THE DAILY BREAD

The Creed of the Apostles



Building Virtue

A Practical Rule of Life

A FORMATION BOOK BY

Kendall Peterson

The Everyday Apostle

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INTRODUCTION

The Man You Could Become

Every man carries within him a picture, however faint, of the man he could be: steadier than he is, braver, more disciplined, more generous, less ruled by his moods and appetites, more reliably good. The gap between that pictured man and the actual one is the space in which the whole work of this book takes place. For the striking truth, often forgotten, is that a man is not simply stuck with the character he happens to have. Character can be built. The qualities a man admires and lacks, the virtues, are not fixed endowments handed out at birth but capacities that can be deliberately developed, the way strength is built in a muscle, by the right exercise repeated over time.

This book is a practical guide to that building. It takes for granted that virtue matters, that a man's character is the most important thing about him and the thing most worth working on, and it presses on to the question men rarely get a clear answer to: how, concretely, does a man actually become more virtuous? Not by wishing, not by admiring virtue in others, not by sporadic bursts of effort that fade in a week, but by understanding how virtue is really formed and then building the specific structure that forms it, which the Christian tradition calls a rule of life. The aim is to put in a man's hands the actual tools for becoming, over time, the man he glimpses he could be.

Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way. — 1 Timothy 4:7-8

We will begin with what virtue actually is and why it must be built rather than merely wished for. We will see how virtue is formed, through repeated action that hardens into habit. We will survey the cardinal virtues that structure a good character and the theological virtues that crown it, so a man knows what he is building. We will then turn to the practical heart of the book: how to construct a rule of life, a personal structure of habits and practices that reliably forms virtue, and how to keep it sustainable rather than crushing. And we will see how the virtuous man is finally the man equipped for mission, because character is the platform on which every other good work stands.

CHAPTER ONE

Character Is Built, Not Born

What Virtue Really Is

The modern world tends to think of character as something a man simply has or lacks, a matter of personality, temperament, or luck. Some men are just patient, we say, or just brave, or just disciplined, as though these were fixed traits like height or eye color. The classical and Christian understanding is radically different and far more hopeful: virtue is not a fixed endowment but a developed capacity, built up in a man by his own repeated choices, and therefore available, in principle, to any man willing to do the building.

Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge. — 2 Peter 1:5

Virtue Is a Firm Disposition

A virtue, in the classic definition, is a firm and habitual disposition to do the good. Each of those words matters. It is a disposition, an inner readiness, not merely an occasional act; a man does not possess the virtue of courage because he once did a brave thing, but because bravery has become his settled way of meeting fear. It is habitual, worn into him by repetition until it operates reliably and almost automatically, the way a skilled craftsman's hands do the right thing without his having to think it through. And it is firm, stable under pressure, not a fair-weather tendency that collapses the moment it is tested. A virtue, in short, is a reliable excellence of character that has become part of who a man is, so that the good action flows from him readily, consistently, and even with a kind of ease, because he has made himself into the sort of man who does it.

Why This Is Good News

The implication of this understanding is one of the most hopeful truths a man can grasp: because virtue is built rather than born, no man is condemned to the character he currently has. The impatient man is not doomed to a lifetime of impatience; he can build patience. The cowardly man can build courage; the self-indulgent man can build self-control; the man ruled by his anger can build the steadiness that governs it. None of this is quick or easy, but all of it is possible, because character is not fate. This cuts directly against the resigned fatalism that keeps many men stuck, the that's just how I am that treats a vice as an unchangeable feature of the self. It is not. It is a disposition that was built, mostly unconsciously, by years of repeated choices, and it can be rebuilt, deliberately, by new ones. A man is, to a remarkable degree, the author of his own character, and the first step toward building virtue is believing that the building is actually possible.

It is worth naming how quietly the opposite belief operates, because few men would state it outright and most men live by it anyway. The resigned shrug, the half-joke about being too old to change, the private conviction that one's temper or one's weakness is simply a

fixed feature of the self, all of these are the fatalism at work, and it is self-fulfilling: a man who believes he cannot change will not undertake the work that changes him, and so his belief is confirmed. The first battle, then, is not against any particular vice but against the fatalism itself, and it is won by a single decision to act as though change were possible, which it is. A man who simply begins, who does one virtuous act against the grain of his settled character, has already disproved the lie that he cannot, and has taken the first real step out of the resignation that kept him stuck.

