

# Living the **Good** Life

## Session 2: Creatures of Habit

### Opening Prayer

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Gracious God,  
Everything that you created is good,  
including us.

Be patient with us when we forget  
that we were created in your image  
and are led astray.

Help us to become the people  
you intended for us to be:  
confident in your love,  
generous with others,  
and grateful for all you have given us.

We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

### Old Habits Die Hard

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*Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.*

- We all want to be good people, but good intentions are not enough. It all comes down to how we act. Have you ever heard a news story about someone who did some terrible thing and asked yourself, “How could a person do something like that?”
- People don’t just start doing terrible things all of a sudden. They gradually grow into them over an extended period of time. Life is full of small decisions—and each one changes you a little—for better or worse. These decisions add up and shape your character.
- Consider the acclaimed, popular, and very disturbing cable series *Breaking Bad* that ran from 2008 to 2013. It begins with a mild-mannered and broke chemistry teacher, Walter White, who discovers he has inoperable lung cancer. He decides to start making crystal meth to provide for his family. He feels forced into this corner.
- But the series develops into something very different, following the decisions he makes from there. It becomes about what makes a person “bad.” Is it the actions he takes? His motivation? His decision to be a bad person?
- Walt starts as a good man, who makes bad decisions one-by-one, and we see them change him, little by little until, as the NY Times puts it, Walt becomes a person who “deliberately abandons the light for the darkness.”
- A person’s moral behavior rarely has dramatic swings, positive or negative. Instead, one’s character is shaped gradually, step by step, by the small actions we take. We build habits—good or bad—that train us to act a certain way in the future. Sean Covey puts it this way: “We become what we repeatedly do.”

## Healthy Growth

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- Think of your character as a fruit tree in need of a good arborist. Ideally, the tree is beautifully shaped with even spacing that lets in light and produces good fruit. But this doesn't just happen. The tree may initially need a stake to grow straight. It needs regular thinning, pruning, and training. It needs to be fertilized and watered. With care, little by little, it grows into a healthy, beautiful tree.
- One way to improve ourselves is to be attentive to how our actions are changing us. For example, you may find that hanging out with certain friends brings out the best in you, while being with others brings out your bad side (be it jealousy, competitiveness, or negativity).
- We can also develop our character by building and reinforcing positive qualities and habits—called *virtues*—and resisting negative ones—called *vices* (also known as the “capital” or “deadly” sins). While this terminology may seem quaint or old-fashioned today, let's move beyond the language to rediscover the helpful and practical concepts behind them.
- As we continually choose virtues, they become easier to use, and we become better prepared for tougher situations. Think of them as key life skills or tools in your *Good Life* toolbox.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Have you ever noticed a change over time—good or bad—in the way a friend or family member has chosen to live? What changed in them?
- ② Are your “branches” growing straight? What in your life may need to be pruned or corrected? Where do you need support or nourishment? Is what you're doing bearing good fruit?

## Embracing Virtues

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*Read aloud the passage **Philippians 4:4-9** from a Bible, then continue with the following talking points.*

- In this reading, St. Paul urges us to embrace virtues. “Think about these things,” he writes. Catholicism has a deep tradition of virtues, which give us a helpful framework to evaluate our lives and commit ourselves to improve in specific ways.
- There are various, interrelated lists of virtues within the Catholic tradition and beyond. There are four “cardinal” virtues and three “theological” virtues. There are also seven “heavenly” virtues and seven corresponding sins or vices (see the separate handout for more details). Virtues are generally a healthy balance between two extremes.
- In the next section, we highlight some specific virtues and give examples for what they might mean for us today. There are many books and online resources that can help you learn more about virtues and give you practical tips for embracing them.

## Examples of Virtues

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- Take the virtue of **temperance**, which is all about self-control and living within healthy limits—for our sake and the sake of others. Controlling our short-term desires for a greater good, whether it's about eating right, keeping our spending under control, taking shorter showers during a drought, or being able to turn technology off so you can be truly present with others. Temperance is between the extreme of overindulgence on one side, and an inability to appreciate and enjoy the gifts God gave us on the other.
- **Diligence** is about persistence, effort, and following through on what you know you should do. Maybe you need to get your act together to pursue something important: a job, a relationship, some other opportunity. Maybe you need to give up some television or Netflix or social media because it's sucking your time and energy away. Maybe you need to build breaks into your work time (e.g. weekends or vacations) so you can be productive and effective during hours you do work. Extremes on either side of diligence would show themselves as workaholism or laziness.
- **Chastity** is about living with integrity and authenticity, and—yes—keeping our passions aligned with deep love. Maybe you're staying in a relationship for the wrong reasons. Or maybe you have a pornography addiction, which pulls you away from other relationships and negatively affects how you see and treat others. This virtue seeks to match the physical expression of love with its deeper meaning. At one extreme, we may disconnect sex from love and relationship altogether and on the other we can repress our sexuality in an unhealthy way.
- **Humility** involves seeing our appropriate place in the world so that we can treat others with respect and love. It falls between one extreme of pride and self-importance, and the other extreme of low self-esteem and feeling inferior.
- **Prudence** involves the ability to make intentional, careful, thoughtful, loving decisions. It is a central virtue that guides the others. Learning and practicing Christian discernment is an essential skill found with this virtue. Extremes on either side would be recklessness or paralysis that comes with over-analyzing a situation.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Which of these virtues comes easily to you? Give an example of how you have put one of them into practice.
- ② Which of these virtues do you most need to work on? Why? Can you commit to doing so?
- ③ Who do you know who lives out one or more of these virtues in a noticeable way? In what ways is it obvious?
- ④ What other virtues beyond this list (whether “official” or not) do you feel you need to focus on to become a better person?

## Closing Prayer

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Creator God,  
    You made us in your own image  
    so we can love like you.  
You created us with a need to  
    stay connected to you,  
    the people in our lives,  
    the world around us,  
    and ourselves.

Help us to follow the example of your Son:  
    to have fun,  
    to enjoy life,  
    to always love,  
    to live fully.

We pray this all in Jesus name.

Amen.

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