

Beauty: Telos and Discipline

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As Christians living in the post-modern West, much is made about protecting the value of objective truth and goodness— and rightly so. We recognize that a society in which “everyone [does] what [is] right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25) is a terrifying prospect, especially when modern technology enables new and powerful forms of wickedness. What receives much less attention is the third of the so-called “transcendentals”: beauty. Most Christians are simply not ready to go to war for the beautiful in the same way they are willing to go to war for the true and the good.

One possible reason for this apathy may be that beauty is remarkably hard to define. We have often heard that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” but is that really all we can say with confidence? What *is* beauty? What is our metric for the beautiful? Many philosophers and theologians have sought to nail down a more conclusive definition, but the problem persists. I have enjoyed thinking deeply about these questions for several years now. Yet the more I do, the more an absolute definition of beauty eludes me. What I do have clarity on is that there are many facets of beauty which can be described, appreciated, and even applied with confidence. This is the first of a four article series which will explore some of those facets before drawing some conclusions at the end. In each, I will lay a theoretical framework before turning to practical applications for our everyday lives.

In this first article we will begin by considering the *telos* of beauty, and how that ought to inform our rhythms of life. It is my conviction that the Christian heart, illuminated by the Holy Spirit and governed by Christ, has an intrinsic (if sometimes fallible) ability to identify and make use of beauty, even without having an exhaustive philosophical account of it. I also propose that the framework of “spiritual discipline” is a useful one to apply to beauty. A spiritual discipline is a means of grace, a habit which draws our hearts regularly to God and promotes our sanctification on this side of eternity. We are all familiar with the benefits of making time for

corporate worship, prayer, the reading of scripture, etc. In a similar manner, the deliberate pursuit of beauty, while not absolutely necessary for the Christian life, is something which can greatly enrich the hearts of those who do it well. For this reason it is something which deserves to be structured into the rhythms of our lives in the same way any other discipline ought to be. In time, the cultivated pursuit of beauty, done correctly, should lead to more well-rounded Christians who know something more of their heavenly Father.

Before we consider the nuts-and-bolts of what that kind of pursuit looks like, we have to lay some necessary groundwork first. Earlier I mentioned that this article series will consider different ways in which beauty can be defined. I will begin by considering how beauty can be defined by its purpose, that is, by its *telos*. Answering this question is integral to approaching beauty effectively; it is only by understanding the end of beauty that we can appreciate why it is worthy of our disciplined pursuit. Quite simply, the *telos* of beauty is to draw our hearts to the ultimate source of beauty in God. In the same way that all truth is derivative from God, and that all goodness is derivative from God, so too is all beauty derivative from God, and points back to Him if viewed properly.

This is no mere philosophical speculation. It guards us against two threats which may lead us to abuse beauty, commandeering it for false uses. First of all, remembering the *telos* of beauty defends against the subjectivism which is prevalent in our modern culture. It anchors beauty firmly in objectivity, making it as objective as God's being itself from where it derives. When we pierce through the fog of preference and cultural conditioning the Christian must come to the conclusion that there is that which is objectively beautiful, and that which is not. The reduction of beauty to subjectivism can get us no further than the reduction of truth or goodness to the same.

Along with the danger of subjectivism we must also remember the danger of making beauty an ideal outside of God to which He must conform to. This is perhaps a more subtle problem, but one which ought not to be overlooked. As the famed apologist and philosopher Cornelius Van Til wrote, "There were no principles of truth, goodness, or beauty that were next to or above [God] according to which he patterned the world."¹ If the *telos* of beauty is God, we must not allow our hearts to be captured by some higher abstract ideal. We can maintain the

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 53.

objectivity of beauty by placing it as a derivative principle from the unchanging nature of God without resorting to idealism.

What is the benefit of understanding these abstract concepts? Critically, they preserve the value of beauty itself. Using its *telos* as a guide, the Christian is enabled to pursue beauty with boldness and joy, knowing that at the end she will not find the vain fashions of man, nor the abstract, impersonal, imaginings of the philosopher, but the Triune God, He who invites the most reverent worship and the sweetest meditation. Once we understand this truth, the pursuit of beauty begins to fit naturally into our framework of spiritual discipline. It is able to take its rightful place alongside other means of grace the Lord has given us as gifts to bring us nearer to Him. We now have a basic theoretical framework to work from. But what does this look like practically? Let us now examine together how to bring the pursuit of beauty into our daily lives.

I was intentional in choosing the word “discipline” to describe the attitude Christians ought to take in their pursuit of beauty. First of all, the word “discipline” suggests intentionality. I would encourage the reader to set aside regular time to consider that which is beautiful; even brief periods can reap valuable benefits. The word “discipline” also reminds us that cultivating beauty in our lives requires effort. We cannot expect our perspective to change immediately, nor to reap the same richness upon beginning the journey of seeking beauty as we will find later in life (a theme I will explore in greater detail below). What the word “discipline” does not suggest is that we need to learn some kind of mystical hidden technique to do these things well. In fact, cliché as it may sound, seeking beauty is very much an issue of *mindset*. The difficulty is being *disciplined* in reframing our minds to seek beauty. The difficulty is learning to find it in the ordinary and the extraordinary, to find it in the rhythms of everyday life and in uniquely cultivated moments. This means that the disciplined pursuit of beauty is immediately accessible. You don’t have to be a master craftsman or a talented photographer. Beauty has been given to humanity as a gift from God, and by training our minds to approach it, all may share in the blessing.