Virtue and Grace Together

For the Christian, there is a further and crucial dimension: the building of virtue is not a matter of unaided human effort but of human effort cooperating with the grace of God. There are virtues a man builds largely through his own repeated action, the natural or human virtues, and these are real and valuable; but there are also virtues that are gifts, infused by God, which no amount of effort could produce on its own, and even the natural virtues are perfected and elevated by grace. This means the work of building virtue is never a grim program of self-improvement by willpower alone, in which a man white-knuckles his way to goodness. It is a cooperation: a man does his part, the repeated effort, the training, the practice, and God does his, supplying the grace that heals the wounded will, strengthens the weak effort, and raises natural virtue into something capable of eternal life. The man building virtue works, therefore, as one who both strives and prays, who trains hard and relies entirely on grace, and who knows that his effort matters and that his effort alone would never be enough.

CHAPTER TWO

How Virtue Is Formed

The Power of Repeated Action

If virtue is a habit built by repetition, then the central practical question is how, exactly, repetition builds it, because understanding the mechanism lets a man work with it rather than against it. The answer is both simple and demanding: a man becomes virtuous by doing virtuous acts, over and over, until the doing wears a groove in him and becomes his second nature. There is no other way, no shortcut around the repetition, and the man who grasps this stops waiting to feel virtuous and starts doing the acts that will, in time, make him so.

We know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. — Romans 5:3-4

We Become What We Repeatedly Do

The ancient insight, confirmed by all experience, is that men become what they repeatedly do: we become just by doing just acts, brave by doing brave acts, temperate by doing temperate acts. Virtue is learned the way any skill is learned, by practice. A man does not become a skilled carpenter by admiring carpentry or intending to be good at it, but by cutting and joining wood, badly at first and then better, until skill is built into his hands. Character is formed the same way. The brave act done before bravery is a settled habit is done with difficulty, against fear, by sheer effort of will; but each such act makes the next one easier, until the man has become brave and the brave act flows from him naturally. This is enormously practical, because it tells a man exactly what to do: not wait to become patient before acting patiently, but act patiently now, again and again, trusting that the repeated action is building the very patience he lacks.

The Groove Deepens Both Ways

The same mechanism that builds virtue builds vice, and seeing this doubles a man's motivation to choose his repeated actions well. Every act a man performs inclines him a little more toward performing it again, carving the groove deeper, so that just as repeated good acts build virtue, repeated bad acts build vice, each indulgence making the next easier and the resistance weaker. The man who repeatedly gives in to anger is not merely committing separate acts of anger; he is building the vice of wrath into his character, making himself into an angry man. The man who repeatedly indulges his appetites is building the vice of intemperance, making restraint harder each time. This is sobering, but it is also clarifying, because it reveals that there are no neutral acts in the formation of character: every choice is casting a vote for the kind of man one is becoming, deepening either the groove of virtue or the groove of vice. A man is always in training, for better or worse, and the only question is which habits he is building.

Begin Before You Feel Ready

The most liberating consequence of understanding how virtue is formed is that a man need not wait to feel virtuous, or even to want to be, before he begins acting virtuously, because it is precisely the acting that produces the feeling and the character in time. Many men stall forever waiting for an inner change that will make virtue easy before they will attempt it, but the order runs the other way: the action comes first, difficult and against the grain, and the transformed character follows from the repeated action. A man who waits until he feels patient to act patiently will wait forever; a man who acts patiently while still feeling impatient is building the patience that will eventually make the feeling match. This is why the counsel of the tradition is always to act, to do the virtuous thing

now, in this situation, however little one feels like it, trusting the slow chemistry of repeated action to do its work. Feelings follow actions far more reliably than actions follow feelings, and the man who grasps this holds the key to actually changing, because he stops waiting to become good and starts doing the good that makes him so.

This reverses the instinct most men bring to self-improvement, which is to try first to change how they feel, to work up motivation, to generate an inner enthusiasm that will then overflow into action. But motivation is notoriously unreliable and tends to arrive, when it arrives at all, after a man has already begun, not before. The craftsman does not wait to feel like practicing before he practices; he practices on schedule, and the satisfaction follows the work. Virtue is built the same way, by men who have learned to act independent of their feelings, doing the good thing on the days they feel like it and equally on the days they do not, and discovering that the character they wanted was being formed all along, in the unglamorous acts performed without any particular enthusiasm at all.

