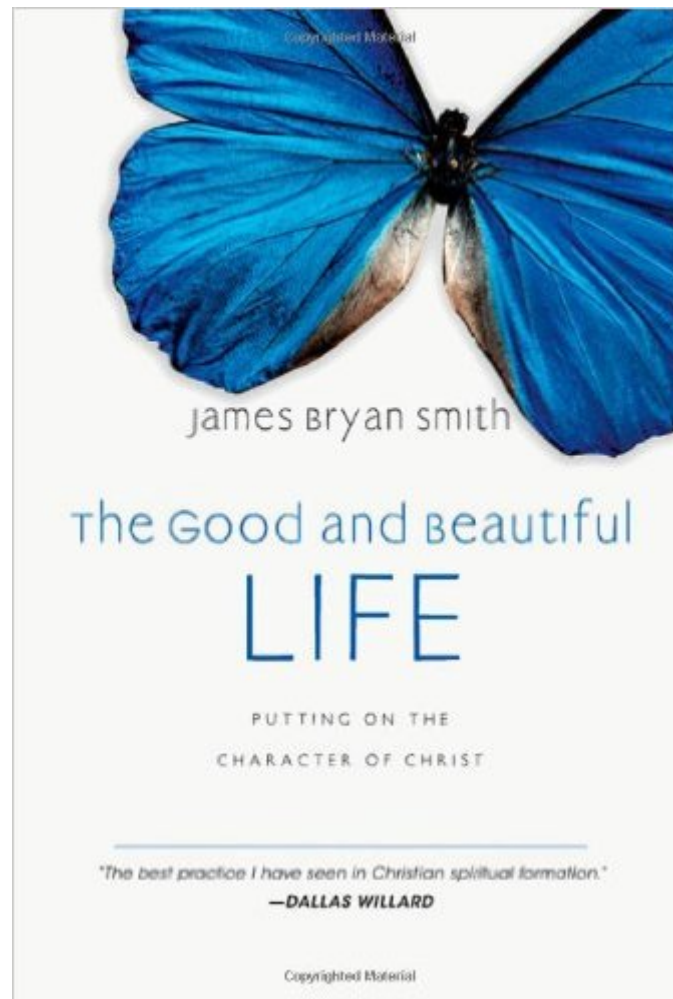


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# The Good And Beautiful Life: Putting On The Character Of Christ (Apprentice (IVP Books))



## Synopsis

"I have never met a person whose goal was to ruin his or her life. We all want to be happy, and we want it all of the time." So begins James Bryan Smith in *The Good and Beautiful Life*. The problem is, he tells us, we have bought into false notions of happiness and success. These self-centered decisions lead us further into the vices that cause ruin: anger, lust, lying, worry and judging. Eventually we find ourselves living a beautifully packaged life of self-destruction. Following the Sermon on the Mount, this follow-up to *The Good and Beautiful God* guides us to look behind these character flaws and to replace our false beliefs with Jesus' narratives about life in the kingdom of God.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Smith opens the second book in the Apprentice Series like this: "The great preacher and founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley (1703-1791), was once approached by a man who came to him in the grip of unbelief. "all is dark; my thoughts are lost," the man said to Wesley, "but I hear that you preach to a great number of people every night and morning. Pray, what would you do with them? Whither would you lead them? What religion do you preach? What is it good for?" Wesley gave this answer to those questions: "You ask, what would I do with them? I would make them virtuous and happy, easy in themselves, and useful to others. Whither would I lead them? to heaven, to God the judge, the lover of all, and to Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant. What

