**How to Act Rightly**

by

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I was driving home from the library recently when I pulled up to a stop sign. Two other cars had already stopped, and after a moment I realized no one else was moving. I soon saw why.

In the middle of the crosswalk an elderly, frail, homeless man had fallen and was struggling to pull himself up by his walker. But no matter how hard he tried, he simply wasn’t strong enough to stand by himself.

I sat there a moment and then thought, “I should go help that man.”

Before I could move, though, a car passing by on the cross street screeched to a halt. Two other men leapt out, leaving their doors swinging open. They came RUNNING into the crosswalk to help the homeless man. They lifted him gently, one on each side, then walked him to a bus bench nearby where he could sit down to recover. Only when they were done did this thought cross my mind:

"Well, crud. Why wasn't I the one who RAN toward the opportunity to help a person in obvious need?"

The next day, I mentioned this incident (OK, whined about it) to a friend of mine over lunch, and he said something important. “Mike,” John told me, “those guys were most likely off-duty first responders. Firefighters or police or EMTs or something. They’re trained to help—it’s just a habit ingrained in who they are by now. That’s why they could react more quickly than you.”

Now, I don’t know if they really were off-duty firefighters, but John raised an idea that I hadn’t thought of before: *Helping can be a* *habit*, something natural that just becomes ingrained in who we are as people. That makes even more sense when I think about how the Holy Spirit helps us to act rightly each day—so much so, that I think that’s what God’s doing when he’s training us for righteous behavior.

*God’s Holy Spirit is a Habit-Maker*

Richard Shotten is a behavioral science expert in Britain. He’s known for marketing and advertising insight, not so much for theology—but I think he’s onto something spiritual when he talks about a process he calls “The Choice Factory.” His basic premise is that choices prompt action, and that everyday decision-making is overwhelmingly influenced by biases already set within each of us. With that in mind, he cites a Duke University study that revealed, “Nearly half of behavior is habitual…Across a range of areas from exercising to travelling, from eating to socializing, a full 45% of behaviors [are] habitual—the same decisions being made at the same time and place without full conscious thought.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

In other words, Shotton’s research reveals, we’re mentally prone to do that which we’ve always done, to choose that which we’ve always chosen, to live the familiar rather that the unknown. If you don’t believe it, then ask yourself this question: When was the last time I changed toilet paper brands? Or took a different route to work?

The great *aha* moment for me from the Duke study was the realization that *God’s Holy Spirit is a habit-maker* in our souls.

It’s by the Spirit that we first learn, and then are able to repeat, the choices that prompt actions of holiness, hope, and love. As these choices and actions become more frequent, by God’s grace, they also become habitual. It becomes easier to quickly answer God’s call to righteousness because righteousness becomes that which we’ve always done, a choice that we’re used to making, a familiar lifestyle rather than something new and unknown. We don’t even have to think about it anymore—we just *act rightly* because that’s the habit our Holy Spirit has built within us, and so it’s what we’ve grown accustomed to doing.

Scripture calls this habit-forming experience “living by the Spirit” (Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:25; 6:1), “walking by the Spirit” or “keeping in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16; 5:25), and “sowing to please the Spirit” (Galatians 6:8). I think my favorite of those biblical images is the one in Galatians 5:25, where Paul encourages, “Let us *keep in step* with the Spirit.” It reminds me of a dancer leading a partner in a way that creates beauty through movement.

*Dancing with the Father*

At this point, I think I should tell you I’m not a great dancer.

Well, that’s an understatement. I’ve actually been known to frighten small animals with my dancing! (But, as my wife used to say, what I lack in skill I make up with enthusiasm.) Despite my own insufficiencies, I’m mesmerized by truly talented dancers on a stage. This past Christmas, for instance, I went to see my granddaughter perform in a professional ballet production of *The Nutcracker*. There was a point where the entire stage was filled with dancers twirling and leaping and moving in such captivating symmetry that it brought tears to my eyes.

This, then, is how I picture the idea of keeping in step with the Spirit: Following his example, doing what he does, letting him lead the movement while I stay in symmetry him nearby. And by working together with him, I get to see him create something beautiful in my life.

“Whatever the Father does,” Jesus said of himself in John 5:19, “the Son also does.” Likewise, that which we see the Holy Spirit doing, we also can do.

This is how we live out lives of meaning and righteousness. We fixate on him and joyfully articulate his movement in the whole of our being and behavior. This is defined by motion, by activity and kinesthesis—by things *happening* as an expression of God in our lives. The ancient Romans had a common saying that’s helpful when we think about this: *Facta non verba*, which is Latin for “Deeds, not words.”[[2]](#endnote-2) That’s reminiscent of the brother of Jesus when he said, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). We don’t just talk about symmetry with God’s Spirit, we get to live it in breathtaking, heart-pumping ways each day.

Living in the Spirit, walking by the Spirit, and keeping in step with the Spirit work in you in this way. This is not a “deeds-first” kind of religion that attempts to prove it’s authentic by vain activity (yawn), but it’s an *act of imitative gratitude*. As the Apostle John clarified for us, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

So next time you want to act rightly, don’t choose your own guilt and need for self-salvation over gratitude that God has invited you to his dance. Instead, lean into the gift of God’s habit-forming Spirit at work in you. Let that be the thing that leads you toward the choices that help you act rightly today.

Maybe then, you and I both, can be the ones running to help when we see a person in need.

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1. Richard Shotton, *The Choice Factory* (Hampshire, Great Britain: Harriman House, 2018) xi, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jennifer Delgado, “Acta non verba, facts or words?,” *Psychology Spot*, https://psychology-spot.com/acta-non-verba-meaning-deeds-not-words [↑](#endnote-ref-2)