CHAPTER THREE

The Framework of a Good Character

The Virtues Worth Building

A man setting out to build virtue needs to know what he is building, and the Christian tradition offers a well-tested map of the virtues that together form a complete and excellent character. These are not an arbitrary list but a coherent structure, with four cardinal virtues on which the natural moral life hinges and three theological virtues, gifts of grace, that orient a man to God himself. Knowing this framework keeps a man from lopsided effort and gives his building a plan.

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely… think about these things. — Philippians 4:8

The Four Hinges

The cardinal virtues are called cardinal from the word for a hinge, because the whole moral life turns on them, and every other natural virtue gathers around one of these four. Prudence is practical wisdom, the virtue that sees rightly what should be done in a given situation and how; it directs all the others, for without it courage becomes recklessness and generosity becomes folly. Justice is the steady will to give each person his due, to God and to neighbor, the virtue of right dealing and fair treatment. Fortitude is courage,

the strength to pursue the good in the face of fear, difficulty, and suffering, the virtue that holds firm under pressure and endures what must be endured. Temperance is self-mastery, the governing of one's appetites and desires so that they serve rather than rule, the virtue that keeps pleasure in its proper place. Together these four structure a good natural character: a man who sees rightly, deals justly, stands firm, and governs himself is a man of solid virtue, and almost every particular good quality a man might want is a form or offshoot of one of these four.

The Three That Reach to God

Above the cardinal virtues stand the three theological virtues, so called because they have God himself as their direct object and because they are infused by grace rather than built by effort alone. Faith is the virtue by which a man believes God and all that God has revealed, trusting the divine word above his own understanding. Hope is the virtue by which he desires and confidently awaits the eternal life and the help God has promised, neither despairing nor presuming. Charity, the greatest of the three, is the virtue by which he loves God above all things and his neighbor as himself for God's sake, and it is the form and crown of all the virtues, for a courage or justice not animated by love falls short of its full stature. These three cannot be manufactured by human repetition the way the natural virtues are built; they are gifts, poured in by God. But a man cooperates with them, exercises them, and asks for their increase, and a character structured by the four cardinal virtues and crowned by these three is a character complete, reaching from the right governance of a man's appetites all the way up to the love of God.

Building Where You Are Weak

Knowing the framework lets a man build intelligently rather than at random, and the intelligent approach is to work especially where he is weakest, strengthening the particular virtues his character most lacks. Just as a man training his body gives extra attention to his weak points rather than only exercising what is already strong, a man building his character looks honestly at which virtues are thin in him, the courage he lacks, the self-control he has never developed, the justice he is careless about, and directs his deliberate effort there. This requires the honest self-knowledge of knowing one's own weaknesses, and it requires resisting the temptation to practice only the virtues that come easily while neglecting the hard ones. A naturally gentle man may need to build courage; a naturally bold man may need to build the temperance and justice that his boldness runs over. The goal is a complete and balanced character, strong in all the virtues, and a man approaches it by honestly identifying his weak points and building there, patiently, the specific strengths his character most needs.

CHAPTER FOUR

What a Rule of Life Is

Structure That Forms the Soul

Here we reach the practical heart of building virtue, and it rests on a principle a man already knows from every other serious endeavor: that reliable growth requires structure, not just good intentions. No man gets physically fit by vaguely intending to exercise when he feels like it; he builds a routine, a structure that carries him past the days he does not feel like it. The spiritual and moral life is no different, and the structure that forms virtue over time has an ancient name in the Christian tradition. It is called a rule of life.

Let all things be done decently and in order. — 1 Corinthians 14:40

A Rule Is a Trellis

A rule of life is simply a deliberate, personal plan of the regular practices and habits by which a man intends to grow, a settled structure he commits to rather than leaving his growth to the mercy of mood and circumstance. The word rule here does not mean a harsh set of prohibitions but comes from a word meaning a trellis, the frame on which a growing vine is supported and trained upward. That image captures exactly what a rule of life is for: it is the supporting structure on which a man's character grows, holding him up, keeping him oriented toward the light, training his growth in the right direction. Left without a trellis, a vine sprawls on the ground and bears little; supported by one, it climbs and flourishes. A man without a rule of life grows haphazardly if at all, at the mercy of whatever each day happens to bring; a man with a rule has a structure that reliably forms him, day after day, whether or not he feels inspired, and that is precisely its value.

