

From Aristotle to Jesus: Reclaiming Virtue in a Dopamine Driven World



Dr. Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

Aristotle and the Practice of Virtue

Aristotle lived nearly 2,400 years ago, but his voice still echoes across time. A student of Plato and tutor to Alexander the Great, Aristotle built his philosophy on the observation that we become what we practice. To live well is not a matter of chance. It is the art of cultivating virtue.

For Aristotle, virtues like courage, wisdom, and temperance were not abstract ideals but habits. He believed that a flourishing life, what he called *eudaimonia*, came not from indulgence but from aligning daily choices with higher values. If you practice bravery, you become brave. If you practice honesty, you become honest. Life is a gymnasium for the soul.

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A Dopamine Driven World

Fast forward to today. We live in what could be called a dopamine driven world. Our phones buzz, our feeds refresh, and our attention is captured in milliseconds. Aristotle would warn us: if we practice distraction, we become distracted. If we practice superficial pleasures, we risk becoming shallow. Virtue is still about practice, but so is vice.

The Apostle Paul echoes Aristotle without ever quoting him, declaring, *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”* (Galatians 5:22–23). These are virtues not just of the mind but of the Spirit, aligning us with something far greater than ourselves.

Jesus and the Call Beyond Virtue

Jesus takes it further. He invites us not just to live virtuously but to abide in Him, promising that apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Virtue becomes more than moral effort. It becomes co creation with the God who designed us in His image.

Vending Machine Christianity

Yet we must admit that in the modern church we have traded this vision for something easier. Much of Christianity in the West has been remade in our image rather than God’s. We prefer shortcuts to sanctification, comfort to sacrifice, consumption to calling. What has emerged is vending machine Christianity. For fifty cents or a buck, you can buy a quick fix. Worship becomes entertainment. Prayer becomes a wish list. The gospel becomes a product. What we are handed is pseudo nutrition that lacks the costly nourishment of the cross.

The marketed version of Christianity feels quick and easy. It demands little responsibility and offers little transformation. But the true way of the Spirit is anything but cheap. To live in the Spirit is to live virtuously, and the price of living well is the price of suffering, sacrifice, and even death itself. Jesus did not promise a life of convenience. He promised a cross. He did not offer vending machine blessings. He offered the narrow road.

Compromise in the Church

Even among Christians in ministry and those serving in addiction and trauma recovery, compromise has crept in. It is not uncommon to see leaders and helpers who love Jesus and sacrifice greatly, yet live together outside of marriage. They want to carry the message of Christ while quietly setting aside His directives. But this dissonance has a cost.

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Aristotle was right that you cannot cheat virtue. Jesus is even clearer that you cannot shortcut discipleship. Paul called it the divided mind. Neuroscience calls it autonomic dissonance. When our bodies live one story and our souls proclaim another, the nervous system does not lie. The body carries the weight of contradiction. And I have seen again and again how this fracture undermines recovery, leaving people vulnerable to relapse and collapse.

I know this because I have walked it myself. When I compromised, chasing achievement and financial gain, God brought me to my knees. I do not speak from superiority but from scars. God cares more about character than about success, and if you belong to Him, He will do whatever it takes to bring you to humility. He will strip idols. He will allow collapses. He will expose contradictions until the heart is undivided.

To my young colleagues in addiction recovery, I cry out to you. My heart cries out. My soul cries out. Because I have seen what compromise costs. God invites us into coherence, into integrity, into covenant faithfulness, because anything less sets the stage for collapse. There are no shortcuts. No vending machine grace. Only the narrow road, the daily cross, and the peace that comes when body, mind, and Spirit align in Him.

Dopamine and Serotonin

Here we must pause and look at what modern neuroscience reveals. Daniel Lieberman describes how dopamine fuels our craving for more. It drives us forward with restless ambition. Dopamine is not evil. God gave us that system to create, to explore, to reach. But we have elevated dopamine as if it were the only circuit that mattered. We have abandoned its companion, serotonin, which grounds us in the here and now, in connection, in presence, in peace.

Dopamine says, chase the next thing. Serotonin says, be rooted in this moment. Together they can be balanced. Separated, they can enslave. When Christianity becomes dopamine only, it becomes a pursuit of the next high, the next conference, the next spiritual sugar rush. It becomes vending machine faith.

Dying to Self

But Jesus calls us to something harder and deeper. He calls us to die to self. Paul writes, *"I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"* (Galatians 2:20). Dying to self means crucifying the addiction to dopamine driven circuitry and embracing the slow, often painful, relational devotion of the Spirit. It means moving from vertical ambition to horizontal connection, from endless craving to abiding love.

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Dying to self hurts. It strips away illusions. It feels like loss. Jesus said plainly, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). This is no vending machine. This is no quick fix. This is the way of sacrifice and surrender. Yet it is also the way of blessing. "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24). Death is the seedbed of resurrection life.

The Wisdom of NeuroFaith®

Here is where the **NeuroFaith®** model enters the story. NeuroFaith® is not something to worship. It is a tool, a lens, a map of God's intricate design of our body and brain. It honors what neuroscience teaches us about the autonomic nervous system and shows how God embedded His wisdom in our very flesh.

The sympathetic branch, activated by the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis, releases adrenaline and cortisol to prepare us for danger. The dorsal vagal system slows us down, collapses our energy, and can even freeze us in protection. But then there is the ventral vagus system. This is God's masterpiece of connection. The ventral vagus nerve allows us to find safety in relationship, to regulate through presence, to co regulate through love. It is where the Spirit meets us most profoundly, for Jesus restores us not in isolation but in connection with Himself and with one another.

Neurocardiology and the Heart First

And God's design goes even deeper. Neurocardiology shows us that the heart is not just a pump but a rhythm center, rich in neurons and sensitive to emotional states. When we align with God's peace, the rhythms of the heart shift into coherence. As we breathe, the sympathetic rise of the heart rate on the inhale is balanced by the parasympathetic fall on the exhale. In coherence, those rhythms become a beautiful sine wave, ordered and harmonious. That coherence is what allows the brain to integrate. In God's design, the heart comes first, the mind second. *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it"* (Proverbs 4:23).

God's Chemistry of Connection

And even here God has given us relational chemistry. Serotonin grounds us in contentment and presence. Oxytocin deepens our bonds of trust, nurture, and love. The world offers cheap imitations. A quick hookup or a shallow distraction might release a burst of oxytocin or dopamine, but it fades as quickly as it comes. It is counterfeit intimacy. Real peace, real connection, comes only from the Spirit who unites us to Christ and to one another. "The love

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of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5).

Soaring on Wings of Eagles

NeuroFaith® brings all of this together. It teaches us that our nervous system is not an accident. It is God's revelation in biology. When the sympathetic system, the dorsal vagal, and the ventral vagus are balanced in Him, when heart coherence is established, when serotonin and oxytocin are aligned with love and connection, then our mind is free to soar. Not in the empty high of vending machine faith but in the abiding strength of God's Spirit.

The world tells us to chase highs. Christ calls us to die to self, to find coherence, to live connected, to embody virtue. Aristotle was right that we become what we practice, and Paul was right that the Spirit produces in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are not quick fixes but cultivated fruits. The Spirit gives us dunamis, resurrection power, to integrate body, heart, mind, and soul. The NeuroFaith® vision is to help us walk this road with open eyes, to understand the science of our systems, but to rely always on the Spirit who renews us. For only in Him do we find safety, only in Him do we find peace, and only in Him do we soar. As Scripture reminds us, *"Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain"* (1 Corinthians 15:58).