



from the

Inside Out

INSIDE

**VIDEO SUPPLEMENT**

Transcription of Video Segments

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Session One

What is Spiritual Formation? Pages 2 – 5

## Session Two

What is My Picture of God? Pages 5 – 7

## Session Three

What is My Picture of Myself? Pages 7 – 10

## Session Four

What is My Picture of the Gospel? Pages 11 – 13

## Session Five

How Do People Change? Pages 14 – 17

## Session Six

How Do I Follow Jesus? Pages 17 – 20

Video transcriptions produced by Renouaré  
As part of their series, *From the Inside Out*.

For more information, visit [Renouare.org](http://Renouare.org)

## ***From the Inside Out***

### **Session One: What is Spiritual Formation?**

The other day, I saw a little video clip on the internet of a puppy who apparently does not have any dog siblings, but is growing up in the company of rabbits. The thing that was so striking about this clip was that you could see the rabbits go hopping by, and then, shortly behind them, the puppy would come hopping by. And I do mean hopping. This puppy didn't run around like a typical dog at all. He hopped. He moved, to the best of his ability, exactly the same way that rabbits did. I was so taken by this clip because, first of all, it was totally adorable, but secondly, it reminded me that creatures are profoundly shaped by whatever and whomever they spend time with.

In this course, we're going to use the term spiritual formation a lot, and it can be tempting to think of spiritual formation as an elite process reserved for super spiritual people. But the truth is every living creature gets some kind of formation. In the case of us humans, because we are both body and spirit, we can properly call the formation of a human being a spiritual formation. So are you tracking with me? Every single person gets a spiritual formation, whether they want to or not, and whether they're aware of it or not.

Think about who you are today. What lights you up inside? What totally triggers you? What or who would you die for? What could you not care less about? What brings tears to your eyes, and if you fight those tears, what makes you fight them? What do you assume to be true about the world, about God, about yourself, about other people? All of your answers to those questions are the product, in at least a significant part, of your own unique spiritual formation. And your spiritual formation is the ongoing product of a whole constellation of variables: your parents and grandparents, your siblings and friends, your education, your work, the way you've been endlessly marketed to, all the neural pathways you've formed in your brain through multiple exposures to images and ideas, and through repeated patterns of thought, and through the forces of habit, the way you've been loved, the way you've been wounded. Your spiritual formation is the product of every conversation you've ever had, every book you've ever read, every song you've ever heard, every joke you've ever laughed at, and yes, even every clip you've ever watched on the internet.

So what is spiritual formation? In the words of Dallas Willard, "Spiritual formation is the process by which the human spirit, which is to say our personality, character and will, is given a definite form or character. And it happens to everyone." The good news is once you have become aware of how you have been formed and are being formed, there are things you can do about who you are now and who you are becoming. An awareness of your own spiritual formation will allow you to become more intentional about what, and especially who, you let shape you.

So if you are a Christ follower or if you are considering becoming a Christ follower, a very important question emerges: What is Christian spiritual formation? Well, in its simplest terms, Christian spiritual formation is what happens when you intentionally center your life in Christ. That just makes sense, right? If we know that we are formed by whatever, or especially *whoever*, we spend time with, then, as Christians, we decide to spend our time with Jesus. Now, I just said that - "we decide to spend our time with Jesus" - as if doing that is a simple and easy process. But, of course, deciding to spend your time with Jesus turns out to be a richer, and wilder, and harder, and more thrilling, and multifaceted adventure than we could possibly describe. Still, there are two words, I think, that can help us begin to find the way. Those two words are focus and openness.

Let's talk about focus first. Your formation becomes a Christian spiritual formation when you make the decision to focus your life on Christ. This decision affects everything you do and involves some very intentional rhythms of scripture reading, and worship, and prayer, and spending time with other people who love Jesus, and a whole

bunch more. Most primarily, focusing your life on Jesus involves learning to turn your thoughts to him over and over again, moment by moment, practicing his presence all day long, every day.

And what about openness? Well, the decision to focus your life on Jesus emphasizes your agency in your own spiritual formation. Instead of letting life haphazardly shape you, you decide to center your life around Christ. But that's just a small part of what can actually happen in Christ-centered spiritual formation. Because if using your agency to focus on Christ helps you become increasingly able to open yourself up to his movement in your life, then you create space for his agency and your formation. As important as your agency is, God's agency is a much, much bigger part of the equation.