Why Structure Beats Willpower

The deep reason a rule of life works is that it replaces the exhausting and unreliable mechanism of willpower with the sustainable mechanism of habit, deciding once what would otherwise have to be decided, and lost, a hundred times. A man relying on willpower faces the same decision every single day, whether to pray, whether to exercise self-control, whether to do the hard good thing, and willpower is a limited and fluctuating resource that fails exactly when he is tired, stressed, or discouraged, which is often. A man with a rule of life has made the decision once, in a clear-headed moment, and built it into the structure of his days, so that the practice happens by habit and does not have to be re-won by willpower each time. This is why structure beats willpower decisively over

the long run: not because the man with a rule has more willpower, but because he has arranged his life so that he needs less of it, having converted his good intentions into standing habits that carry him through the days when willpower alone would have failed.

Personal, Not Borrowed

A rule of life must be a man's own, fitted to his actual circumstances, temperament, and stage of life, not a borrowed program copied from someone whose situation is nothing like his. The monk's horarium, the saint's regimen, another man's impressive routine, these may inspire, but they cannot simply be transplanted into a life with a job, a family, and a particular set of duties and weaknesses. The practices that will actually form a given man are the ones he can actually sustain within his real life, and so a rule of life is always personal: built by this man, for his circumstances, addressing his specific weaknesses, pursuing the virtues he specifically needs, at a level he can specifically maintain. This is not a lowering of the ideal but the only way the ideal gets realized, because a borrowed rule too grand for a man's life is abandoned in a month, while a modest rule fitted to his actual circumstances is kept for years and slowly remakes him. The best rule of life is not the most impressive one but the one a particular man will actually live, and building it well means fitting it honestly to the life he actually has.

None of this means a man sets his sights low in what he hopes to become; the ideal remains sanctity, nothing less. It means only that he is realistic about the path, recognizing that the summit is reached by steps a man can actually take from where he presently stands. A rule fitted to a man's real life is not a compromise with mediocrity but the shrewd strategy of someone who intends to arrive, who would rather climb slowly and keep climbing than make a dramatic lunge and fall back exhausted. The man who honestly fits his rule to his circumstances is not asking less of himself in the end; he is arranging to ask it sustainably, over the decades it actually takes, which is the only way the great thing ever gets built.

CHAPTER FIVE

Building Your Rule

The Practical Construction

With the principle understood, we come to the actual construction: how a man sits down and builds a rule of life he can live. This is concrete, hands-on work, and it is worth doing deliberately rather than drifting into a vague set of good intentions. A well-built rule covers the main areas of a man's life with God and others, sets practices at a level he can

sustain, and is written down specifically enough to be actually followed. Here is how to build one.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough to complete it? — Luke 14:28

Cover the Main Areas

A good rule of life touches the several dimensions of a man's life rather than fixating on only one, so that his growth is balanced. A useful way to structure it is around a handful of areas. There is prayer, the foundation of all the rest: what will be his daily commitment, his weekly worship, his regular use of the sacraments. There is the moral and ascetical life: what disciplines of self-denial and self-control he will practice, what particular vices he is fighting and virtues he is building. There is his life with others: his duties to his family, his generosity, his service, the relationships he is responsible for. There is the care of his mind and body: his reading and formation, his physical health, his use of time and attention. And there is his work, offered to God and done with integrity. A man need not make his rule elaborate in every area, but a rule that covers these dimensions, even simply, forms a whole man, while a rule obsessed with one area while neglecting the rest produces a lopsided soul.

Set the Bar Where You Can Clear It

The single most important practical principle in building a rule is to set each commitment at a level a man can actually sustain, erring toward modesty rather than ambition, because a rule kept is worth infinitely more than a rule abandoned. The characteristic mistake, made by nearly everyone in a burst of initial fervor, is to build a rule far too demanding, an hour of prayer, severe fasts, a dozen new practices all at once, which collapses within weeks and leaves the man worse off than before, discouraged and convinced that he cannot change. The wiser path is to start small and secure, with commitments so modest that a man can keep them even on his hardest days, and to build up only after the foundation is solid. Ten faithful minutes of daily prayer, kept for a year, forms a man far more than an hour attempted and abandoned in February. The question to ask of each commitment is not is this impressive but can I actually sustain this, even when I am tired, busy, and uninspired, and a man should set the bar deliberately low enough that the honest answer is yes.

A good instinct is to build the rule at the level of a bad week, not a good one. Men naturally design their routines imagining their best days, the mornings with time to spare and energy to burn, and then feel like failures on the ordinary days when life crowds in. A rule set at the level of a hard week, the week with the sick child, the work crisis, the travel

and the exhaustion, is a rule that survives, because it was built to be kept exactly when keeping it is difficult. On the good days a man can always do more than his rule requires, and should; the rule is the floor, not the ceiling. But the floor must be low enough that a man never falls through it, because the unbroken continuity of a modest practice is worth more than the occasional heroics that a demanding rule produces between its long collapses.

