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You Are What You Love—But You Might Not Love What You Think
Award-Winning Author James K.A. Smith Explores the Spiritual Power of Habit

Humans are not simply thinking things. We are first and foremost lovers, defined by our desires, says philosopher and award-winning author James K.A. Smith in his new book, ***You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*** (Brazos Press, hardcover \$19.99, April 2016). The question is, what do you love? It might not be what you think, says Smith. We are often unaware of the cultural practices competing for our hearts, and the habits that shape our longings.

“To be human is to be animated by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as ‘flourishing,’” Smith says. “And we *want* that. We crave it. This is why our most fundamental orientation to the world is love.”

Ideally, for Christians, that vision is the kingdom of God. Whatever it is, our desire for it is shaped by practice. We’re immersed in “love-shaping rituals”—liturgies, Smith calls them, habit-forming practices that get hold of our hearts. “Humans are liturgical animals, creatures whose loves are shaped by our worship,” he says. But there are rival liturgies everywhere—at the mall, in sports stadiums, on television, even in well-intentioned youth ministry—diverting attention away from God.

The antidote can be found in historic Christian practices. “We don’t need to reinvent the wheel, nor do we need to invent new liturgies,” Smith says. He believes that the future of the faith hinges on the renewal of worship through an embrace of ancient, tested, practices. The repetition of practices found in liturgical worship is transformative: “Repetition is how God rehabilitates us,” Smith says. “Virtue formation takes practice and there is no practice that isn’t repetitive. We willingly embrace repetition in other pursuits: to hone our golf swing, our piano prowess, and mathematical abilities.”

Historic Christian worship with “its smells and bells and its Gothic peculiarity embodies a spirituality that carries whiffs of transcendence,” Smith says. In a secular world that has been “disenchanted,” it is these strange historical rites that have a future. The ancient liturgy contrasts sharply with “the thin gruel of DIY spirituality, which turns out to be isolating, lonely, and unable to endure crises.” Even a ritual such as confessing one’s sins has surprising appeal—turns out people *want* to confess, and to receive pardon.

Smith offers ways to “calibrate” our hearts beyond Sunday morning—an hour a week is not sufficient to change the habits of hearts that are daily immersed in rival practices, he says:

- At home: “When we frame our daily lives by the worship of Christ, then even the quotidian is charged with eternal significance. Never underestimate the formative power of the family supper table.”

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- In youth ministry: “Keeping young people entertained in our church buildings is not at all synonymous with forming them as dynamic members of the Body of Christ.” Yet when young people are introduced to ancient ways of following Jesus, “their faith is given a second life. They receive the disciplines not as burdens, but as gifts that channel their devotion and shape their faith.”
- At work: “Worship is not an escape from the world.” Smith suggests we need to think about habit-shaping practices that will sustain love—the ultimate virtue—throughout the work week.
- Through culture making: “The innovative, restorative work of culture making needs to be primed by those liturgical tradition that orient our imagination to kingdom come. In order to foster a Christian imagination, we don’t need to invent, we need to remember.”

“Discipleship is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love,” Smith says. He explains that worship is the “imagination station” that incubates our loves and longings so that our cultural endeavors are indexed toward God and his kingdom. Through historic Christian practices, “we learn how to be a community of faith, not just a collection of individuals who happen to love the same Savior.”

James K. A. Smith (PhD, Villanova University) is professor of philosophy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he also holds the Gary and Henrietta Byker Chair in Applied Reformed Theology and Worldview. He is the editor of *Comment* magazine. Smith has authored or edited many books, including *Imagining the Kingdom*, *Who's Afraid of Relativism?*, and the *Christianity Today* Book Award winners *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* He is also editor of the well-received Church and Postmodern Culture series.

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