

YOU ARE WHAT YOU LOVE

THE SPIRITUAL POWER OF HABIT

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DISCUSSION GUIDE PREPARED BY
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CHAPTER I

You Are What You Love

What to Look For

1. What does it mean to worship someone or something?
What's love got to do with it?
2. What exactly is Paul praying for in Philippians 1:9–11?
3. How do human beings become different people over time?

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you define “thinking-thingism” (p. 4)? How does this match or differ from how you have experienced discipleship?
2. “It’s not that I know in order to love, but rather: I love in order to know” (p. 7). Give an example of someone or something that we “love in order to know.”
3. For Smith, to be human is to be “on the move, pursuing something” (p. 8). When we feel aimless and lacking direction in life, are we less than fully alive? Or are we experiencing misdirected desire toward something else?

Accompanying this discussion guide are a series of videos featuring the author of *You Are What You Love*, James K. A. Smith. You can find these videos on the discussion guide page at www.JamesKASmith.com or at [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com).

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Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

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4. Smith gives examples of what he calls “second-nature default orientation” (p. 19). Can you give examples of other things you do without thinking? Has anyone ever marveled at a second-nature skill you have and asked you to explain how you do it?

5. Smith says our desires are “caught more than they are taught” (p. 22). Think of a good teacher, coach, music instructor, or parent. How was this true of them as a teacher and you as a learner?

6. David Foster Wallace’s commencement address touches on deep theological themes, although Wallace was not religious (pp. 23–24). How does Wallace’s discussion of desire and worship resonate with a wide audience? What can we learn about discussing human desire and worship with people who are not religious?

Closing Application

Worship, according to Smith, is “*counterformation* to those rival liturgies we are often immersed in” (p. 25). Whether we tend to think of worship as routine and dull or as stimulating and inspiring, how does Smith’s understanding change our view of worship? Can you think of a call to worship or an introduction to a song that would reflect what Smith suggests is at stake in worship?

CHAPTER 2

You Might Not Love What You Think

What to Look For

1. Think about your last trip to the mall. What did you do there? What did you buy? How were people around you spending their time or money?

Questions for Discussion

1. Would you open the door to the Room in the scene from *Stalker* (p. 28)? Why might you hesitate?

2. How would our culture say Lester “found himself” in *American Beauty* (p. 32)? How did he actually lose himself?

3. What is the best way to unlearn a harmful stereotype? What does this tell us about how we learn stereotypes (p. 37)?

4. Smith argues that the point of apocalyptic books like Daniel and Revelation is not predicting the future but “unveiling the realities around us for what they really are” (p. 39). How does this change how we read these books?

5. Shopping malls hold interest for anyone who studies human behavior (see box on p. 41). If you weren’t religious, what would interest you about the mall as a “ceremonial center”?

6. Consider other cultural institutions in the same way Smith treats the mall. How might you look anew at the stadium? the university? the political campaign? social media?

Closing Application

Studies show that some brands can inspire worship-like devotion (see box on p. 52). When does brand loyalty turn into worship? What brands do you have religious devotion to in your life? How should you reconsider your relation to these things?

CHAPTER 3

The Spirit Meets You Where You Are

What to Look For

1. What is the most successful diet, exercise routine, or other lifestyle change that you've put into practice? What did it take to succeed, or why did it fail?
2. Watch "The Backwards Brain Bicycle" at <https://youtu.be/MFzDaBzBlL0>. Consider how this might relate to Smith's discussion of deep habits.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of a food you eat regularly that you used to dislike? How did you learn to love it? How long did it take (p. 59)?
2. Smith lists two things that are required for new disciplines to take hold: a community and a commitment to practices we might not initially enjoy. Can you think of a change in your life that required these two things (p. 62)?
3. How long do you think it would take you to learn to ride the bicycle in "The Backwards Brain Bicycle" (see box on p. 64)? How is following Jesus like learning to ride a new, very different, bike?

4. Smith compares sanctification to participating in Weight Watchers, saying it “requires submitting ourselves to disciplines and regimens that reach down into our deepest habits” (p. 65). How can we embrace Smith’s vision for sanctification without making discipleship seem merely obligatory? How do we capture both the discipline and the joy of growing in faith?

5. On page 67, Michael Horton describes what he calls “the ordinary means of God’s grace.” How can we notice and celebrate these better in our churches?

6. Some Christians experience repetition in worship as “insincere and inauthentic” (p. 80). What more positive view of repetition does Smith offer? How could this be practiced in your church?

Closing Application

Reflect on agency and action in the church’s worship where you attend (p. 73). What is understood to be the action of God in your church’s worship? How does God interact with the congregation? How could your church better emphasize the primacy of God’s action in your worship?

CHAPTER 4

What Story Are You In?

What to Look For

1. If you could diagram the plotline, or narrative arc, of your church’s worship service, what story would it be telling (p. 96)?
2. Describe worship-related reasons people give for leaving a church? Are these good reasons?
3. Do we usually feel a *need* to confess sin? Do we *want* to?

