



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)

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."

Next week: Prayer and Fasting



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"Prayer, in its most basic form, is the surging of the human spirit in its weakness, grasping at the Spirit of God in His strength." Ravi Zacharias

When You Pray, Remember...

1. Prayer is fundamentally an expression of our dependence upon God.
2. Our purpose in prayer is to glorify God by seeing him actively accomplish his will here on earth. God, not self, must be the focus of all our prayers and it is his will and not our own that we must pursue.
3. Submission is an essential ingredient in Jesus' prayer life and should be in ours as well.
4. Emphasize a growing love for others and look for God's movement in the lives of our brothers and sisters. When we do, our prayers will naturally overflow with thankfulness.
5. Ask God to work in and through circumstances, rather than merely change them.
6. God is more interested in us than in what we want and he occasionally denies our requests so that his glory and our good will be optimal. Embrace this.

Preparing to Meet God

Sometimes the effectiveness of our prayer can be impacted negatively by inadequate preparation. So, preparing to meet God is vitally important.

- According to **2 Chron. 7:14-15** what must we do to have an effective prayer life?
- Does God always answer prayer? Are there any conditions for answered prayer? Read **Is 1:15-16; Ps 66:18-20; Jn 9:31**.
- What does **Zech 7:8-13** teach us about the consequences for ignoring God?
- Peter gives a clear warning to husbands about the relationship between their wives and their prayer lives (**1 Pt 3:7**). "No Christian husband should presume to think that any spiritual good will be accomplished by his life without an effective ministry of prayer. And no husband may expect an effective prayer life unless he lives with his wife in an understanding way, bestowing honor on her" (Wayne Grudem).

Jesus' Prayer Life

Our Lord prayed privately, publicly, earnestly, repeatedly, submissively, and expectantly. Jesus prayed...

- *alone with the Father and away from distraction.* **Lk 5:16**, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."
- *during his inauguration into ministry.* **Lk 3:21**, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened."
- *before he made an important decision.* **Lk 6:12-13**, "Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them."
- *when others were present and about to witness a miracle.* **Jn 11:41-43**, "Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'"
- *during his greatest need.* See **Mt 26:36-44; Heb 5:7**.
 1. His deep anguish and grief drove him to prayer, rather than to despair or anger.
 2. Knowing His life was about to end he turned to prayer, alone with the Father.
 3. He prayed in total submission to the Father.
 4. He prayed repeatedly (three times for the same thing).



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5. Jesus entreats his followers to pray for victory of spirit over the flesh. Prayer is often the best weapon to defeat the evil one who uses the flesh as his battle ground (cf., Eph. 6:18).

Jesus taught us to pray confidently and expectantly. Read **Mk 11:24**; **Lk 11:9-10**; **Jn 16:23**.

The Prayers of Paul

When reading through the prayers of Paul, we get a sense that his prayers are very different from the way we often pray. Read the following passages from Paul's letters: **Eph 1:15-23**; **3:14-21**; **Philip 1:9-11**; **Col 1:3-14**; **1 Thess 3:9-13**; **2 Thess 1:11-12**.

- In **Eph 1:15-23**, after offering thanksgiving to God for his work of salvation (vv. 15-16), Paul prays for two things (vv. 17-19):
 1. *That we might know God more intimately and personally.* The implicit idea here is that unless God gives us a spirit of wisdom and revelation, it's impossible to know him better. We come to God on his terms by his means in order to accomplish his ends. This kind of knowledge cannot be gained by merely reading your Bible or being involved in Christian ministry. It can only be gained through fervent prayer.
 2. *That we would have special insight into* a) the hope of our calling, b) the riches of God's inheritance granted to us, and c) the power to live for God's glory.

*To Consider: The same power that raised Christ in victory over death and sin lives within us and is unleashed through prayer! The same power that raised Christ from the dead and exalted Him to the heavens is readily on display in our lives **when we pray!***

Fasting

To Consider: "Christians in a gluttonous, denial-less, self-indulgent society may struggle to accept and to begin the practice of fasting. Few Disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream of culture as this one." Don Whitney

The Function of Fasting

Fasting is the voluntary and temporary abstinence from food and/or drink for the purpose of seeking God's will. In Scripture, it is most often a close associate of prayer. The pangs of hunger serve as reminders that we are a needy people. Fasting often reveals far more than just our dependence upon food; it can reveal other things that control us, which might be eliminated or perhaps better moderated.

Abstaining from food and/or drink causes us to realize that our souls have an appetite for something that food and drink cannot satisfy. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (**Mt 4:4**). Therefore, fasting is really *feasting* on God. In fasting the relationship to our bodies changes as our physical longings are redirected toward God, thus making our bodies servants rather than masters (**1 Cor 6:12-13**; **9:27**).

Like all the spiritual disciplines, fasting has collateral benefit. In fasting we learn self-denial and temperance, which are virtues that carry over into other parts of our lives. Thomas à Kempis said, "Refrain from gluttony and thou shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh." Dallas Willard suggests, "Since food has the



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pervasive place it does in our lives, the effects of fasting will be diffused throughout our personality" (*The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 167).

Jesus gives no command for how long or how often to fast, but he seems to assume it is a normal part of spiritual formation, just as prayer and giving are ("When you fast..." **Mt 6:16, 17**; "When you pray..." **Mt 6:5**; "When you give..." **Mt 6:3**).

What Are the Benefits of Fasting?

- *Fasting can strengthen prayer*: Ezra called on everyone to fast before setting out on the 900-mile journey back to Jerusalem after the Jewish exile (**Ezra 8:21-23**; see also **Neh 1:4** and **Dan 9:3**; **Lk 2:37**). Esther calls on the entire nation of exiled Jews to fast (synonymous with prayer) on her behalf as she approached the pagan king Xerxes to plead for their lives (**Est 4:16**).
- *Fasting expresses confession and repentance*: Israel showed genuine contrition by fasting (**1 Sam 7:6**). Through the prophet Joel, God commands that his people demonstrate their repentance by fasting (**Joel 2:12**). After Jonah preaches to Nineveh, they show signs of repentance by fasting (**Jonah 3:5-10**).
- *Fasting strengthens us for ministry*: Jesus refused to succumb to temptation, but persevered in fasting to gain spiritual strength for ministry (**Mt 4:1-11**). Just as God's provision of manna in the desert was sufficient physical strength, so too is God's provision of inner strength during the desert experience of our fast. Daniel engaged in a partial fast for gaining strength to resist the lures of a pagan culture (**Dan 1:8-15**). Before commissioning Paul for his first missionary journey, the church fasted to demonstrate a sense of urgency in ministry, both for discerning God's will and executing it (**Acts 13:2-3**; see also **14:23**). Fasting is a way of "putting your stomach where your mouth is," or showing seriousness in advancing God's kingdom. When spiritual strength is gained from fasting, we are equipped for victory in ministry.
- *Fasting is a needed antithesis to the celebratory practice of feasting*. In feasting we rightly celebrate the good things of this world and all the blessings God has given for our enjoyment (see 1 Tim 6:17). In fasting we focus on repentance, confession, mourning, and our longing for the Day of the Lord. In feasting we affirm the world that God has made for us. In fasting we look with eyes of faith for the world to come (Heb 11:16). Whereas feasting connects us with our present, fasting connects us with our future. Both help us maintain a balance in our spiritual formation.

