.

The Corporate Witness of the Church

Shaping Virtues are essential for us as individual followers of Christ sharing his love with others. But the reality is that our co-workers and neighbors can write off one person or family as an exception. They can see your joy as a rare personality trait. They can chalk up your thankfulness to a good upbringing. But when they see an entire church that is full of joy, when they meet other believers who are filled with thankfulness, they can't write you off anymore.

Sociologists have coined the phrase, "plausibility structures" which determine for people whether a story is believable or unbelievable. The main factor determining our plausibility structures isn't evidence or experience, but rather the communities that we interact with. Sam Chan says:

One of the major reasons our friends aren't Christians is that they don't belong to a community of friends who also believe in Jesus. It's not primarily because they haven't heard the gospel (they probably haven't, but they already think they know what you believe). It's not because there's not enough evidence for the Christian faith (because no matter how much evidence you produce, they'll

explain it away). In many cases, the number one reason our friends aren't Christians is that they don't have any other Christian friends.⁴⁴

This is exactly why an important part of our outreach strategy is building friendships with non-Christians, But we do not do it just one-on-one. Bringing our unbelieving friends into our network of friendships is one of the best things we can do because it adjusts their plausibility structures. It enables them to think differently about the relevance and truth of the gospel. This is what we call our corporate witness. Together, as the church, we live out our shaping virtues and testify to the truth and power of Christ which has changed our lives.

Acts 2:42–47 shows us the power of a strong corporate witness:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Displaying the Power of the Gospel

Like we see in the early church, virtues have a direct connection to witness. The early church was shockingly different from the culture around them. When the Holy Spirit filled them, they immediately became devoted to the church and the teaching of God's Word. They joined their lives together in deep fellowship, eating together and praying together and sharing life together. They were also extraordinarily generous, sharing everything they had and even selling their possessions to give to each other. These changes, these differences, showed the watching world the power of the gospel. Their love for one another made the world sit up and take notice.

The same is true for us. Our virtues are directly connected to our witness. When non-Christians see biblical virtues and godly character in our lives and our church, how could they not take notice?

Our church runs an introduction to Christianity class called The Bridge Course, and many of our church members serve in different roles: group leaders and assistants, kitchen staff and administrators, childcare workers and greeters. Guests often comment about the way we care for one another as we work together. They see the deep bonds we have for one another and it makes a loud statement. It's not unusual for someone

⁴⁴ Sam Chan, *How to Talk about Jesus (without Being That Guy)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 8.

serving in The Bridge Course to be returning Tupperware from a shared meal, greeting a friend with a hug, or giving someone a ride. This mutual care provides a powerful witness to the watching world.

The care extends to our guests as well. Toward the end of the course, we attend an overnight retreat. It's not cheap, so to make sure our guests join us, we provide scholarships for whoever needs them. I tell our guests that the members of our church, most of whom they have never met, give generously so they can attend the retreat even if they can't pay a dime. Generosity like this is a clear demonstration of the generosity of God toward us.

Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Let's be a people that not only love the lost, but also love one another so that those around us might see a visible demonstration of the power of the gospel that has transformed our lives.