See, most of us are being shaped by a world that has a very particular agenda for our lives, a world that primarily wants to make us fear-driven, needy consumers. But if you become open to allowing Jesus to shape you, instead, well, what Jesus wants for you is freedom. Freedom from the powers of sin and evil and death. What Jesus wants for you is life. Abundant life, life to the full. And what Jesus wants for you is healing and wholeness, a life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Now, if you remember that Jesus is one with his Father and one with the Holy Spirit, you realize that to be open to the act of presence of Jesus in your life is to allow the healing, redeeming, transforming, liberating power of the triune God of the universe: Father, Son, and Spirit, to begin to flow through you. Slowly but surely, you can expect that power and presence to reform and transform you, even as Christ, to use the language of the Apostle Paul, is formed in you.

So what is Christian spiritual formation? James Bryan Smith sums it up like this: "Jesus-centered spiritual formation is the process of being transformed into the image of Christ, through a relationship of intimacy with God, by the power of the Spirit, in order to live a good and beautiful life of faith, hope, love, joy, and peace - a life that will be a blessing to oneself and to others and will glorify God now and for all eternity." Who wouldn't want that?

There are lots of ways to talk about this adventure of being formed by Jesus. We can use the language of discipleship, or of apprenticeship, or of friendship. So let's take a moment to talk about each of those paradigms.

One of the most common ways we can think about spiritual formation centered in Jesus is by using the language of discipleship, which is, of course, the language Jesus himself used. During the time Jesus lived in Galilee, it was common for students to identify a rabbi they wished to emulate and follow him everywhere he went. Jesus' disciples responded to his invitation to follow him by pretty much dropping everything and centering their lives on him. They were listening, observing, and imitating; living with him so that they could learn to be like him. Based on this pattern, Dallas Willard offers us a contemporary definition of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. "A disciple is a person who has decided that the most important thing in her life is to learn how to do what Jesus said to do. Disciples simply are people who are constantly revising their affairs to carry through on their decision to follow Jesus." In other words, disciples systematically and progressively organize the details of their lives to grow in their capacity to focus upon and be open to Jesus.

Did you know that the New Testament authors collectively used the word Christian only three times to describe followers of Jesus? They used the word disciple 269 times. Apparently, it was impossible for first-century Christ followers to see a commitment to Jesus as anything less than discipleship. Significantly, this means that all the New Testament promises regarding life in Christ are descriptions of what life looks like for people who are living

as intentional disciples of Jesus. Discipleship is not some optional add-on to life in Christ. It's essential. As Richard Foster puts it, "Believing in Jesus and discipleship to Jesus are part of the same action."

Another way to explore spiritual formation centered in Jesus is to use the model of apprenticeship. Apprentices in any craft or trade must pay very close attention to the one they wish to follow. They need practical training and lots of it. The apprenticeship model is helpful because it reminds us that we can learn some vital things from Jesus about the rhythms of a flourishing life. If, in the gospels, we see him stepping away from the busy demands of his life to pray, then, as his apprentices, we should, too. If we see him reaching out to the outcast, we know that's something we need to practice as well. If we see him quoting scripture in the wilderness, then we know that part of our apprenticeship will be to learn scripture by heart. But as with our discipleship model, we also need to be with him in order to learn from him. So we not only learn from the earthly life he lived, but we also learned from his active presence with us today.

Spiritual practices, at their best, are practices of friendship. Now, many people struggle with the idea of relating to God as a friend because they feel it reduces God's majesty and transcendence. And yet, in John 15:15, Jesus himself says that he calls us not servants, but friends. The beautiful thing about friendship as a model for our formation in Jesus is that it reminds us that all our spiritual practices - prayers, study, worship, and more - are not spiritual techniques, but rather ways of being intentional about spending time with the God who deeply desires relationship with us. As God's friends, we will have the seriousness of disciples and the teachability of apprentices, but also the delight of discovering we are His beloved.

Before we wrap up our exploration of this first big question, we'd be wise to clarify some things that Christian spiritual formation is not. First, Christian spiritual formation is not about fixing ourselves. Only God can make us whole. A journey into Christian spiritual formation is a journey into opening yourself up to the ways God wants to heal and transform you.