Suggested Guidelines for Fasting

- There is no biblical mandate to fast with any prescribed frequency. While the New Testament may assume regular fasting (two days / week), it is not prescribed as a necessary devotional habit. That said, it is not wrong to build fasting into our habits; only we must not insist others do likewise.
- Regular or periodic fasting should take into account one's health needs. A consult with your medical professional would be wise before engaging in any fasting practice.
- If one chooses to fast more than one day per week, the additional days to fast should be staggered between days of feasting (i.e., fasting consecutive days is not recommended).
- A "one-off" fasting exercise for a specific purpose while seeking God's will or to complete confession and repentance is appropriate, keeping in mind the additional guidelines offered here.



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One of the three legs from our proverbial stool will be the focus here. When **knowing** is rightfully calibrated, then the other two legs of **doing** and **being** is shored up and the stool is balanced and stable.

Most, though not all, sinful behavior can be traced to our thought life. That's why Paul says the renewing of our "minds" is so important (**Rom 12:2**). It is the content in our minds that drives the direction of our hearts. We live from the inside out. What we think matters because what goes into our minds comes out in our lives. Sure we all have moments when we act *before* we think, but predominantly our thought life dictates the course of action that we take. There is no better way to rid ourselves of unwholesome thoughts than a steady diet of truth from God.

Memorization

Everyone can memorize. It takes no special skill. It's often the case that we don't memorize Scripture, not because we can't, but because we haven't experienced the value of it in our lives. And we don't experience the value of it because we haven't done it. So the cycle goes. However, the difference between memorizing Scripture and knowing Scripture is like the difference between consuming a good meal and merely tasting it. When we consume food, we receive all the benefits of the nutrients and gain strength. **Jer 15:16** says, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart."

The Value of Memorization

- *Memorization supplies spiritual power over sin.* The Psalmist tells us that he "stored up" God's Word in his heart "that I might not sin against you" (**Ps 119:11**). When tempted, Jesus immediately applied God's Word as the primary weapon against the Devil (**Mt 4:7, 10**; see also, **Eph 6:17**). Moreover, God's Word gives us an authoritative basis to deny false teachings, just as Jesus did when Satan misapplied Scripture (**Mt 4:5-7**).
- *Memorization helps us distinguish right from wrong.* God's Word sheds moral light on life, giving us wisdom and discernment (**Ps 119:24, 104-105; Rom 7:7; 2 Tim 3:16; Heb 4:12**).
- *Memorization provides an objective basis for truth.* Before his crucifixion, Jesus prays "sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (**Jn 17:17**). Paul exhorts Timothy to rightly handle the "word of truth" (**2 Tim 2:15**) and the Psalmist exclaims "the sum of your word is truth" (**Ps 119:160**). Scripture is not just subjectively inspiring; it is objectively true because it is breathed out by the God of truth.
- *Memorization demonstrates we value God's thoughts.* God told Moses and us to take his word seriously. **Deut 6:6-9** reads, "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Though this passage is intended to be applied metaphorically and not literally, the notion is clear that God's Word must permeate our thoughts, our attitudes, and our behavior.
- *Memorization emboldens our witness for Christ.* Peter quoted from Scripture when testifying to God's grace at Pentecost (**Acts 2:14-40**). In Pisidian Antioch Paul quoted Scripture repeatedly showing the truth of Christ as Lord and Messiah (**Acts 13:13-41**). When attacked by the Jews one week later, Paul again quoted from Scripture to substantiate God's truth (**Acts 13:44-47**; see also **Acts 4:31; 16:32; 2 Cor. 10:4-5**).
- *Memorization sustains us against a world that resists God.* Although **Ps 1:1-3** speaks to meditation, the implantation of God's Word via memorization is presupposed, and is a beautiful picture of the stability and prosperity that the Word of God brings. "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers."



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Meditation

Meditation is the prayerful, willful, and persistent focus upon the word of God or the works of God resulting in a sense of wonder and amazement at the movement of God.

Consider:

MEDITATION IS NOT ...	MEDITATION IS ...
emptying your mind of all thought	filling your mind with God's thoughts
visualizing your own reality	focusing upon God's reality found in Scripture
fantasizing about your hopes & dreams	resting in God's faithful promises from his Word
involving only one person: you	involving two persons: you and God
passively waiting on a thought or feeling to be revealed to you	actively pursuing God's thoughts and feelings already revealed to you in Scripture

The Value of Meditation

- *Meditation first and foremost moves the soul to gain spiritual insight into the wonders of God's character.* Meditation gives us spiritual insight that moves the mind from admiration to adoration of God's excellencies, perfections, and beauty. This Spirit-ed illumination does not stop at the corridor of the mind but moves deep into the caverns of the soul where authentic spiritual worship takes place. "My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night" (Ps 63:5-6).
- *Meditation helps re-center our focus and recall God's activity in creation and redemption.* "I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands" (Ps 143:5). Or again, Ps 77:12, "I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds."
- *Meditation seeks to align our hearts with God's heart.* "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight" (Ps 19:14; also 104:34).
- *Meditation keeps us focused on God rather than our defense during times of trouble.* Jesus instructed his disciples not to spend undue time on their response to persecution (Lk 21:14-15; see also, Ps 119:23).
- *Meditation on God's Word, more than any other discipline, facilitates obedient living.* True success (not always materially, but certainly spiritually and morally) is promised to those whose thoughts are governed by God's thoughts. Joshua 1:7-8 explicitly affirms a direct connection between meditation and prosperity. "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful." The goal of meditation is obedience and the result of obedience is blessing (Jn 13:17). If you're not experiencing spiritual blessings, then look at the obedient factor in your life. If you're failing in obedience, then take a serious look at your thought life!



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What AAA Teaches Us about Spiritual Formation

I once heard an interview on NPR with an executive from AAA regarding the dangers of cell phone use while driving. AAA reported that texting while driving is the “mother of distractions” because the activity involves eyes off, mind off, and hands off the driving task. When these three faculties are disengaged from driving for 2 seconds or more, the likelihood of an accident is greatest. I feel a spiritual lesson coming.



Eyes Off

The writer of Hebrews admonishes we must “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb 12:2-3). What comes into our view matters. Just a 2-second glance away from Jesus and the likelihood of an encounter with sin is significantly increased. Want to stay strong in faith and not lose heart? Eyes on Jesus!

Mind Off

When our minds wander, we can quickly follow pathways that lead to sinful thoughts. Scripture says our minds matter. “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—**think about such things**” (Philip 4:8). Just a 2-second thought away from excellence and the likelihood of a fatal engagement with sin is greatest. Want to purify your thoughts? Mind on excellence!

Hands Off

If our faith is not practical but merely intellectual, then Scripture says it is lifeless and useless. We must maintain a hands-on faith and put into practice the reality of our beliefs. “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (Jam 2:14-17). Just two seconds of hands-off biblically endorsed behavior and the likelihood of us having a head-on collision with sin is equal to 100%! Want to have fewer regrets? Put your faith to work!



