

THE SHAPING VIRTUES OF SOVEREIGN GRACE CHURCHES

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When the gospel of Jesus Christ is embraced, it produces a culture marked by the fruit of the gospel. All churches that have come to know the grace of God should prioritize and pursue those qualities that are in keeping with the message of grace. In Sovereign Grace, the explicit gospel-focus that has marked our history has led us to value seven particular Shaping Virtues: humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, and godliness.

Our Shared Values and our Shaping Virtues must work together. Values without virtues will be cold and ultimately unattractive, neither glorifying God nor adorning the gospel. Virtues without values will be shallow because they are untethered to gospel truth.

Although there are specific ways we can cultivate each of these virtues, the primary way we grow in all of them is by immersing ourselves in the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every church member has a vital role to play in promoting a gospel culture by demonstrating these qualities. Pastors in particular must model these virtues in their own lives, setting an example for the flock and helping shape the church.

The following list is not exhaustive. None of us perfectly demonstrates these qualities, and for this reason we press on toward a fuller expression of each Shaping Virtue in our lives. Ultimately, it is God who graciously creates and grows these qualities in his people, and he has promised to bring to completion the good work he began in us. As we labor to keep Christ central in Sovereign Grace, our hope and prayer is that these Shaping Virtues will be present and increase in our churches for generations to come.

Humility

The Lord promises to bless the one “who is humble and contrite in spirit” (Isa. 66:2). Humility is foundational to all our other Shaping Virtues, because without humility we will experience neither the desire nor the grace necessary to cultivate them. The great enemy of all these virtues is pride. Their greatest friend is humility. Jerry Bridges said, “Humility opens the way to all other godly character traits. It is the soil in which the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit grow.”¹

¹ Jerry Bridges, *The Fruitful Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 49.

Humility comes from “honestly assessing ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness.”² When we encounter the gospel of Christ, we are humbled as we recognize that, as sinners, our salvation isn’t merited in any way but is given freely by grace and grace alone—“by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). The gospel continues to humble us as we increasingly recognize that the only way we both relate to and receive from God is grace, and not anything we do or don’t do.

The message of grace also humbles us in relation to one another, lowering our view of our own importance and raising our view of others. We are consistently exhorted to this humility in Scripture: “I therefore...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility” (Eph. 4:1–2); “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones...humility” (Col. 3:12); “Humble yourselves before the Lord (Jas. 4:10); “Clothe yourself, all of you, with humility toward one another” (1 Pet. 5:5). Note that humility isn’t simply a way we feel but a way we act toward others. It includes inviting and pursuing correction from others.

Finally, the gospel provides both the model and the motive for considering others better than ourselves. Paul’s exhortation to “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” and to “look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3–4) is rooted in Jesus’ stunning example of humility in Philippians 2:5–8. Humility like this creates fertile soil for all the other virtues to flourish, as our eyes look away from ourselves and are fixed on Christ.

Joy

In Philippians 4:4, Paul exhorts believers to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” But how are we to do that when life in a fallen world is often full of difficulties, disappointments, and suffering? The answer lies in the reality that in the gospel, we have a source of joy that cannot be touched by any circumstance in this life, no matter how bad.

The gospel is “good news of great joy...for all the people” (Luke 2:10). As believers hear and embrace the good news of salvation by grace alone, the natural response is to rejoice. Our greatest trouble in life has been dealt with once and for all. We are “justified by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24), forgiven of all our sins, and forever reconciled to him. And that’s just the start.

We are adopted as sons and daughters into God’s family. We are given the Holy Spirit to empower our daily walk with him, and that same Spirit is the “guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (Eph. 1:14). Our inheritance is eternal life in the new heavens and earth where “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). And even more gloriously, we shall “see his face” (Rev.

² C.J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2005), 22.

22:4), as the apex of God's redemptive plan. It is no wonder that Peter can say, "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). We, of all people, have reason for joy!

But what about our suffering? Scripture doesn't pretend that life is easy. It honestly admits to the reality of crying, mourning, and pain. But it also helps us to understand that even those moments are tempered by this untouchable joy, because we know that God has ordained them for our good. That's why we can "Count it all joy...when you meet trials of various kinds" (Jas. 1:2) and actually "rejoice in our sufferings" (Rom. 5:3). We rejoice not just because some day we will escape this world and all suffering will end, but because our suffering now is actually "preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

Repeatedly preaching the gospel to ourselves positions us for this kind of joy, even in suffering. Ultimately, though, the Holy Spirit produces this joy by his indwelling presence (Gal. 5:22). Gospel joy is contagious joy, and joyful believers will produce joyful churches and joyful gatherings.

