



# Shaping the Heart

## Spiritual Formation & the Christian Life

“And we all...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3:18)

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### Schedule/Topics

#### Round 1

Jan 15 – Introduction to Spiritual Formation  
Jan 22 – Prayer, Fasting  
Jan 29 – Memorization, Meditation  
Feb 5 – Solitude, Silence  
Feb 12 – Simplicity, Modeling Jesus (Obedience)  
Feb 19 – Secrecy, Sacrifice

#### Round 2

Mar 5 – Review Introduction, Service, Submission  
Mar 12 – Confession, Repentance  
Mar 19 – Forgiveness  
Mar 26 – Fellowship, Worship & the Liturgical Life  
Apr 2 – Reflection, Direction, Decision

### How Might We Begin Thinking about Spiritual Formation?

Every person has an invisible dimension; an immaterial space where thoughts run deep, intentions are developed, feelings are weighed, and character is formed. Scripture calls this the “heart” and it is the place where religion begins. The heart is so important that God tells us to “keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Pr. 4:23). To be sure, what goes on inside of us finds its way to the outside where we live. Real progress in spiritual formation, therefore, begins in this space within; it begins with a religion of the heart.

### Knowing, Doing, and Being

A spiritual formation program might be likened to that proverbial three-legged stool: knowing, doing, and being or our heads, our hands, and our hearts. Without question, we’re required to know certain things: knowledge of our Savior’s death and resurrection, for instance, or that God exists as Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And, we are called to do many things, such as obey our Lord, serve those in need, and the like. But we cannot think our way into spiritual maturity nor obey our way into holiness; we are not brains on a stick or robots from a factory. Of course, our heads and hands are involved, but without that third leg we call the heart, spiritual formation falls short. For the stool to stand and spiritual formation to be authentic all three legs are required. Knowing, doing, and being; our heads, our hands, and our hearts all work together as an ensemble in the ongoing performance of spiritual formation.

### Where Does Spiritual Formation Express Itself?

Now that we have a general framework for how to think about spiritual formation, I want to ask: **Where** does spiritual formation express itself? On what stage does this performance take place? Does spiritual formation have a place where my progress in Christlikeness advances?

Spiritual formation emerges from the heart, that immaterial space, but it manifests in and expresses itself through the body; our physical presence in the world (cf., Rom. 12:1; 1 Cor. 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 5:10; Philip. 1:20). “Our body is both the place of our personal presence and the temple of the living God—it is the place we meet with him and he lives in and through us” (*Earthen Vessels*, p 182). Christ takes up residence **in** us (Gal. 2:20; see also 2 Cor. 4:10). Therefore, the habits and patterns of our bodies matter. And our bodily actions are not merely products of what we think or feel, but primarily they issue from our desires and intentions. Our actions come from our hearts. Jesus says as much in Luke 6:45: “the good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil.” The moral yield of our lives comes from the kind of heart that we have. And the body is the vehicle for our heart’s expression. The more our practices are investing in those activities sanctioned by Scripture, the more progress in growth we will experience. Developing habits of the heart that look like, think like, and act like Jesus, will transform us into his character, necessarily. We turn now to those habits known as the “spiritual disciplines.”



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### What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

The disciplines are not...

1. **A new label put on old activities.** If nothing changes in our lives, then growth in Christlikeness can hardly be possible. This is because growth occurs *only* when change is introduced. Try and identify anything that grows that has not first changed. You can't. Change is the necessary ingredient to all growth.
2. **An exercise in academic competence.** The goal is to become transformed by not merely informed of the disciplines. Of course, learning what must be changed and discovering new habits are important, but we must not confuse means with ends; learning is the means, growth in Christlikeness is the end.
3. **A way of earning God's favor,** but a means of experiencing his transforming grace in our lives. We must not think that we can sit back, do nothing in the name of "grace", and expect to become more like Christ. Jesus is clear that we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him (Lk. 9:23). God has commissioned self-denial, death, and mirroring Christ's life as the ongoing charter of all who call Jesus Lord. Every believer is "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10) and it is by these good works that we participate in the process of maturing. So, while the disciplines never *improve our standing before God*, they will promote *intimacy with God* as we become more like his Son.
4. **Empowered by our own self-determination.** These are not simply techniques that promote behavior modification that might yield some positive outcome to overcome a personal weakness. Instead, the disciplines are fueled by God's Spirit within us and can only yield that which only Christ gives; namely, himself by his Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11). Yes, self-control is necessary, but the source of our control is not self but God's Spirit-empowered fruit within us (Gal. 5:23).
5. **A means of adapting to the character and behavior pattern of other believers.** This is not a social engineering program. There is a difference between "cultural holiness" and an authentic personal holiness. "God has not called us to be like those around us. He has called us to be like himself. Holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God" (Jerry Bridges). The standard is Christ and the disciplines, rightly implemented, will have Christ as their focus.