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"The soul is restless until it finds its rest in Thee." – Augustine

The disciplines of solitude and silence are countercultural. Why? Because we live in a society that is enslaved by all that opposes them. For example, despite our culture's ideological emphasis on individualism and personal freedom of expression, we are enamored with what others think of us. To ensure we are not distracted by the stark realities of our inner selves, we immerse ourselves with sights and sounds that drown out the silence of our hearts. We become intoxicated by and addicted to the cultural "noise" that surrounds us. Immersed in social media, email, cell phones, text messages, etc., we have every opportunity to avoid every chance at being alone. Working against these intense, perennial choruses of clamor and clatter, the disciplines of solitude and silence free us from this cultural, audible, and social captivity.

Solitude

Solitude is the intentional, temporary practice of spatial and relational distance from any place or person that could potentially distract us from hearing God and being near to him. "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (Jm 4:8).

The discipline of solitude does not entail being alone; it is being present only to one Other. Solitude is a subtraction of all visual, audible, and spatial distractions. It is the awareness of and sole focus on the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" (**Acts 17:28**). Solitude is isolation without seclusion – others are temporarily shut out in order to let in God's presence. Solitude is retreat without privacy – we temporarily withdraw from the world to find sanctuary in God's presence.

The Value of Solitude

- *In solitude, we're not merely alone with ourselves. Instead, we're alone with God. As Jesus enters this world he is "Immanuel, (which means, God with us)" and as he leaves this world his last words are "I am with you always" (Mt 1:23; 28:20; see also Ps 23:4; 139:7-10).*
- *Solitude gives us a chance to empty ourselves of all else so we can be full of God's presence and prepare ourselves for ministry. Consider Rom 15:13 "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him" (also, Col 1:9). Both Paul and Jesus had a desert experience to prepare themselves for ministry (Gal 1:15-17; Mt 4).*
- *In solitude, we learn that we do not need others as much as we think. Solitude teaches us to rely on God for our deepest relational needs. And, solitude gives others a chance to realize they don't need us as much as they think. Ps 4:8, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety."*
- *In solitude, we have a chance to identify and confront our fears and our uncertainties and find strength in God's presence. When we're around others, the chatter and residual noise that comes from their lives often eclipses our worries and doubts so we are unable to recognize them. "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy" (Pr 14:10).*

Jesus spent time in solitude...

- To draw strength from his Father's presence (cf., **Mt 14:23; Mk 1:35; Lk 4:42**)
- To discern his Father's will (**Lk 6:12-13**)
- To avoid misunderstanding and misguided enthusiasm (**Jn 6:15**; note the "again," ESV, NASB, NRSV, NIV, HCSB)



Shaping the Heart

Spiritual Formation & the Christian Life

Silence

*"Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does."
– Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines**

Silence is the willful choice to quiet every voice but One...God's. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). "Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling" (Zech 2:13). "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lam 3:26).

The Value of Silence

- *Silence frees us from the temptation to control people or circumstances with our words. When we're silent, we tacitly agree to trust God and wait for him, just as Jesus did. Consider 1 Pt 3:16, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." Jesus knew the words of Isaiah "in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Is 30:15).*
- *Silence disarms the weapons of our duplicity; namely, our "words" that often wage war in relationships. How often have you said one thing but meant another in an effort to hide your true thoughts or feelings? Silence strips us of deceit and forces us to remain honest. There is nothing dishonest about silence. Pr 10:19, "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent."*
- *In silence, we express our hope and trust in God, rather than take matters into our own hands. "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation...For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him." Ps 62:1, 5. "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him" (Ps 37:7).*
- *Silence helps us pause and consider our words carefully so our mouths don't unexpectedly erupt. Jm 1:26 "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless."*
- *In silence the doorway to our heart is opened to receive the healing touch of God's love. "The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love" (Zeph 3:17). It is in our "loss for words" that we find the voice of God's love. Selah.*
- *Silence provides opportunity to hear and respect others' need to be heard. Jm 1:19 "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak." Why? Because the needs of others cannot be met before they are expressed. If you are busy talking or thinking about what you're going to say as others speak, then the only voice in a conversation is yours.*

The 17th century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) made this startling observation: "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room." Pensées, 139.

Like no other disciplines, silence and solitude expose our heart's deepest longings; they liberate us from the fragility of this life and help us connect with the stability of our eternal life with God.



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Simplicity

“Because — and to the degree that — we lack a divine Centre our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things.” Richard Foster

Simplicity is the discipline of gaining control over or removing altogether unnecessary distractions, vain attachments, or superfluous relationships that hinder our clear and focused walk with God.

- *Simplicity forces us to identify and confront the volume of things we acquire in life that may hinder our spiritual fruitfulness. It is often true that the more we have, the more complex our lives become. “Lay up for yourself treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys” (Mt 6:20; see also 1 Tim 6:17-19). The implicit assumption in Mt 6:20 is that we can have too much in this life but can never have enough in the next. Moreover, it is now in this life that we work toward and for the future in the next.*
- *The discipline of simplicity frees us from our attachment to things and connects us to God as the sole Supplier of our contentment. “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (1 Tim 6:6-8).*
- *Simplicity helps us see the value of a few deep relationships, rather than the breadth and often shallowness of many. “A friend loves at all times” (Pr 17:17). Or, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Pr 27:5-6).*

Obedience & Discipleship

Control is a deadly enemy to spiritual formation and disobedience is merely an attempt to gain or maintain control over our lives rather than live in accordance with Jesus’s commands.

In spiritual formation, obedience is the ongoing sculpting and fashioning of our life after the life of Jesus. Since we have trusted God with our eternal life, does it not make sense that we can trust him with our earthly life? After all, isn’t obedience really just the tangible expression of our trust in God? Could it be that what stands behind disobedience is a lack of deep and abiding trust in God and his goodness? If we shored up and strengthened our trust in God, would not our obedient living come easier?

The first command Jesus issued to his disciples is “Follow me” (Mt 4:19; also Mk 1:17). Note that the command to follow Jesus precedes the task we are called to, namely “fish for people.” *Who we are* (followers of Jesus; **being**) *defines what it is that we do* (proclaim the Good News; **doing**) and never vice versa. We don’t become followers of Jesus by obeying, but show that we are followers of Jesus by our obedience. Interestingly, the first command is surely a prerequisite to fulfilling the last command Jesus issued: “Go therefore and make disciples...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:18-20). We must first be followers of Jesus before we can make disciples for Jesus.

The word for “disciple” in the Greek is μαθητής. As a verb it means “to learn and conform to.” Therefore, a disciple is one who adheres to someone’s teaching or instruction. In fact, as a noun μαθητής, or “disciple”, was a common first-century designation given to students. “The student [μαθητής] is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.” (Lk 6:40). Therefore, a disciple of Jesus is an obedient follower of Jesus whose life gradually but certainly looks like their master.

If obedient living is an indication of our trust in God and his goodness, what is stands behind our trust in God? Is it not our love for God? What is the relationship between obedience and love?



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Obedience & Love: An Unlikely Relationship?