Questions for Discussion

1. For Smith, the Bible portrays not just a “spiritual” heaven but “a heavenly order that becomes a reality on earth” (p. 86). Does this change how we think about heaven? Does this change how we hear the story of Scripture? If so, how?
2. How does worship answer the question of what we’re “here for” (p. 88)? Is this a question we as worshipers naturally bring to worship, or does worship lead us to ask it?
3. Smith imagines the misuse of a flute (pp. 89–90). Can you think of a time you tried, unsuccessfully, to repurpose an object? Why didn’t it work? What does that teach us about purpose, design, and *telos*?

4. Take the following quotation from *The Little Prince* and adapt it for a church: “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea” (p. 91). Start with “If you want to build a church . . .” How would you finish the sentence?

5. Literature critic James Wood explains that “fiction does not ask readers to *believe* things, . . . but to *imagine* them” (p. 93). How is this true of worship? How is this not true of worship?

6. Smith narrates the sequence of historic Christian worship (p. 96). How is this sequence represented in your church’s worship? Do you experience your church’s worship as a story?

Closing Application

What does Smith say the church has to offer the “spiritual-but-not-religious crowd” (p. 101)? How can the church convey historical rootedness without sounding old-fashioned and out of touch?

CHAPTER 5

Guard Your Heart

What to Look For

1. What does your baptism mean to you?
2. How are weddings like worship services? What elements do weddings typically lack?
3. Name some household routines you do on a daily or weekly basis that shape and form you more than you might realize.

Questions for Discussion

1. Smith notes that John’s claim is “not just that we love *God* because he first loved us, but that we *love* because he first loved us” (p. 111). What is the significance of this difference in emphasis?
2. Discuss one aspect of baptism that you haven’t thought about before (pp. 114–18). How does this change your view of baptism?
3. Is it surprising to think of weddings as “liturgies of narcissism” (p. 121)? Can you think of a recent example of a wedding you went to that had these characteristics? Or one that didn’t?

4. Smith describes how marriage can be a mission to “bear witness” to the kingdom (p. 124). Describe a marriage or a friendship you know of that fits this description.

5. What is a “household liturgical audit” (p. 128)? What can it teach us? If you started one in your household, what would it look like?

6. How do we see the household as a potential sacred space while maintaining a sense of “sending” (p. 130)? How does one lead to the other?

Closing Application

Smith says that mealtime rituals can be formative in a household (p. 132). How can we intentionally foster meaningful mealtime conversations?

CHAPTER 6

Teach Your Children Well

What to Look For

1. Consider some things you learned at school that were not explicitly taught. How did you learn them?

Questions for Discussion

1. Smith argues that all education is formation (pp. 139, 159). How would you answer a skeptic who says that nonreligious education can be morally neutral?
2. How do the tapestries at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels connect church history to a contemporary context (see box on p. 140)? Discuss how your church could illustrate connections between history and the present.
3. Smith says that innovation in worship is often motivated by fear (p. 144). What fears lead to careless innovation? What fears cause us to resist healthy innovation?
4. Which of the four guidelines Smith lays out for formative youth ministry would be most daunting for your church (pp. 152–53)? Which would be most promising? How could you put these into practice?

5. Why are supportive adults so important to the formation of teens (see box on p. 154)? How can churches encourage relationships between teens and adults?

6. Smith lists four communal practices for people who form others, such as educators (pp. 162–63). In what other places or communities outside of worship could we implement these practices?

Closing Application

Smith describes how providing coffee to students became a contemplative practice (p. 163). Is there a simple ritual you could implement in your weekly routine that might become an act of transformative hospitality?

CHAPTER 7

You Make What You Want

What to Look For

1. What does it mean to you to know that you are made in the image of God?
2. How does worship carry over into your work?

Questions for Discussion

1. Our mission, or calling, can be summarized in three words: image, unfold, occupy (pp. 172–74). Which sounds most familiar to you, and which is most surprising to consider as a calling?
2. Why does Patrick Lynch say that bricks smelled like “love and hope” to him and his brother (see box on p. 175)? What does this suggest about different types of work?
3. How is living out the biblical story like writing a sequel to *Star Wars* (pp. 176–77)? How did the story George Lucas carried around in his unconscious shape his creative work? How might the biblical story shape your work in underlying ways?

4. Smith calls evangelicalism “a hotbed of almost unfettered religious innovation” and says that innovation can be at odds with faithfully being the church (p. 178). What is the tension between the two? How and when is this tension manifested?

5. Smith imagines alien anthropologists observing us hunched over our smartphones at the breakfast table (p. 185). What would someone unfamiliar with smartphones assume about these devices based on watching us use them?

6. Smith says, “God doesn’t simply propel us; he also *attracts* us” (p. 186). Can you think of a story from Scripture or from your life that illustrates this?

Closing Application

What does it mean to ask God to “hallow then our purpose” (see box on p. 187)? What does this mean for you in your home life, your work life, and your church life? What does it mean for your calling from God?