

The Spiritual Formation of Jesus: Transferable (various scriptures)

Luke chapter 10 tells the account of Jesus sending out 72 of his followers to minister ahead of him in towns and places he intended to go. Among other things he told them to heal the sick who are there and tell them, “The Kingdom of God is near you.” He also said that those who listened to them, were listening to him. When they returned to Jesus the 72 joyfully reported the success of their mission to the point that even demons had submitted to them in his name. At this, Jesus, described as full of joy through the Holy Spirit praised the Father because it was clear that the ministry Jesus was pursuing, was transferable to his followers. It transferred to them because their inner lives were aligning with his—what Jesus knew of the Father and what followed on that was taking hold in them enabling them to live in the power of God’s life as Jesus did.

This is the main idea we’ve been considering in this series of messages: that the spiritual formation of Jesus is transferable to his followers, and that discipleship means ordering our lives in the manner of his so that God’s desire for our life is realized, that is tangibly experienced and expressed, allowing God to grant us whatever we desire because our lives are aligned with Jesus embodying and bringing about the Kingdom in our time. This forms the basis of the promise Jesus made that he and the Father will grant whatever we ask in his name—not a catch phrase, or secret formula, but that which is aligned with the character, values, and purpose of Jesus.

And here is where we discover the value of spiritual disciplines, or habits. These practices place us in the realm of the Spirit so that by the Spirit’s work, our inner life comes into alignment with the inner life of Jesus. Spiritual disciplines are not for the sake of righteousness or merit as though we are proving our worthiness. Spiritual disciplines are for the sake of wisdom, which you’ll recall means “skill in living.” Through them we gain the skills to navigate the reality of our life in the world. Regularly engaging in them prepares us to meet whatever we face in the course of our lives—we won’t be stymied in a moment of challenge and have to ponder, “what would Jesus do?” in this situation. What Jesus would do will naturally and easily flow from our lives because our inner life matches his.

Because we are embodied, spiritual disciplines involve our physical selves, our actions, because what we do affects us. There is thought given to what we do. Feelings or emotions attach to thoughts, so our thoughts affect how we feel. Part of the human condition is that we’re wired to operate by habit. We sometimes refer to this as muscle memory—we learn and then recall actions or feelings automatically. Through repetition we acquire the ability to do some things, as it were, “without thinking” about it. Of course there is thought involved, but because it has been trained, the thought generates action so rapidly we find ourselves doing something before we’re consciously aware of it. I think I’ve told you of the time we were on vacation in a country where you drive on the left side of the road. So, of course, the cars there have the driver’s seat on the right hand of the car. It took me several days to learn how to get in the driver’s seat. My body was used to automatically maneuvering itself behind the steering wheel from the left—it didn’t know how to do that from the right, but, you bump your head enough times, you eventually get it. Feelings can generate in the same way. A song we hear, or the scent of a fragrance associated with someone we love can generate an emotional response. It can catch us by surprise when that happens, but something very tangible can trigger the way we feel.

Spiritual disciplines, then, are a means of training ourselves, developing a sort of muscle memory for involving our whole selves—action, thought, feeling—in the life of God leading us to act in accordance with God’s desires in any given moment, and to delight in that reality. Broadly speaking, by practicing spiritual disciplines, we’re training ourselves in the following ten ways: 1) to an awareness of being in God’s presence, 2) to have a right understanding of God, 3) to have a correct understanding of ourselves relative to God, 4) to think in the way God thinks, 5) to feel as God feels, 6) to desire what God desires, 7) to act in ways consistent with God’s character, 8) to delight in outcomes that align with God’s purposes, 9) to celebrate God’s goodness, & 10) to easily and naturally display or express God’s life.

Friends, this training occurs in the course of our daily life, at home, at work, with our friends, our neighbors, our casual encounters, even with those who are opponents or antagonists. It happens in the causes we promote or oppose, in times of joy or sorrow, health or illness, riches of poverty, in peace or conflict, in community or isolation, in times of great excitement or in the mundane.

Nothing about this is limited to simply “going to church.” What happens when the church gathers is part of our disciplines—worship and fellowship and service to one another. You who follow Jesus, who are determined to be his disciples learning from him how best to live life, you ARE the church, wherever you are. You don’t “go to church,” you—as the church, regularly gather together, but the church is wherever you are, and you are being formed in the image of Christ throughout the day, in the course of your daily routine as you give attention to this formative process that is always pursued in you by the Holy Spirit.

On the one hand, as Paul points out in Phil. 1, “the one who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” This means that God is doing this formative work; God does it by the Spirit, and this is something towards which God is always pursuing in you. On the other hand, in 1 Cor. 9, Paul speaks to our part in this: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” Using athletics as an illustration, Paul points out that athletes strictly train for what they hope to gain. He refers to beating his body, figuratively—he means training that brings his whole self into the regimen to gain God’s outcome.

The truth is that you can ignore or disregard this formation. God’s love for you is not conditioned by this—you can’t make God love you more or less. God loves you period. But God’s love for you isn’t coercive, meaning that God will not force you to pay attention to the formative process God desires for you—that your inner life would match the inner life of Jesus. Though this is God’s desire for you because it is the best path for navigating the reality of our world, God will not, indeed we might go so far as to say that God cannot force you to adopt this way of life. God makes it possible for you—that’s the place of grace—but you must desire it for yourself. And there is effort involved, but as you train in the disciplines, the way of life they inspire becomes natural, or easy for you to live by. We might call it “second nature.” In fact, this way of life becomes your primary or first nature.

To that end, let me ask some questions that can point you in the direction of this formation: 1) How are you intentionally recognizing the presence of God? How do cultivate the sense of God’s sovereignty, that you are part of God’s family, that you are submissive to God? 2) How are you informing your understanding of God? Is time in scripture part of your life? 3) How do you set the Lord before you? This would be a good place for scripture memory and prayer, perhaps listening to praise songs, remembering key thoughts: I am who you say I am; Is He worthy, He is. 4) How are you training your response to the circumstances of your day to reflect and strive towards kingdom values? This is the place to evaluate what Spirit guides your temperament, your reactions, your feelings. Solitude helps here—taking a day to be alone reminds you that the world gets along just fine even though you’re not engaged in it—it doesn’t revolve around you. Practicing silence helps—it tempers our inclination towards instant response—when we’ve learned silence, we hear better and we weigh our words carefully. 5) How are you practicing the virtuous life? Where do you find beauty—how is beauty present in you? DW described beauty as the goodness of God made manifest to the senses. How’s your purity? Do your actions, thoughts, inclinations lean into God’s holiness? 6) How are you responding to your awareness of pain in creation? How do you cultivate compassion—what actions does it prompt in you? 7) How are you celebrating the goodness of God? This is the place for worship, praise, and thanksgiving. And finally, 8) What is keeping you from ordering your life in the manner of Christ’s life, and how will you resolve that conflict? This is where intention and means gain traction.

Many years ago I read an interview Arnold Schwarzenegger gave, where he said that his decision to become a body-builder was based on the fact that other athletes had to go to a clubhouse to show off their trophy, but the body-builder carried his trophy everywhere he went. Spiritual formation, where your inner life matches the inner life of Jesus is also something you carry with you everywhere you go. You introduce the fragrance of Christ into every place you are, and when you die, you present your changed life as a gift to God. It's the only thing we carry with us into eternity. It's also the only thing we can give to God—the changed life we received by God's grace through Jesus. And when you do, God will say, "well done, good and faithful servant. Come and share your Master's happiness." AMEN