Gratitude

The manifold blessings of the gospel are ours as a free and undeserved gift from our gracious God. The only appropriate response to such generous grace is gratitude. "I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart" (Ps. 86:12). A thankful heart is cultivated as we remember, understand, and appreciate the many benefits of the gospel.

We receive many graces as children of God: forgiveness, adoption, our helper the Holy Spirit, the Word illuminated, the privilege of prayer, the church, spiritual gifts for the common good, and divine promises for wisdom and guidance. This list could go on and on, since we are appropriately to be "giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:20). In all of this, God guards and protects us by giving grace in the face of temptation and spiritual armor to be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

These gospel benefits are more than enough to fill our hearts with thankfulness. Yet God has also provided blessings through his common grace. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God has created a world that is beautiful and awe inspiring. The heavens declare his glory and the earth is full of his glory. He feeds, clothes, and shelters us, and he blesses many of us well beyond the mere necessities of life. Paul sums it up in 1 Timothy 6:17 when he speaks of "God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy." And then there are the people in our lives that have been a blessing: parents, siblings, spouse, children, friends, teachers, and others.

We are especially grateful for other Christians in the local church to which God has joined us. Paul's example of thanksgiving for others is compelling. In his letters to various churches he constantly expresses his gratitude for God's people: "We give thanks to God always for all of you" (1 Thess. 1:2). Each local church,

therefore, is to be a community of gratitude, giving thanks to God in everything we do: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17).

Encouragement

To encourage means to give support, confidence, or hope. God delights to strengthen and sustain his people through the ministry of encouragement. There is nothing more encouraging to our souls than knowing that because of Christ, we are and will always remain in right standing with God. Encouragement is designed by God to build faith and impart grace to keep us going in our Christian walk. Because we live in a fallen world, and because even as believers we can grow discouraged and weary as we serve, suffer, and battle remaining sin, encouragement is a daily necessity.

Effective encouragement focuses on who God is, what he has done for us in Christ, and his promises of ongoing work in our lives. These truths include God’s fatherly affection and care for his children, his steadfast love, persistent grace, everlasting mercy, enduring patience, sovereign power, and infinite wisdom. It includes his promises to work all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28), that his grace is sufficient for you (2 Cor. 12:9), and that in all the ups and downs of life he “will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). Jude assures us that he is able “to keep you from stumbling and present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (Jude 24). We can “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23). It is no wonder that Paul calls him “the God of endurance and encouragement” (Rom. 15:5)!

Although every believer can and must encourage themselves in the Lord, the emphasis in Scripture falls on the privilege, joy, and responsibility we have to discover evidences of grace in others and remind each other of the truth. In Paul’s visits and letters, he regularly encouraged the recipients by reminding them of God’s character and promises and by pointing out his grace in their lives. Paul and Barnabas strengthened “the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith” (Acts 14:22).

Every believer is exhorted to “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thess. 5:11). We are to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13).

Consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:24–25).

Note that we are to proactively “consider” how to make this happen. Effective encouragers perceive other’s graces and needs, whether big and small, and are prepared to speak edifying words when opportunities arise.

Generosity

The gospel of Jesus Christ is an act of cosmic generosity on God's part, revealing the riches of his love, grace, and mercy. In the gospel we see the overflow of God's love: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). We also see the overflow of God's grace: "For [we] know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). And, we see the overflow of God's mercy: "But God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:4–5). God didn't just barely save us. The gospel's provision is rich and abundant and complete in every way.

All things belong to God, the giver of every good and perfect gift (Jas. 1:17). Thankfully, God is a generous owner. In Christ, he continues to generously and abundantly bless us. Paul, helps us understand the fullness of the gospel's blessings when he asks, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32) If God gave us what is most precious to Him—"his own Son"—there is nothing, either material or spiritual that we have need of, that he would now withhold. Truly, Jesus came that we "may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

When our hearts are transformed by the gospel, God's own generosity is unleashed in our lives. God has extravagantly blessed us, and now we delight in blessing others, using our time, energy, and resources for their good. We taste of the reality that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). We view our own blessings not as indulgent gifts, but as opportunities to bless others and "produce thanksgiving to God" (2 Cor. 9:11).