Personally, I try to make time every Thursday on my commute to appreciate a beautiful piece of music, whether it be in the form of a dramatic Bruckner symphony or a thoughtful 90’s

folk song. It inevitably lightens my morning and keeps the concept of beauty on my mind in a world which is not only evil but ugly. The reward has really been more substantial than I would have expected, and in many ways these articles are the fruit of those mornings. We can find the same benefits with the critical appreciation of art, literature, and nature. I would also agree with many in saying that science, rightly viewed, can also bring us into contact with the beautiful, something which has tragically been lost in our modern world. The thoughtful Christian can readily perceive the elegance in astronomy or the intricacy in biology, for instance. By deliberately scheduling these encounters with the beautiful, whether considered individually or together, we can take part in an ancient practice that is both spiritually nourishing and pleasant.

I would like a moment to highlight that last word. The wonderful part about the disciplined pursuit of beauty is that it should be *enjoyable*. While beauty cannot be defined ultimately in terms of our pleasure in it, it is certainly true that the Beautiful, rightly perceived, brings joy to our hearts. It is not taxing for me to find joy in the landscape of my birthplace of central Pennsylvania; the verdant, rolling mountains, stretching well beyond the horizon, are a delight to the eyes. The hard part is not enjoying beauty— it is finding the time to do so. This is one good reason why we should pursue beauty with discipline. It gives an immediate, wholesome satisfaction which is consistently refreshing in a fallen world.

However, at the same time, we must acknowledge that while beauty often brings an inherent and obvious pleasure to those who encounter it, there is also a sense in which deeper appreciation of it requires practice and consistency. Here lies the second reason why it is good to approach with discipline. My friend who has sung in classical choirs for decades gets a great deal more joy out of Bach than I do; he has the knowledge and experience to appreciate Bach's famously genius use of counterpoint, for instance, where I do not. In the classical world, these differences in how people are able to perceive the value of a beautiful thing was explained by the concept of *adaequatio*, or "adequateness." The receiver of something beautiful has to have a certain "adequateness" in order to understand the fullness of it. Here is an example that may be more relatable to most. It is the testimony of almost anyone in a healthy marriage that we find our spouse to be more beautiful² with the passage of time. The reason for this is not because he or she has become more attractive *as such*. It is because we have grown in our familiarity, our

² "Beautiful" in the sense that we have been discussing in this article is just as applicable to men as to women, even though in common parlance wives do not typically refer to their husbands as such.

love, (or to use the language from above), our *adequateness* to perceive what was already there. We have been more conformed to his or her beauty— something which only comes with time. This same principle can be applied to anything beautiful. It is another encouragement to pursue beauty deliberately, because we know that the quality of our harvest will only increase.

We are grateful for the satisfaction that we get in pursuing beauty. Here we are in agreement with many people in our society. We are grateful also that this satisfaction can grow, mature, and deepen over our lives as we deliberately cultivate our tastes to be in alignment with the beautiful. Here we are in agreement with the true humanists (rare as they may be today) who still have some sense of personal virtue. But is this really all there is? Is the end of beauty really found in ourselves, our own pleasure and our own advancement? By no means! The greatest reason why we ought to pursue beauty is because of the God to whom it leads. Here we come back to the idea of beauty's *telos*, and why the pursuit of beauty is a *spiritual* discipline, and not just a personal one. If we believe that all beauty is derivative of God and points to Him, then the seeking of beauty is ultimately for the sake of following it back to its source.

This can be a rather vague idea. In order to clarify, I would like to say first what I do not mean. I have argued that we can only really appreciate beauty when we appreciate its *telos*. Yet there is a subtle way in which we can misapply this principle. It is easy for us to think that this means taking various “lessons” from beautiful things and applying them to God. I am no mathematician, but I am told that those who really understand mathematics are able to find a certain beauty in their work. The faithful student could thus consider the elegance of a certain geometric proof and use it to derive a “lesson” about the beauty in God's orderliness as a Creator, for instance. We could think of other examples in different fields with similar results. The great gothic cathedrals of Europe are known to draw the eyes of a visitor heavenward, an immediate reminder of the transcendence of the God they come to worship. No Christian would contest that these meditations are valuable. But is this ultimately what it means to “follow beauty back to God?” I think this could be an area for valuable discussion, and would be happy to engage with anyone on the question. But my instinct is that viewing beauty *solely* in this manner may be missing the point.