Write It Down and Make It Specific

A rule of life must be written down and made specific, because a rule that lives only as a vague intention in a man's head is not a rule at all but a wish, and wishes do not form character. The act of writing it down forces a man to be concrete, and concreteness is what makes a rule followable. Not I will pray more but I will pray for ten minutes each morning after I make my coffee. Not I will be more disciplined but I will not look at my phone before my morning prayer, and I will go to Confession on the first Saturday of each month. Not I will serve my family better but I will put my phone away from dinner until the children are in bed. The specificity does several things at once: it makes the commitment clear enough to actually do, it makes success or failure visible so a man knows how he is doing, and it removes the daily negotiation that vagueness invites. A written, specific rule becomes a thing a man can actually live by, review, and adjust, and the simple discipline of writing it down is often the difference between a rule that forms a man and a set of good intentions that never touch his life at all.

CHAPTER SIX

Keeping the Rule Alive

Sustaining Growth Over Time

A rule of life is built once but lived over years, and the challenge shifts from construction to perseverance, from writing the rule to keeping it through the long seasons when its newness has worn off and its practice has become simply part of the furniture of life. Many a man builds a good rule and then watches it quietly erode, not through any decision to abandon it but through drift, discouragement, and the failure to maintain it. Keeping a rule alive over time is its own skill, and it is worth learning.

Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. — Galatians 6:9

Expect to Fail and Begin Again

The first thing to settle, before it happens, is that a man will fail to keep his rule perfectly, will miss his prayer, break his resolutions, and fall short, and that this is not the end of the rule but a normal part of living it. The great danger is not the failure itself but the discouragement that follows, the all-or-nothing reflex that says, I have broken it, so the whole thing is ruined, and abandons the rule entirely after a few lapses. This reflex has destroyed more rules of life than any other single thing, and the antidote is simple: when a man fails, he simply begins again, without drama and without despair, returning to the practice the very next day as though he had not fallen. A rule of life is not a perfect record to be maintained or else discarded; it is a direction to be held over a lifetime, and the only real failure is to stop getting up. The man who misses a hundred days but returns a hundred and one times is keeping his rule; the man who misses three days and quits is not.

Review and Adjust

A rule of life is a living instrument, not a monument, and it should be reviewed periodically and adjusted as a man's circumstances and spiritual condition change. What fit a man's life in one season may not fit the next; a new job, a new child, a move, a change in health may all require the rule to be revised, and there is no virtue in clinging rigidly to a structure that no longer fits the life it was meant to serve. A man does well to review his rule every so often, perhaps on a retreat or at the turn of the year, asking honestly: is this still fitting my life, am I keeping it, is it forming me, should some practice be deepened now that it has become easy, should another be eased because it has become crushing, is there a new weakness I should address or a new virtue I should pursue. This periodic review keeps the rule honest and alive, matched to the man's actual situation rather than frozen at the moment it was written, and it prevents both the staleness of an unexamined routine and the discouragement of a rule that has quietly stopped fitting.

The Company of Others

Finally, a rule of life is kept far more faithfully in the company of others than in isolation, and a man serious about persevering should not try to go it entirely alone. The same truth that holds for every difficult endeavor holds here: we persevere better when others know what we are attempting, can ask us how it is going, and are pursuing the same thing alongside us. A spiritual director or a wise confessor who knows a man's rule can help him keep it, adjust it, and not be discouraged by his failures. A brotherhood of men pursuing their own rules, meeting to encourage one another, lends each man the strength of the others on the days his own flags. Even a single friend who knows the goal and will ask about it provides an accountability that doubles a man's perseverance. The solitary pursuit of virtue is the hardest and least successful; the pursuit undertaken in the

company of others who share it is sustained through seasons that would defeat a man alone. A man building virtue should therefore build it in community, letting the fellowship of others carry him when his own resolve wavers, as his carries them.

