

*Ruth began our new series by asking us to think of someone we know who is really holy: someone who seems naturally connected to God, someone who carries His beautiful presence with them. This is someone living what James Bryan Smith calls 'The Good and Beautiful Life' in his book of the same title. Maybe we think we could never be like that but the Good News is that holiness and transformation ARE possible by becoming an intentional disciple of Jesus, by doing the things He commanded, not as laws or rules, but as a new way of life. Jesus explained how to live like this in His Sermon on the Mount, ending with a well-known parable:*

**1. The Wise and the Foolish Builder. Read Matthew 7: 24 – 29.**

- At St Paul's we emphasize the importance of getting to know the Bible but it's possible to read, learn and believe the Bible without actually doing what it says: **it is the putting into practice that counts.**
- In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes the life we need to be living if we, His apprentices, are to become like Him. A life of peace and happiness is not available if we are unwilling to allow God to challenge and change us: it doesn't exist without our **transformation**. The Greek word is **metamorphōsis** which denotes a completely radical change in character. **2 Cor. 3:18.**
- Metamorphosis is not instantaneous and is hard because we are continually and unwittingly shaped by our relationships, habits and the stories we believe. We need to recognise false influences.

**2. False Influences.**

- **Narratives.** Everyone wants happiness but its pursuit is built on false narratives: Happiness comes through money, sex and power; through acquiring expensive luxuries; through looking out for 'No. 1'. False narratives can be about ourselves: 'I am not good enough'; 'I need to earn approval'.
- **Habits.** Eating well/badly; drinking coffee; checking the 'phone ..... Habits form us, but we rarely stop to think what they really are: mostly they are unintentional.
- **Relationships.** In the Office, at home, you probably look, talk and vote like the people around you: peer pressure is a brutally strong force which we don't recognise when we are in the middle of it.
- **The Environment.** Our location, where we live or work influences us: the internet shapes us.
- **Experiences.** Divorce, childbirth, going bankrupt, being bullied: these things all shape us powerfully.

**3. Intentional Spiritual Formation. Partnering with God in a process that will change us.**

- **Take on new Narratives.** Come every Sunday to learn new narratives and new realities about ourselves from the Sermon on the Mount, from sermons, from regular Bible reading, from podcasts.
- **Adopt new Habits.** Choose to break away from bad habits and practise new ones. Engage with the 'Soul Training Exercises': Spiritual disciplines are the key to transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit
- **Commit to Community.** Covenantal community is the crucible for transformation. In most relationships we self-select by preference; Church is so profoundly diverse we are bound to be exposed to 'difference' and we begin to discover who we really are and what needs changing! Small groups are places of both challenge and encouragement, where we can share ourselves and our vulnerabilities. Ask to join one!
- **Become Friends with the Holy Spirit.** Learn to live in the here-and-now Kingdom of God. Transformation is about 'Spirit-dependent effort' and every day we begin anew. The past is written in stone and cannot be changed but the future is like wet cement, pliable, smooth and ready to be moulded by what we do. No-one is past redemption nor too old to change their minds, hearts and behaviour.
- **Transformation takes time.** We are all formed on the anvil of life's experiences and the tough things over which we have no control are often the experiences God uses to shape us for His glory: miscarriage, the death of a father when aged 18, infertility, death of a son, a transgender child, cancer diagnoses .....

**Soul Training Exercise. Write a letter to God and tell Him what you want to be like in the future: a letter about your inner self, your character, your heart, your mind and soul, and how you would like to be different in the future from how you are today. What did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise? If you feel comfortable, share your letter next week.** Questions can be found throughout Chapter 1 and on pages 223 – 225 of the book: 'The Good and Beautiful Life' by James Bryan Smith. Available on Amazon or from St Paul's Church. Tel: 01306 743378