Jesus explicitly insists upon a relationship between love and obedience. Read **Jn 14:15, 21, 23**. Jesus is not saying “If you obey me, then you will love me.” Rather, he says “If you love me, you will obey me.” Obedience is a sign of love and devotion; it is the tangible, visible expression of love. All who love Jesus obey him, but not all who obey Jesus love him.

It is unfortunate that the relationship between love for God and the laws of God gets confused. The biblical storyline of Israel repeatedly annotates this confusion between love for God and obedience to God (cf. **Ps 51:16-19; Mt 23:23-24**). The Apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that the law was never to be seen as a means of establishing a relationship with God; a relationship that can only be established by faith in God (cf. **Gal 2:16; 3:15-28**). Instead, God’s law is a means of maintaining a relationship that is already established by God (**Rom 8:3-4; 1 Jn 4:19**).

Also, Jesus promised that his burden would be light (**Mt 11:28-30**). Believers are not under the yoke of duty but bound by the law of love (**Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; Jm 2:8**), which finds its expression in obedient living.

Love is to obedience as motivation is to action. Obedience without love is mere duty, while love without obedience is mere sentimentalism. The former depersonalizes relationships, and the latter demoralizes them. We obey God because we love him and not vice versa.

With one command, viz., “love,” Jesus once and for all did away with the sterile observance of laws and rules *apart from* wholehearted commitment. In one way or another all of God’s laws and rules are expressions of our Father’s love for his children (see **Mt 22:37-40**; similarly, **Rom 13:8**).

Living obediently is an expression of our affection for God. Conversely, living disobediently is an expression of contempt toward God. Therefore, when I am living disobediently it is often my love for God that has weakened and in need of repair (see **1 Jn 2:3-6**). How do I love God more? By looking at the cross, the concrete and definitive expression of God’s grand and great love for us (**Rom 5:8**), which has been put into our hearts (**Rom 5:5**).

Obedience involves not only our active compliance to God’s explicit commands motivated by our love for God, but also our passive endurance under temptation and trial. It is God’s will that we endure pain and suffering (**2 Tim 3:12**). Yet we can be sure that God never demands more than he enables (**1 Cor 10:13**). When God requires our endurance, then he provides the moral strength and courage to carry on. Although the way of obedience is no easy road, we are promised God’s encouragement and comfort in the midst of our trials and difficulties (**2 Cor 1:3-4; 12:8-10; Heb 12:1-13**).

Finally, each week we pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Is this request an all-inclusive one or is it selective? When rolling off our lips each week, are we thinking abstractly or concretely? Do we seek God’s will only on a political or social level or do we also long for it on a personal level? This prayer must never exclude our obedience or conformity to God’s will. Unless and until God’s will is sought first in our hearts and expressed in our lives through obedience, then all other levels on which this prayer is prayed are secondary.



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To Consider: A little girl cries out, "Daddy, Daddy! Watch this!" as she makes her first attempt at riding her bike without training wheels. She wants to know that her efforts are worthy of her father's attention. No one else's attention will do; it is her father's attention she longs for.

Secrecy

Secrecy intentionally dims the light on our own good qualities or good deeds in order to shine a bright light on God's. "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" **Mt 5:16.**

1. Secrecy frees us from the "approval game," which can quickly turn into the "fame game." The very moment we do things for the approval of others, no matter how seemingly selfless our acts may be, we lose the approval of God. Why? Because our motive is to bring glory and attention to ourselves, thus robbing God of what is rightfully his (see **Is 42:8**). Jesus warns "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven" (**Mt 6:1**).

*Note: Jesus did not say "beware of practicing your **un**righteousness before other people..." Why is it that the things we do in secret are not the things for which we seek approval from others?*

2. Read **Mt 6:1-6; 16-18**. Note the NIV renders **Mt 6:4** as "your Father, who sees **what is done** in secret" [Note: The ESV/NRSV ignore the definite article in the dative τῷ which modifies κρυπτῷ. Thus the NIV/NASB is likely a better rendering]. It's not that God secretly sees, but that God sees "what is done" in secret. The implication? What goes on in public may not be recognized and certainly not rewarded by God when motivated by self-adulation. Hence, the discipline of secrecy "enables us to place our public relations department entirely in the hands of God" (Dallas Willard).
3. Read **Pr 16:3; Mt 5:16; 1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17; 3:23**. What do these passages say about our motivations and how could these texts help us avoid the "approval game?"
4. Read **Jn 7:1-9**. Jesus refused to be put on public display. Is it possible John is telling us that those who seek to elevate prominent leaders before the public do so because of unbelief (cf. **Jn. 7:5**)? Put differently, a sign of unbelief is when the limelight conceals or obscures what God may be doing secretly. Jesus's time had "not yet come." Of course, Jesus did go to Judea and eventually became prominent, but not in the way his brothers demanded or expected (**Jn 7:6-10**). The discipline of secrecy affords us the opportunity to see surprising and unexpected results.
5. Secrecy is the main ingredient for humility (**Jm 4:10; 1 Pt 5:6**). Without secrecy, it's impossible to be humble. Likewise, all those who are genuinely humble practice the discipline of secrecy.
6. Most importantly, *secrecy is a tacit yet wonderfully tangible expression of our deep and abiding trust in God.* Secrecy redirects all our attention to God as we trust him to be the sole provider for our needs and our longings.

Consider: Secrecy is not the same as privacy. Given the existence of an ever-present, all-knowing God, there are no acts done, no thoughts thought, no attitudes expressed, and no feelings felt that are exclusively in private! The attention of One and only One must be our focus in secrecy. And rest assured, an all-seeing, all-knowing God **never** takes his eyes off of you!



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Sacrifice

1. Sacrifice teaches us to forsake self-reliance and our own resources and to trust in God's ability to make us secure. Sacrifice is not merely "giving when it costs us something." Instead, it operates on a much deeper level. Sacrifice involves "spending" ourselves for the sake of God's kingdom. It's the intentional abandoning of whatever it is that makes us comfortable, including our very lives if necessary, for the purpose of advancing God's purposes in this world (**2 Cor 11:21b-29; Heb 12:2**).
2. Sacrifice may mean forfeiting everything we have, including our financial security (**Lk 19:8-10; 21:1-4; Philip 3:7-8**; see also **Deut 8:11-18**). At the very least it means giving from our resources, even though at times it may hurt to do so (**2 Sam 24:24; 2 Cor 8:3; Heb 13:16**).
3. Sacrifice may involve giving your time, your emotional well-being, your sleep, your career progression, or even temporarily compromising your family's well-being (**Lk 14:26**). It may mean giving up the security of a relationship (**Gen 22:9-10**).
4. Just as in the Old Testament, sacrifice and worship are closely related (**Ps 54:6; Heb 13:15**). Indeed, sacrifice is an expression of worship (**Rom 12:1**) and God expects us to offer our whole selves to him ("bodies" = our physical existence as a concrete expression of our entire being). Whenever we sacrifice, we are worshipping God and vice versa. Note **Rom 12:1** says it is "to God" that our sacrifice is directed. Thus, whenever our sacrifices are aiming at anyone/anything else but God, our "acts of righteousness" fail as authentic worship, and become mere religious posturing (see **Mk 7:11-13** for an example of "righteous" pretension).