The gospel also creates a heavenly-mindedness in us that frees us from greed and covetousness in this world to invest in the world to come, because there we have "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). We can now generously and cheerfully "lay up...treasures in heaven" by using our time, talent, and money for his kingdom (Matt. 6:20).

Servanthood

The gospel saves us into a life of service, first to God and then to others as an expression of that service. "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). If humility is the foundation of our shaping virtues, servanthood is their concrete expression. The humble, joyful, grateful, encouraging, generous, loving believer simply can't help but have those virtues overflow in a life of practical service.

Jesus left us with a clear example of this life of service that is at the heart of our gospel calling. As his disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest, Jesus redefined true greatness:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:42–44).

And to emphasize the point, he made this stunning statement: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The death of Christ is the greatest demonstration of that service, but not the only one. To show exactly what such service should look like, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, fully cognizant of his divinity and of the looming cross. He explained,

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you (John 13:13–15).

Indeed, it was Christ’s coming death, which would truly “wash” the disciples, that was to serve as their deepest motivation in serving others

Thus, we care for one another in the context of local church communities. This is not only an intent of the gospel, it is also one of the fruits of the gospel. God’s love has been placed in our hearts, enabling Christians to love in ordinary and extraordinary ways. In I John this connection is explained:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love...Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:7–8, 11).

We are given the necessary grace to live this way. Paul explains that “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). Peter emphasizes the purpose of such gifts: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Pet. 4:10). In the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, Jesus emphasizes our responsibility to use the gifts and graces God has given us, but also teaches the heavenly reward his servants will receive. “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:23) is the commendation every believer longs to hear on that day.

Godliness

Justification means that God has declared guilty sinners to be righteous through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This justification is “by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24) and, once given, can’t be lost or

taken away because it rests on Jesus' finished work and not our ongoing performance. Thus, those who are freely saved through the gospel are also called, empowered, and motivated to please the one who saved them.

Justified believers are called to "let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27), to "strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14), and to "cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). All these passages refer to the call to progressive sanctification: a process in which one's moral condition is increasingly brought into conformity with one's justified status before God.

Like justification, sanctification is a work of grace. Many make the mistake of thinking that we are saved by grace, but that we then become holy by our own efforts. This is simply not true. We are justified by grace and we are sanctified by grace as well. The difference, however, is that in justification God alone works, but in sanctification we are active participants with the Holy Spirit in receiving and responding to God's grace to us.

The problem for many Christians comes when we confuse these two aspects of God's work in our lives. This confusion can lead either to license—believing it doesn't matter how we live since we are justified—or legalism, which is living as if relating to God is on the basis of our performance rather than by faith in the performance of Christ.

Philippians 2:12–13 is key to understanding God's role and ours in our growth. Paul writes, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." We work out our salvation by putting sin to death and by putting on godly virtues. God the Holy Spirit works by enabling us to "will" (the desire for godliness) and to "work" (efforts toward godliness) in the process of becoming more like Christ. It is the Spirit who empowers our battles against temptation and sin and produces spiritual fruit in our lives (Gal. 5:17, 22–23).

Motivated by a desire to please and honor the Lord, Christians are to strive after holiness (Heb. 12:14) and be doers of the word (Jas. 1:22). We put sin to death (Col. 3:5) and we live in all things for God (Col. 3:17). In so doing, our lives testify to the goodness of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the reality of the gospel. We pursue godliness in the confidence of knowing that God will sanctify us completely at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23). "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:24).

Cultivating These Virtues

Humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, and godliness. These are the Shaping Virtues that the gospel creates and that God calls us to continually pursue. They are qualities we have valued throughout our history in Sovereign Grace, and ones that ought to increasingly mark our life together in our churches as we press on to maturity.

We would do well to ask ourselves, “Am I shaped by these virtues? Where do I need to grow?” Pastors would be wise to assess whether the culture of the church they serve is shaped by these virtues, and how to grow through teaching and example. The joyous news is that we already possess the key to such growth: the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, with all the transforming power it brings into our lives. By God’s grace, let’s continue to pray for, prioritize, and pursue these shaping virtues in Sovereign Grace churches, for the glory of Christ and the advance of the gospel.