This does not require anything elaborate. It can be a single trusted friend who is also trying to live by a rule, and an agreement to ask each other, honestly, how it is going. It can be the regular confessor who comes to know a man's rule and holds him gently to it. It can be a small group of men who meet with no agenda grander than to encourage one another in the ordinary work of becoming better. What matters is not the form but that a man ceases to attempt the whole thing in secret, where discouragement works on him unopposed and no one would ever know if he quietly let the rule lapse. Virtue pursued in the open, witnessed and supported by even one other person who cares whether a man keeps going, is pursued with a strength the solitary man simply does not have.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Virtue for the Mission

Why Character Is the Platform

A man might pursue virtue purely for his own sake, to be a better man, and that would be reason enough. But in the Christian vision the building of virtue is never finally about the man alone; it is the forming of an instrument God intends to use, the construction of the character on which every other good work he will do must stand. The virtuous man is the man equipped for mission, and seeing this gives the whole patient labor of building virtue a purpose larger than self-improvement.

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. — Matthew 5:16

Character Carries the Message

The hard truth of all witness is that a man's character either carries his message or contradicts it, and no eloquence or argument can finally overcome the testimony of a life. A man may speak beautifully about the faith, but if his life is marked by the vices he preaches against, by anger, dishonesty, selfishness, or lack of self-control, his words are emptied of power, and those who know him discount everything he says. Conversely, a man of solid virtue preaches with his whole life before he opens his mouth; his patience, his integrity, his self-mastery, his evident love are themselves an argument for the faith that formed them, and they give his words a weight no technique can supply. This is why

the building of virtue is not a private spiritual hobby but the foundation of a man's entire capacity to witness: people are moved far more by what a man is than by what he says, and a man's character is the platform on which all his words about Christ either stand or fall.

Virtue Makes a Man Useful

Beyond witness, the practical usefulness of a man to God and others is largely a function of his character, because the works God will ask of a man require the virtues to carry them out. The mission needs men who will persevere when it is hard, which requires fortitude; who will deal justly and keep their word, which requires justice; who will govern their appetites rather than being derailed by them, which requires temperance; who will act wisely in complex situations, which requires prudence. A man of thin character, however good his intentions, breaks down under the demands of real service: his courage fails at the test, his self-indulgence compromises him, his imprudence makes a mess of good causes. The man of built virtue, by contrast, can be given weight to carry, because his character can bear it. In this sense building virtue is building capacity, enlarging the amount of good a man is actually able to do, and the more virtue a man has built, the more God can entrust to him and the more he can accomplish for others.

The Saint Is the Fully Built Man

In the end, the goal of building virtue is nothing less than sanctity, and the saint is simply the man in whom the building has been carried through to its completion, the fully formed character wholly given over to God. There is a tendency to think of saints as a special and distant category, but in the light of this book they appear as what they are: ordinary men and women who gave themselves fully to the building of virtue in cooperation with grace, and in whom the work was brought to its full stature. The same construction this book describes, the repeated virtuous action, the rule of life, the patient perseverance, the reliance on grace, is the very path by which every saint became a saint, and it is open to every man. To build virtue seriously is therefore to walk the road to sanctity, which is the road to the full flourishing of the man God created one to be and the full usefulness of that man to God's purposes. The patient, unglamorous work of building virtue, day after day, is how a man becomes both the fully alive person he was made to be and the apostle the world needs, and there is no higher or more worthwhile labor a man can give his life to.

CONCLUSION

Begin Building Today

Return to the man you could become, the steadier, braver, more disciplined, more loving man you glimpse when you are honest about the gap between who you are and who you might be. The whole burden of this book has been that the gap is not fixed, that character is built and not merely born, and that a man who understands how virtue is formed and builds the structure that forms it can, over time, actually close the distance and become that man.

The path is clear, even if it is not easy. Virtue is built by repeated action, the doing of good acts until they become second nature, in cooperation with the grace of God. The character worth building has a shape, the four cardinal virtues and the three theological ones, and a man builds best where he is weakest. And the structure that reliably forms virtue over time is a rule of life, a personal, written, sustainable plan of the practices by which a man intends to grow, kept alive through inevitable failures, periodic adjustment, and the company of others. This is not mysterious. It is a known road, walked by every saint, and open to any man willing to walk it.

So do not merely admire the man you could be; begin building him today. Sit down, look honestly at your character, identify the virtues you most need and the vices you most need to fight, and build yourself a simple rule of life, modest enough to keep and specific enough to follow. Start it tomorrow, keep it through your failures, adjust it as you grow, and pursue it in the company of others who are doing the same. Give yourself to this patient work over years, and trust the slow, reliable chemistry of repeated action and grace to do what it has always done: to form, out of an ordinary man willing to build, the man of solid virtue, the saint in the making, the apostle the world is waiting for. The building is possible, the tools are in your hands, and the only thing left is to begin.

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