*Often, sacrifice involves others (our children, our neighbors, friends, co-workers, church members). And yet the recipients of our sacrificial offering are secondary to the One who sees what is done in secret. God must be front and center in all sacrifice. It is God himself who is the primary recipient and it is he who accepts our sacrifice when offered in accordance with the discipline of secrecy and faith (see **Gen 4:3-8; Heb 11:4**).*



Shaping the Heart

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Service and submission are essential to all the “one another” passages of the New Testament. They enable and inspire genuine community.

Service

In service, we actively and willingly employ our gifts and resources to meet the needs of others so we might train ourselves in the selflessness of Christ. The discipline of service is not merely about others; it’s also about us. In a twist of irony, when we meet another’s need, our need to grow in Christlikeness is also met.

The Value of Service

1. *Service strengthens the weak and frees us from resentment.* Those who are “serving the Lord Christ” (**Col 3:23-24**) do not worry that their service goes relatively unnoticed by others. At the end of the day we serve an audience of “One.” Mundane tasks, therefore, become some of our greatest endeavors because we serve others as if serving Christ himself (**Mt 25:40**). And so, when we “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (**Col 3:17**) there’s no chance for resentment to creep in, since what we do is done for Christ and not merely for the sake of others (**Eph 6:6**).
2. *Service weakens the strong and frees us from arrogance.* Those in positions of leadership and authority can easily view their status as more important than it really is, or tacitly permit others to do so. Jesus challenges “greatness” by showing us that the way up is really the way down (**Mt 20:25-28; Philip 2:3-8**). “Greatness” in Jesus’s kingdom is measured by selfless service. The terms “minister” or “pastor” originally meant “helper” or “shepherd”, but have come to be seen as a badge of honor or a title of prestige. Yet Jesus emphatically cries, “It shall not be so among you” (**Mk 10:43**)! To be “great” is to live as a servant. There’s no room for superiority or conceit among God’s children because there’s room for only one King in the kingdom.
3. *Service frees us from the pitfalls of pretense and performance traps.* With our singular orientation toward Christ, we serve with pleasure at the feet of others where the only quality that matters is humility (**Jn 13:14-15**). With service, we refuse the call of honor and recognition and become free to consider others better than ourselves; eager for their success rather than merely pursuing our own (**Philip 2:3-4**).
4. *Service helps us find our “fit” in the Body of Christ* (**Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:11; 1 Pt 4:10-11**). In one sense, all of the spiritual gifts are gifts of service, so we no longer need to be in control, since “each of us needs all the others” in the body of Christ (**Rom 12:5**, NLT).



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"Be filled with the Spirit...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:18, 21)

Submission

The idea of submission is not viewed as a cultural norm or accepted virtue. However, Scripture tells us we live in a kingdom "not of this world" (**Jn 18:36**); a kingdom set into motion by Jesus's example of submission. The very Incarnation of God in Jesus is an act of submission (**Philip 2:5-8**). Moreover, Christ voluntarily submitted to flogging, public humiliation, and death, all of which are part of a greater submission to his Father's will (**Mt 26:42**), which is a demonstration of God's redemptive love (**Rom 5:8**). *The discipline of submission, therefore, is the voluntary yielding to another for the sake of love and in accordance with God's will.*

1. *First, submission necessarily assumes the presence of others and, therefore, is a "social" discipline or practice.* Consequently, in submission we consciously reject the notion that we're above others. Instead, we accept that we are all "one in Christ Jesus" (**1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11**), "submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ" (**Eph 5:21**). All believers are called to be "slaves to one another" (**Gal 5:13, NRSV**). Thus, the discipline of submission is always mutual in God's kingdom because:
 - a. *The Gospel equalizes all relationships under the authority of Christ.* Whether husband to wife, parents to children, or slave to master, all human structures have only relative authority in relation to Christ (see, **Gal 3:28; Jn 19:11a**; see **Rom 13:1** on relative authority).
 - b. *Every "one another" injunction in the New Testament assumes parity in relationships for their proper operation.* All "one another" passages imply the notion of 'without distinction on the basis of social status or personal preference.' Christians are enjoined to accept one another (**Rom 15:7**), be hospitable to one another (**1 Pt 4:9**), be devoted to and honor one another (**Rom 12:10**), live in harmony with one another (**Rom 12:16; 1 Pt 3:8**), bear with one another (**Eph 4:2; Col 3:13**), be kind and compassionate to one another (**Eph 4:32**), carry one another's burdens (**Gal 6:2**), forgive one another (**Eph 4:32; Col 3:13**), build up one another (**1 Thess 5:11**), admonish one another (**Col 3:16**), and encourage one another (**1 Thess 4:18; 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:25**).
 - c. *Every believer is called to self-denial, submission, and service to others.* Since this call is equally applicable to all believers (i.e., it is not truer for some than for others), then the discipline of submission – "voluntary yielding to another for the sake of love and in accordance with God's will" – logically applies to every believer without regard to social status, economic ability, sex or gender, title, church office position, education level, office held, et al.
2. *This is not to say there is no order in this other-worldly kingdom.* **Heb 13:17** and **1 Pt 5:2-5** clearly says there is. Although **Heb 13:17** is addressed to those who follow their leaders, the text says more about leaders' responsibilities than about the followers'. In addition, **1 Pt 5:2** is a call to service, not status or posturing above others. Moreover, on the heels of this call to service is a call for everyone ("all of you") to express humility "toward one another" (**1 Pt 5:5, 6**). Clearly this new kingdom is governed by mutual submission and honor to all. Any order that does exist arises from a recognition of the unique spiritual gifts given to individuals and a respect for their spiritual maturity gained by an abiding walk with Christ. There is no hint of superiority or authoritarian rule among the subjects of Jesus's kingdom precisely *because everyone is a subject.* "It shall not be so among you" (**Mk 10:43**)!
3. *In submission, we cry for help from those whose depth of experience in Christ can direct us toward spiritual formation.* The weight of authority comes not from individuals who speak the truth but from the Giver of truth as we submit to the God of truth under the prayerful and loving direction of those who have a deep and abiding walk with Jesus.



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Because confession and repentance are ongoing marks of every Christ follower, they become a part of our **being** as much or perhaps more so than they are a part of our **doing**. For example, honest is a way of being; truth-telling is a way of doing. As disciplines or habits, the emphasis is on who we are, our moral identity; not so much on what we do, our activity.