The disciplines are...

1. **The journey and not the destination.** Just as going to the gym is part of the journey toward the destination of good physical health, the disciplines are a way of adjusting our minds, shaping our character, and conforming our actions after the pattern of Jesus's life. They are repeated activities toward some other end.
2. **Divine instruments** used to perform the symphony of God's amazing grace in our lives. Implementing the spiritual disciplines ensures that we are not only playing the same song as Christ, but that we are in tune with him as well.
3. **Tools for cultivating the imago Dei (God's image within us).** We are called to be "imitators of God" (Eph 5:1). The disciplines are like a brush and a palette in the hands of a painter or a hammer and chisel in the hands of a sculptor. Without them the artist's potential would never be realized. Therefore, the disciplines paint the picture of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).
4. **Like a road map** that guide us into experiencing the abundant life about which Jesus spoke (Jn. 10:10).
5. **"Consciously undertaken or chosen activities that enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort"** (Dallas Willard). Jesus warned that "apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5) and this applies not only to our salvation but also to our sanctification; our progress in holiness.



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### What is the Aim of the Spiritual Disciplines?

The goal of the disciplines is to make us more like Jesus Christ in thought, word, and deed. We are called to imitate Jesus...

- **In attitude toward others, Philip. 2:5:** "Have this attitude [mind] in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus."
- **When treated harshly by others, Heb. 12:3:** "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."
- **When serving others in the Body of Christ, Rom. 15:2-3** "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself."
- **In everything we do, 1 Jn. 2:6** "whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked."
- **In love for others, Eph. 5:2** "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."
- **When encountering those with different convictions about disputable matters, Rom. 15:7** "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you."

You see, God's goal for all of us is the same: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). This is not merely at the end of our lives but *during* our life now. Every instance, every encounter, every relationship, every circumstance is moving us in this direction and we can be sure that God meets his goals! Our final spiritual destination is laid out by Paul to the Philippians: "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philip. 1:6) and Paul ached for the Galatians' growth when he writes "my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" (Gal. 4:19). John the Apostle insists that "when he appears we shall be like him" (1 Jn. 3:2). God not only finishes what he begins, but he begins what he finishes. If indeed Christ is in you, the train has left the station and we are all on the same journey toward Christlikeness. The spiritual disciplines are the deliberate, routine practices that keep us going. We could say the disciplines are **our personal liturgy**.

### What does Scripture Say about Spiritual Formation?

**1 Tim. 4:7-8** God exhorts you to "train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." "Godliness" has value for life today and life in eternity. How do we become "godly?" By "training" (Greek, γυμνάζω = gymnasium) ourselves.

**Rev. 3:2** Jesus warns the believers at Sardis, "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die." This is a call to grow up in our faith and do more, lest we incur a rebuke from our Lord.

**1 Cor. 9:25-27** "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." While directly applying to Gospel proclamation, Paul indirectly calls us to rigorously order our priorities after the Gospel recognizing that we're never "off duty" when it comes to Christian living. We never retire from diligent, self-controlled Christian living, especially since the world is watching and the glory of the Gospel is at stake!

Listen to the progress of faith as Peter writes: "make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." **2 Pt. 1:5-10**



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In fact, Scripture calls out a lack of progress in spiritual formation with a stern warning. Hebrews issues a strong rebuke to believers who should have progressed after being in the faith for some time. **Heb. 5:12-14** "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained [γυμνάζω] by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."

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*Next week: Prayer and Fasting*