If we simply say that the aforementioned mathematical proof is beautiful *because* it is orderly, that “beauty” refers to its superlative quality of orderliness, then we have made an oversight. In thinking about beauty these ways we have turned it into a catch-all term for

something which communicates another principle well. In this way beauty resists utilitarian definition. Think about it this way. We can imagine in a sense that God *could* have (setting the finer theological issues surrounding the use of that phrase) made a very functional world, which was conducive to human flourishing, and to His glory, without infusing it with beauty at every turn. But that is not the world we live in. Science, if anything, simply teaches us the absurd, over-the-top abundance of beauty in the things which God has made. He made the world this way not *only* so that we could see His orderliness, and His creativity, and His wisdom, but also so that we could see His beauty— and marvel at it, and enjoy it.³ This is what it means to follow the *telos* of beauty: to see the beauty of God in the beauty of what He has made.⁴

What does all this philosophical abstraction mean for our pursuit of beauty in the day-to-day? It means that when I look at a painting by Caspar David Freidrich, it is good to be reminded of the power of God in the sublimity⁵ of a mountain landscape. It is good to be reminded of our dependence on God in the smallness and weakness of man amidst creation. These “lessons” are a healthy and necessary aspect of pursuing beauty in a disciplined manner. But we cannot always stop there, or we will miss out on the fullness which is being offered to us. It is also good to be reminded of the beauty of God in the beauty of the piece— and to not always rush into another lesson to occupy our hearts. Sometimes we need to consciously allow ourselves to *perceive* the beauty in what we are appreciating— whether it be in the loveliness of our wife, or the awe of a thunderstorm rolling onshore across the face of a raging sea— and find *rest* and *satisfaction* in that beauty as our hearts are led gently to the God from whom it comes.

This is our call to pursue something which seems utterly foolish in the eyes of the world. In a culture which is either expressly anti-beautiful⁶ or reduces beauty to some sort of mangled hedonistic subjectivism, set aside time to make deliberate, disciplined efforts to find and to appreciate beauty. Make room for it in your heart and make room for it in your conversation.

³ There is a way to think about beauty in which these aspects of orderliness, creativity, and wisdom, along with things like harmony, skill, insight, etc. can be seen as constituent parts of beauty. That which is beautiful will contain these elements. In this sense, it is appropriate to be drawn to them when considering the beautiful. The danger is when one “misses the forest for the trees” and reduces beauty— which is greater than the sum of its parts— to being merely an effective conduit of any one of them.

⁴ I do not just mean “nature”. I mean all beauty, whether made directly by God or made indirectly by Him through us.

⁵ The concept of the “sublime” in aesthetics is the sense of greatness, the weighty imposition of the subject upon the viewer. Friedrich was a Romantic-era painter known for capturing the sublime in his work.

⁶ Defying beauty is the essential characteristic of modern art and music, at least in the world of high culture. This fact, and our response to it, will be explored in more detail in my third article.

Teach yourself to enjoy it more and teach others to enjoy it more. Find the goodness in it and delight in it. But never stop there— never fall into the hedonist's snare, nor the humanist's trap. Draw your heart to delight all the more in the God from whom all beauty flows, letting the good things of this world bring you to better things in Him. Beauty in this world is a grace and a tool that he has given us to see something about God that we never could otherwise. What better reason could we want to pursue it than that?

We know that pursuing beauty is a lifelong discipline. It requires hard work to develop over time, and yet it is also something which can bring an intrinsic joy into one's life. Most importantly, it brings the thoughtful Christian to consider the source of all beauty, our Triune God. But how to begin? There aren't exactly a plethora of resources available to help! A few brief tips are helpful to keep in mind.

First, there is nothing wrong with seeking beauty more seriously in things we are already interested in or familiar with. Are you a man who already enjoys good literature? Read some of your favorite poems or novels with the express intention of finding beauty within. Are you a woman who was fascinated by that architecture lecture in history class? Try finding exemplary buildings in your area, and set aside an afternoon to visit them. Second, find friends who are interested in pursuing beauty. Instead of hitting that new trail yourself, find several friends and make the hike together. Engage in conversation, and ask each other what they have been learning through the experience. Approaching these things from a communal perspective is even more enriching and leads to more substantial relationships too. I especially like the idea of organizing a group to go on regularly scheduled trips, whether that be at the concert hall or in the museum. The pursuit of true friendship is arguably as dire of a state in modern America as the pursuit of true beauty. Why not attack both of these problems together?

Beginning with the familiar and engaging in communal beauty-seeking are some of the fastest and most effective ways to jump-start this journey. But what about those who have little previous interest or knowledge, or do not have access to friends and acquaintances to pursue these things with? Even for this man, the possibilities are diverse and easily accessible. Learn a little about art history and find a style of painting that captures your imagination. Pull over on the

side of the road to appreciate the rosy rays of a sunset rather than mindlessly listening to the radio on your way home from work. Appreciate the ornate craftsmanship of your Grandmother's ancient dining room table when you are visiting her after church. As I mentioned previously, in many ways the effective pursuit of beauty is a mindset change rather than a specific technique to follow. There is no clear progression from one area of study to another. Just pick something and go with it! Learn something about it, discover what quality looks like in that field, and look for good examples to appreciate. It is a marvelously simple path to follow. It is one which is open for the young and old, the wealthy and the impoverished, the academics and the blue-collar workers. The question is not whether you should, or whether you can, but whether you will.