Confession

As a social discipline confession occurs in the context of a relationship built on trust and acceptance. In biblical terms, "confession" is agreeing with or speaking the same thing about a matter, a condition, or state of affairs. Confession requires honesty with ourselves and transparency with God (**Ps 139:23-24**). At the ground level, all confession involves not only what we have done or failed to do, but who we are as sinners by nature and by choice. Most importantly, confession is always a means to some other end; namely, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

1. **Above all else, we must personally confess "Jesus is Lord" (Rom 10:9-10; Philip 2:10-11).** This involves at least three things:
 - a. **Confession means change (2 Tim 2:19).** Without confession, there is no repentance and without repentance there is no forgiveness. Confession sows the seeds of change and yields the fruit of repentance resulting in forgiveness that produces reconciliation and a harvest of righteousness.
 - b. **Our confession that "Jesus is Lord" is an ongoing claim we make each and every day.** If Jesus is Lord at salvation, then he remains Lord throughout our sanctification. After all, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (**Heb 13:8**).
 - c. **Confessing "Jesus is Lord" promotes a healthy distance with our brothers and sisters in the faith.** Although Scripture tells us to confess (some of) our sins to others (**Jm 5:16**), we do so because we are serious about change in our lives and need their encouragement and prayer. This does not mean that they rule or govern our moral lives. Why? Because "Jesus is Lord" and he does not share his Lordship with others.
2. **Personal confession displays the virtues of intellectual honesty and biblical humility that results in a restored relationship with God (1 Jn 1:9).** Rather than denying sin is present in our lives (**1 Jn 1:8**), we continually confess (= admit as true) our sinful behaviors asking God for his pardon. Contrary to some teaching, forgiveness is not unconditional (cf. **Ps 32:1-5; Pr 28:13; Mt 6:14-15; and Lk. 17:3** for conditions of forgiveness). *God forgives confessed sin.* Nevertheless, we must not confuse conditions with causes. Our confession does not cause God to forgive; it is the condition he set and one that he enables. Anyone who teaches believers to merely accept God's forgiveness, without meeting the condition of confession and repentance, profoundly misunderstands how a healthy family relationship operates. Jesus insists we must regularly seek God's forgiveness (**Mt 6:12**), which means we regularly must confess and repent.
3. **Public confession nourishes our sense of being loved by others and promotes physical and spiritual healing in the Body of Christ (Jm 5:16).** Because God heals and forgives (**Jm 5:14-15**) we can safely confess our sins to one another. When we do this regularly (note the present tense in vs. 16 suggesting ongoing practice) we experience God's affirming love from our spiritual family and the blessings of restored physical health. In times of physical illness, it is always appropriate to examine our spiritual lives. Unconfessed sin can be a burden to the body as well as to the soul (**Ps 32:3-5**). Although we need not publically confess all sinful behaviors, James likely has in mind those sins that are committed publically (cf. **Mt 5:23-26**), especially those that result in physical brokenness (see **1 Cor 11:30** for an instance of physical sickness tied to sin. Alternatively, not all illness



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or physical brokenness is directly related to personal sin, cf., **Job**; **Jn 9:2-3**. See also **2 Cor 12:7-9** for an instance of God not healing despite confession.).

4. **Public confession promotes intimacy with others and breaks through the artificial, manufactured, and frivolous social arrangements often encountered within church.** Confession makes restitution possible and promotes consonance rather dissonance in relationships (**Heb 12:15**; **Jm 3:14-16**).

Repentance

Repentance is far more than a change of mind; it's a change of masters. It is a determined, intentional response to abandon a lifestyle or behavior dominated by sin. In fact, in several instances Scripture indicates repentance is a necessary condition for forgiveness (**Lk 17:3-4**; **Acts 2:38**; **5:31**; **8:22**). Repentance is not only desired but demanded by God (**Acts 17:30**; **2 Pt 3:9**) and was the beginning and end of Jesus's message (**Mt 4:17**; **Lk 24:46-47**). Repentance involves turning away from everything(one) that rules our lives and turning to God as the sole Lord, Ruler, and Master of all (**Mt 6:24**; **12:30**; **Acts 3:19**; **14:15**; **20:21**; **26:20**; **1 Thess 1:9**).

1. **First and foremost, our ability to repent is not within us but is a gift of God to us.** Therefore, we must seek God to grant it. Not only is repentance unto salvation a gift from God (**Acts 5:31**; **11:18**; **2 Tim 2:25**), it remains a gift after our salvation and we should long for God to ignite within us the holy fire of lamentation.
2. **Like confession, repentance is a social discipline, but can also be a public discipline.** In **Ezra 9:6-10:1**, one man's lamentation and repentance moved an entire nation to repent. In fact, repentance is never a private matter because sin is never solely private, affecting only one. Sin impacts everyone, not just the offender. Why did Ezra include himself in the sins of others (see also **Dan 9:4-19**)? Because Ezra understood there's a kind of moral solidarity in God's people such that when one member fails, all fail (see also **Rom 5:12**). The Western Church (esp. America) could use a healthy dose of this collective accountability.
3. **Getting a theological grip on God's mercy and grace increases our incentive for repentance.** Because the gravity of our sin is always greater than the punishment we receive or the consequences we experience (**Ps 103:10**), our heavenly Father always welcomes us back as the father welcomed the prodigal. Knowing that God is not obligated to forgive and that pardon for sin is never our due, we are moved to repent by the sheer, undeserved grace of God.
4. **Getting a theological grip on God's justice and holiness decreases our need of repentance.** Though God's mercies are evident even in our punishment, they must never be taken for granted. Keeping our eyes on God's moral purity while not losing sight of his riches in mercy and grace reduces our desire for repeat offenses and increases our longings for holiness. Once these theological truths take hold in our hearts and the repeated practice of repentance is embraced, then naturally our sinful behaviors decrease and our holy habits increase.



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Is there a difference between saying “I’m sorry” and “Will you forgive me?” What is involved in offering forgiveness? Does God forgive unconditionally? Must I forgive others even if they refuse to repent? How can I find peace when others have committed a grievous sin against me? Shouldn’t I unconditionally grant forgiveness to others so a “root of bitterness” does not well up inside me?

Consider: **We cannot extend to others what we do not already have.** As believers, all our sins are forgiven (Col 2:13) so the same forgiveness extended to us can be and must be offered to others (Eph 4:32). We can indeed extend to others what we have been given.

Forgiveness is the cancellation of a moral debt incurred due to an offense in a relationship caused by sin.

“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, **having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us** with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col 2:13–15).

1. As a social discipline, **forgiveness involves a triangle of relationships.** Every sin committed against a person is also a sin against God in whose image we are made. God bears all our burdens, including the pain we experience when others sin against us and vice versa. **God** sees the offense committed by the **offender**, feels the pain of the **offended**, and provides the vehicle for forgiveness in the cross of Christ.
2. **Forgiveness entails vicarious suffering.** When an offense has taken place, then a loss or debt has been incurred because something rightfully owned (human dignity) has been compromised, marred or damaged. Once a moral debt has been incurred, then the only way a debtor can be released from that debt is when it has been paid in full. If justice is to be satisfied, the loss must be recovered and what has been taken must be restored to someone by someone.

In the biblical framework of forgiveness, the cancellation of debt entails not ignoring or denying the debt but *absorbing* it. When we extend the offer of forgiveness to our offender, we are in effect foregoing the restitution that we are entitled to; we are freeing the offender from their obligation to pay their debt. This can only be done because **the Son of God already paid the offender’s debt and suffered on behalf of the offended.** That is how we can extend the offer of forgiveness to our offender. The **offended** is released from exacting a penalty due to their loss; the **offender** is released from obligation to pay the debt because God’s Son already paid the debt in full and suffered on behalf of both. Christ has already stood in my place as the offended and paid the debt of my offender. No longer do I require punishment from my offender because Christ bore their punishment. By extending forgiveness, I am accepting the finished work of Christ on behalf of my offender. No longer must I suffer the pain of my loss because Christ bore the pain of my offense. I vicariously receive the suffering that Christ experienced on my behalf and accept the debt that Christ paid on behalf of my offender.