Second, Christian spiritual formation is not about striving to become flawless. Rather, it's about a joyful adventure of ongoing learning, all in the context of a loving friendship and an empowering apprenticeship. If you ever find that you are starting to white-knuckle the journey, go back and read Jesus' words to you captured in Matthew 11:28-30. You might find the Message paraphrase especially helpful, which reads, "I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Third, Christian spiritual formation is not about living in some kind of spiritual bubble. It encompasses all of life, body, soul, mind and spirit, and you'll probably find that your greatest growth happens in your kitchen, and at the office, and in the nitty-gritty of your ordinary days and your closest relationships. Also, don't be surprised if your formation journey includes the help of not only your pastors and teachers, but also doctors, therapists, and coaches. If there has been significant trauma in your life, you may discover that getting the help you need to begin to process and heal those wounds must accompany or even precede the development of other spiritual practices.

Fourth, Christian spiritual formation is not a quick fix. As James Houston was fond of saying, "Spiritual formation is the slowest of all human movements." Change takes time, and God, in His mercy, usually moves very gently within the fragile corridors of a human soul. Expect your transformation to be gradual, and know that others may be able to detect changes in you long before you can.

Well, my friend, you and I are receiving a spiritual formation, whether we want one or not. We are being shaped by whatever and whomever we spend time with. So let me ask you this: is there anyone you would trust to shape you more than Jesus? That's not a rhetorical question. What's happening inside of you as we explore this invitation into a life centered around Jesus? Excitement, resistance, hope, uncertainty? If you find yourself

feeling some hesitation, it might have something to do with your picture of God. I'll look forward to exploring that with you in our second big question. Until then, may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

---

## ***From the Inside Out***

### **Session Two: What is My Picture of God?**

Let's begin with two quotes. The first one is from A.W. Tozer: "What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us. "Let me say that again. "What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us." And here's the second quote from Dallas Willard: "The single most important thing about us is our idea of God and its associated images. The single most important thing about us is our idea of God and its associated images."

Now, you might not agree with Tozer and Willard that the picture we hold of God is the most important thing about us. You may be able to think of something else that is even more important. Even so, I want to invite you to ponder why it would be that both Tozer and Willard were convinced that the picture we hold of God is so incredibly important. Why do you think they were so passionate about this?

You know, I have the privilege of serving as the director of the Renovaré Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation, which offers a two-year deep dive into intentional life with God. When James Bryan Smith heard that I had stepped into that role, he called me up, and he encouraged me, and then he offered me one piece of advice. "Carolyn," he said, "before you do any work with the students in the area of spiritual disciplines or anything like that, make sure you spend some time with them first on their picture of God."

Are you noticing a theme here? I think Tozer and Willard and Smith are all so concerned about the picture we hold of God, because they know this: We become like the God we worship. If I believe that God not only loves, but is love, then the more I center my life on Him, the more loving I will become. If, however, I actually hold a picture of an angry God, I will gradually become an angrier person. If I worship a trustworthy God, I will have an easier time trusting God and other people, but if my image is of an unreliable God, I will likely become increasingly anxious and controlling. That's why the early 20th century Anglican priest William Temple once said, "If we have a negative picture of God, the more religious we become, the worse it gets." Huh, let me repeat that. "If we have a negative picture of God, the more religious we become, the worse it gets."

William Temple knew that the picture we hold of God not only shapes us, it affects everything else, including and especially how we read the Bible, how we interpret and relate to suffering, and how we treat each other. There is no area of our lives that is untouched by the picture we hold of God, even, and maybe especially, if that picture is largely unconscious, which leads me to the next thing I want to invite you to notice. There is often, for many of us, a gap between our professed images of God, the things we say we believe about him, and our default pictures of God, the ideas we hold deep down, perhaps unaware, which are profoundly shaping us. We might say God is loving, and faithful, and generous, and beautiful, but we need to pay attention to how we relate to God and conceive of Him when difficult circumstances arise. Our default pictures of God show up more in times of stress. When something bad happens, if your default picture is of a good and loving God, then your instinctive response might be something like, "This is hard, but thank You for being with me as I go through this," and maybe if you're feeling adventurous, you might even ask God, "What invitation might You have for me in this hard thing?" But if your default, under the hood, unconscious picture of God is that He is harsh or unloving, then your instinctive response might be something more like, "Why are You doing this to me?" Or "I know I'm being punished."