religion do I preach? the religion of love. the law of kindness brought to light by the gospel. What is this good for? to make all who receive it enjoy God and themselves, to make them like God, lovers of all, contented in their lives, and crying out at their death, in calm assurance, "O grave where is thy victory! thanks be to God, who giveth me victory, through my Lord Jesus Christ." Smith lays out four components of change: the mind, disciplines, community and the Holy Spirit. But he recognizes that the dominant content of the mind is found in stories: narratives that make up the content and texture of our personal histories. The change agent is the Holy Spirit. Smith writes, "The Spirit leads us to Jesus, reveals the Father, exposes falsehood, offers correction, and gives us the needed encouragement that make growth and transformation possible. The Spirit helps us change our narratives by leading us into truth, enlightens us as we practice the disciplines, and binds us together in community. If not for the work of the Holy Spirit, transformation simply will not take place. But we must participate in this process. By serious reading and reflection, by practicing the spiritual exercises and by entering into community, we create the condition in which the Spirit can transform our character." He offers a triangle diagram to represent the relationship of these four components, with the Holy Spirit in the center. In the place of "MIND" on the top point he writes, "Personal Narratives." Brilliant I think, and an easy connection to the current generation who live in the constructivist world (and echoes of Taylor's 'social imaginary'). Smith's gift is to translate the sometimes weighty work of Dallas Willard in practical ways without watering down the theological foundation. A needed bit of work and so far a great series.

This book is a gem. While the cover design is aesthetically pleasing, the pages contain great stories, and the theological prose is enjoyable and accessible, of foremost importance for the prospective reader is that in *The Good and Beautiful Life* we have a fantastic resource for the transformation of human character into the likeness of Christ. The second in a series of three, this book is yet another valuable resource for those on the Christian journey, and perhaps even for those outside the Christian faith seeking to learn more about where the Christian life might lead. Throughout this series of books Smith cogently argues that "we live at the mercy of our ideas and our narratives," and it is through this lens the content of our spiritual lives is examined and then challenged. Each chapter within this installment presents a common narrative that many people hold that leads to anger, lust, lying, vindictive competitiveness, vainglory, avarice, worry, or judgmentalism, and then challenges that narrative through the life and teachings of Jesus. Smith relies on Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount as paramount for instilling the virtues that oppose these vices, reinforcing the Jesus narratives with an accompanying spiritual practice. In this

book, those practices are writing a letter to God, play, hospitality, keeping the Sabbath, a media fast, silence, praying for the success of competitors, secret service, deaccumulation, prayer, a day without gossip, and living one day devotionally. The practices are simple, yet powerful, and the instructions Smith provides are very easy to follow. I found this book to be an excellent follow up to the first volume in The Apprentice Series, building well upon the ideas presented in The Good and Beautiful God. As is the case with each of these books, the teachings contained therein are best read and lived within a community, and thus this could be an excellent resource for a book club, a small group, a Sunday school class, or even as a touchstone for a church-wide initiative. As is obvious, I strongly recommend it, believing that this book and the accompanying volumes are invaluable sources of wisdom for the building up of the church today.

The author takes you through the sermon on the mount section by section. In each chapter, he looks at the point of the text and distinguishes between the world's thought pattern (or belief or narrative) and Jesus' counter narrative. He then submits how this narrative might be played out in daily life. Each chapter ends with a 'soul training' which is an exercise or discipline that is to be worked on throughout the week. This book would be fine to do through on your own, but is intended for use with a group. The discussion questions in the back are really good and if done as intended I think would make for an outstanding bible study or small group.

We used this for our small group. At first, some of us were skeptical that it may be a superficial study, but by the end of the book we had all agreed that we really grew spiritually as a result of this study. Our group members ranged from not quite believers to fairly new believers to 30-year believers with a lot of Bible knowledge. I highly recommend this book and encourage you to use a journal as the author suggests. It did seem to make a difference for those who did it.

This is the second of three books in James Bryan Smith's "Apprentice Trilogy." I picked this book up after reading the first in the series, "The Good and Beautiful God." The second book, which does not disappoint, follows in the pattern of the first in that it seeks to challenge the false narratives many have concerning life as an apprentice or disciple/follower of Jesus Christ. Smith looks to the Sermon on the Mount as the outline and substance of Jesus' teaching for his followers. Like the first book, this one comes with a refreshingly light and encouraging touch while dealing with subject matter of great import to all disciples.

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