3. **Are there any conditions for granting forgiveness?** Yes. Two: **atonement** (God’s part; Lev 16; Matt 26:28; Heb 2:17; 9:22; 1 Jn 2:2, 4:10) and **repentance** (our part; Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3; 17:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38). Sin must be atoned for and the offender must take responsibility for their offense. Both are necessary before forgiveness is granted. Atonement makes the way for reconciliation by settling the moral debt. Repentance takes the stain of guilt away by demonstrating responsibility for the moral debt.
4. The weight of Scripture intimates a distinction between **offering** forgiveness and **granting** forgiveness. These are not the same. The former is an attitude, mindset, or a disposition, the latter is an act or an extension of the disposition into the relationship. **We unconditionally offer forgiveness but conditionally grant it.** It is vital we remain in a ready-to-forgive state of **offering** forgiveness to all our offenders. How many times must we forgive? “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:22). By constantly living in this ready-to-forgive state we are able to go the next step and grant forgiveness when the biblical condition of repentance has been met. “If a brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and **if they repent**, forgive



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them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them" (Lk 17:3-4). The only way for us to be in the place where we can grant forgiveness is by leaning forward in this ready-to-forgive posture while simultaneously leaning backward on our already-forgiven status received at the cross (Col 2:13). But we must carefully balance the two postures. Lean too far forward by granting forgiveness and we miss the justice God has demonstrated at the cross and we devalue the price of atonement. Lean too far backward by failing to offer forgiveness and we miss the healing love of God shown to us at the cross. Maintaining just the right position on the fulcrum is the only posture from which the offended will find peace and where offenders will find love. In so doing, resentment, bitterness, and evil will not have the final word. Love does.

5. **The offer of forgiveness must ever be in us and come from us.** We unconditionally offer forgiveness because our relationship with God does not rest on moral performance and therefore cannot be destroyed by immoral acts. So too must we extend this model into all our relationships. Knowing this sets the stage for and in fact makes possible confession and repentance. How?

Consider the story of the prodigal and padre (Lk 15:11-32). Although sin creates distance between us and God just as it had the prodigal and his father, our heavenly Father intently looks across that distance and runs to embrace us even before we confess and repent (Lk 15:20). Put differently, the compassion extended in an offer of forgiveness can be a catalyst for an offender's confession and repentance. Otherwise, where's the incentive for an offender to confess and repent? In the entire biblical scheme, it is God, not the sinner, who always takes the initiative in confession and repentance by maintaining a posture of embrace and not exclusion, mercy and not judgment (see Dan 9:18). In the story of the prodigal and the padre note that the sequence outlined by the son was broken by the father's embrace. The son planned to approach his father, confess, and hope for acceptance (vv 18-19). However, the father's response interrupted the son's strategy (v 20) and so "confession followed acceptance" (v 21). This is not to say that confession and repentance were unnecessary, but they were not required by the father before the embrace of forgiveness was extended. The son's transgression infected the relationship for sure, but it did not jeopardize it. Why? Because the relationship was not grounded in moral performance but in unconditional love. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:32).

6. **Extending and receiving forgiveness turns hell on its head and frees us to love and be loved.** The act of offering forgiveness to an offender overcomes evil by empowering the offended with the requisite freedom necessary to love the offender. Love, therefore, has the final word, not the offense. Before forgiveness is offered, the offended is rightfully angry with the offender because of the offense. Yet the anger of the offended often becomes the controlling influence over the relationship when a breach is realized. Thus, there is a kind of psychological bondage whereby the relationship is held hostage to the evil committed. Offering forgiveness loosens the bonds of emotional slavery and opens the doorway to love the evildoer. "If I have named the evil and done my best to offer genuine forgiveness and reconciliation, I am free to love the person even if they don't want to respond." And so, "when we offer genuine forgiveness to someone else we are no longer conditioned by the evil that they have done—even if they refuse to accept this forgiveness" (N.T. Wright).
7. **Forgiveness is not only a healing power but the reigning power over evil.** Since "we are in fact called to be people of forgiveness in the present because that is the life we shall be living in the future," the master of evil can be conquered now by offering forgiveness, the same forgiveness that someday will characterize our future. Forgiveness, then, "releases not only the person who is being forgiven but the person who is doing the forgiving." Forgiveness is saying in effect "I release you from any burden of guilt, any sense that I might still be angry with you when we meet tomorrow, or that I will treat you differently in the future or try to get even with you. But I also release myself from having to go to bed cross, from having to toss and turn wondering how to gain my revenge." Consequently, "the continuing presence and power of evil in the present world



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cannot blackmail the new world and veto its creation because the power of forgiveness ... is precisely that it enables both God and God's people to avoid the imposition of other people's evil" (N.T. Wright).

8. **What if the conditions for granting forgiveness have been met but I'm unable to forgive?** This is the error of the elder son in the story of the prodigal and the padre (Lk 15:11-32). Jesus warns that relationships trump rules (Lk 15:28-30). Forgiveness upsets the balance sheet. Getting all and only what we deserve makes for good accounting and may satisfy our sense of justice, but there's no room for forgiveness on a balance sheet. Forgiveness offers more than what is deserved. If we find ourselves unable to grant forgiveness, then we must cast our eyes on the cross of Christ and realize anew how much we have been forgiven (see **Matt 6:14-15; 18:34-35** for a strong warning against unforgiving hearts.). Moreover, and most importantly, "the faculty we have for receiving forgiveness and the faculty we have for granting forgiveness are one and the same thing. If we open the one we shall open the other. If we slam the door on the one, we slam the door on the other" (N.T. Wright). God's people must be a forgiving people. Freely we have received forgiveness and freely we must offer it. Failing to do the later hinders the former.
10. **Forgiveness is less about saying something and more about doing something.** God did not just say "you are forgiven," he put forth his Son as a sacrifice of atonement in order that we might be forgiven. Offering and granting forgiveness to our offender should be no less obvious.
11. **We extend God's forgiveness to others because we recognize that we are also in need of it.** "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt 6:12). We cannot, in good conscience, pray this sincerely unless and until we are leaning forward in a ready-to-forgive posture and willing to embrace our offender.
12. **Granting forgiveness does not mean the consequences from the offense are removed** (Num 14:20-23). When forgiveness has been received, God may require that we experience the ongoing effects of our moral failure because it is somehow good and best for us to do so. We must believe there is something in the consequences that otherwise we will not learn. Our heavenly Father knows precisely what he is doing and only permits that which is only good and best for us.

[Note: I'm indebted to N. T. Wright, Miraslov Volf, Chris Brauns, and Terrance Tiessen for many of these insights.]

Further questions for consideration:

- What do we make of Christ's plea for forgiveness from the cross (Lk 23:34)?
- Given this model of forgiveness, are believers the only ones who can offer genuine forgiveness? Are unbelievers able to receive forgiveness in its fullest sense?
- What about the persistently unrepentant? Is there a point of no return where some cross a threshold and are unable to repent and find forgiveness? See **Heb 6:4-6**.
- How does my remaining impenitent and not seeking forgiveness hinder my relationship with God? Exactly how serious is it for me to fail to repent once I'm aware of my sin against another? See **Mt 5:23-26**.



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Excursus: Forgive and Forget? A Theological Musing

Does God forget my sins when he forgives my sins? Aren't we supposed to "forgive and forget?" After all, the Bible clearly states "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and **remembers your sins no more**" (Isaiah 43:25). And, Jeremiah exclaims "For I will forgive their wickedness and **will remember their sins no more**" (Jeremiah 31:34).

But wait a minute! I thought God was omniscient! How can a being who knows all things forget anything and remain all-knowing? **Perhaps the notion that God forgets our sins is not a cognitive act at all but a behavioral one.** For instance, consider 1 Samuel 1:19-20 where God "remembered" Hannah and opened her womb so she could conceive. It's not as though the Lord said, "Oops! Hannah, I'm so sorry I forgot about you. I've been so busy with other things, it just slipped my mind." Rather, based upon her prayer to bear children, God DID something on Hannah's behalf.

Or, consider how we use the word "remember" when I ask you to "remember someone in prayer." It's not as though I'm asking you to literally recall them to mind because you have forgotten them. I am, however, asking you to DO something on their behalf; in this instance pray for them. Likewise, God does not, and in fact cannot, forget our sins, but he graciously chooses not to hold them against us.

It may be psychologically attractive to believe that God "forgives and forgets," but it's not theologically accurate or biblically responsible. What *should* make me feel good is that **God can know my every sin for eternity and still choose to grant me forgiveness!** This is the God of Scripture and this is the God we love and worship. Only a God who is eternally gracious yet eternally mindful of my sin can eternally forgive but not forget.

"Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good." – Psalm 25:6-7



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How Might We Think about Fellowship?

The term “fellowship” is often just another term for “socializing,” typically involving a meal, fun activity, or a casual acquaintance with others by way of a common religious affiliation. For disciples of Jesus, however, fellowship involves a deeper level of community than mere socializing offers. While fellowship is inherently social, it involves sharing our new life in Christ with others. Most fundamentally, fellowship is the outcome of belief in and love for Jesus (1 Jn 1:3).

*From the very beginning God pronounces and it remains forever true that “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). We need one another and truly we are better together. This is the working assumption in all fellowship. Therefore, I would offer that **fellowship is a devoted alliance between individuals with a mutual spiritual heritage and who actively participate in one another’s spiritual formation.***

1. Because we share the same divine life, have the same spiritual DNA, and consequently belong to the same spiritual family, **the goal of fellowship is to encourage one another toward being like our spiritual Parentage** (Lev 19:2; Mt 5:48; Eph 4:15-16; 5:1; 1 Pt 1:16). Put differently, no believer grows alone because we are all connected! As each family member actively participates in the growth of other family members, primarily through serving from one’s spiritual giftedness (1 Cor. 12:7-11), the entire organism gets stronger.
2. *Although we must avoid a “cultural Christianity,” (embracing the values of Christianity but not being a Christ-follower), **fellowship provides the opportunity to imitate others as they imitate Christ.*** Negatively, Scripture warns of assimilating into the wrong crowd (Ps 1; Deut 18:9). Positively, we are encouraged to follow the example of others who follow Christ and to hold in high esteem all who model service and holy living (1 Cor 4:16-17; 11:1; Philip 2:19-30; 3:17; 2 Thess 3:7-10; 1 Tim 4:15).
3. **Fellowship is preventative, keeping us from spiritual malnutrition.** Read Heb 10:24-25. This text is a strong warning to those who think they can live their spiritual lives apart from biblical community. In essence, fellowship is God’s gracious resource for preserving our spiritual lives. [Note: The text warns against *habitual* neglect of biblical community (“as is the habit of some”), not an occasional respite due to burn-out or church abuse.] Fellowship is God’s spiritual lifejacket to weather the storms of life. When tempted to abandon our confession of faith because of torrential storms, biblical community is God’s way of reeling us back in to shallow and safe waters (Jude 23).
4. **Fellowship promotes honesty and transparency, keeping us from the deceitfulness of sin.** Heb 3:13 calls on us to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” When we’re living in isolation and apart from biblical community, it’s easier to concoct our own definition of what is sinful and what is not and be carried away by the deceitfulness of sin. Fellowship offers a restraining influence so we avoid distorted views and twisted interpretations used to justify sinful attitudes and activities (see Pr 15:22; Ps 1). We are **better together!**



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How Might We Think about Worship & the Liturgy?

Whereas worship involves hungering and thirsting for what we most desire (Ps 42:1-2; Mt 5:6), liturgy involves recalibrating or re-habituating our longings and reordering our desires. Put simply, worship is embodied rehearsal of our affections that engages our whole being (Rom 12:1-2). **Worship, therefore, is an embodied response to what God has done in us.** Recall from Lesson 1 I said...

“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.”

Whether free and spontaneous or calculated and habituated, worship involves our whole being.

1. **Worship does not begin in us but does come from us and through us.** Behind and before every act of worship is a deep and profound reaction to God’s love in us and for us. “We love **because** he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). It is “**because** God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” that we cast all our attention and affections on the Guest of honor in our hearts (Rom 5:5; see also Ps 95:6-7; Mt 4:10; Rev 4:8-11; 5:11-14). **Similarly, though worship involves us, it is not about us.** It’s important not to conflate the sincerity of our worship with the God of our worship. God, not our subjective experience, is the subject and the object of worship. It is God who initiates and it is God who inspires true worship. We willingly and gladly receive his movement by actively responding in praise and adoration.
2. **Worship may include liturgy but is more than routine, repetitive activities.** While traditional patterns of worship are not wrong *per se*, if mercy, justice, righteousness, and sacrifice are concealed by our religious practices, or are altogether absent from them, then God’s verdict is clear: “worship nauseates him!” (paraphrasing Amos 5:21-24; Hos 6:6; Matt 23:23-24). Worship is not just about doing; it’s about being the kind of person God calls us to be. Anything less falls short of true worship.
3. **There’s an important sense in which worship must be detached from our subjective experience in order to see the value of repetition in spiritual formation.** Listen to James K. A. Smith:

“If you think of worship as a bottom-up, expressive endeavor, repetition will seem insincere and inauthentic. But when you see worship as an invitation to a top-down encounter in which God is refashioning your deepest habits, then repetition looks very different: it’s how God re-habituates us. In a formational paradigm, repetition isn’t insincere, because you’re not *showing*, you’re *submitting*. This is crucial because there is no formation without habituation. Virtue formation takes practice, and there is no practice that is not repetitive. We willingly embrace repetition as a good in all kinds of other sectors of our life—to hone our golf swing, our piano prowess, and our mathematical abilities, for example. If the sovereign Lord has created us as creatures of habit, why should we think repetition is inimical to our spiritual growth?” (*You Are What You Love*, p 80).
4. **Worship is not limited by location (Jn 4:21-24).** Jesus teaches, “God is spirit” (having no physical form) meaning he is not geographically or spatially bound. Thus, God is spiritually present to everyone at all times and relationally present to different people under different circumstances (Ps 51:9-11; Mk 15:34; 2 Thess 1:9). One of the implications of this theological truth is that we can worship God anywhere! “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).