Depending on how you were raised, and where you came to faith, and how you've been formed so far, there is a whole range of possible default pictures of God that you could be contending with. You may have a picture of God as an exacting parent, or maybe even a drill sergeant, one who just can't wait to send anyone who steps out of line straight to Hell, or you may have a picture of a distant or indifferent God. You may have a picture of a well-meaning but incompetent or ineffective God. He'd like to help, but his hands are tied. Or maybe a benevolent old grandfather God who just wants you to have a nice time, and would never challenge you to grow. You may have a picture of a chronically disappointed God. This is the one that plagues me.

I was blessed to have been given a pretty healthy God picture as a child, but I do find that I can default to a picture of a God who is mildly disappointed in me most of the time, you know, just sort of rolling His eyes at me. Or if you're like a lot of other people, you may even have a picture of a sort of godfather God. He's very powerful and He can get stuff done for you, but don't get on His bad side. These default pictures can be shaped by the voices of our parents, the voices of our teachers, the voices of our preachers, and the voices of our culture. But the truth is, holding a distorted picture of God has been a fundamental sickness that has plagued us really from the beginning. Think of what happened with our ancestors in Genesis 3. Do you remember the story?

Adam and Eve are in the garden with their good and beautiful God. Every evening He comes to walk with them in the garden, and they can't wait to see Him. They have everything they need for a full and flourishing life, until the serpent decides to launch an attack. And what is the serpent's MO? He suggests that God is holding out on them, that God can't be trusted, that God doesn't have their best interest at heart, and after they fall for the lie that God is not good, that God is not with them and for them, then the next time God comes to walk with them in the garden, in the cool of the day, they now see God as someone they need to hide from.

But God has not changed. They are the ones who have changed. Their sin and their shame distorts their perception of who God is. Sadly, the apple does not fall far from the tree, and this problem of distorted God pictures plagues us to this day. When you read through the Gospels, you see that Jesus is constantly heartbroken by the pictures people hold of his Father. He offers one of the most beautiful stories, the parable of the prodigal son, to help us begin to picture just how good, and beautiful, and full of mercy his Father really is.

So if the picture we hold of God is so incredibly critical to our formation, what are some true things we can say about who God really is? Trevor Hudson helps us with this at the Renovaré Institute, and I'm going to borrow a bit of his language here.

Maybe the first thing we can say about God is that he is always greater and better than we can possibly imagine. The psalmist tells us that God's greatness is unsearchable. His greatness is so vast that we can't begin to understand all of it. This means that, while our encounters with God are significant, God is always greater than our particular experience of Him. It reminds us that, while the language we have to describe God is helpful, God will always be more than anything we can say about Him. And it helps us see that while our theology and traditions can serve to point us to God, He will always transcend our doctrines and denominations.

God is big. Trevor likes to say, and I wish I could do this in his great South African accent, "God is very, very, very big." What's more, God is also better than we imagine. Love isn't something God does on and off as our behavior warrants it. No, God is love. It's His very being. He can't stop loving. It's who He is. You can trust Him to be good and to will your good without fail. In the book of 1 John, the Apostle tells us twice that God is love, and then, in case we aren't getting the point, he puts it another way. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." So whatever picture we hold of God, we can remind ourselves that God is always greater and always better than we imagine.

Maybe the second thing we can say about God is that His character is clearly revealed to us in the person of Jesus. In fact, one of the ways you can check to see if your picture of God is healthy is to ask, "Is there anything I believe about God's character that is in conflict with the character of Christ?" Remember, Jesus said, if we've seen him, we've seen the Father. In his teaching, his actions, his sacrificial death, and his victorious resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth reveals to us the character of God. If you ever wonder if God is truly a God of both unsearchable greatness and unending love, compassion, and goodness, you can look at Jesus, and say a resounding yes.

We said a minute ago that God is always greater than we can imagine. That reality got us in touch with God's transcendence. Now we want to also affirm that God is closer and more accessible than we can possibly conceive. God is not only transcendent, He is imminent, tenderly imminent. Through His Spirit, He abides in you and you in Him. In fact, the Apostle Paul says that it is in God that you live, and move, and have your being. God is very, very, very close.

A fourth thing that could help you clarify your picture of God is to affirm that God is three in one. Jesus teaches us that God is more wonderful and more complex than we could ever imagine. Although the New Testament never uses the word Trinity, biblical writers teach us that God exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And here's the thing: because God has always been triune, we know that God has always been relational. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always existed in a circle of deep love, of mutual affection, and fellowship, and delight. You were created not because God was lonely, or bored, or needed a science experiment, but because the Father, Son and Spirit had so much love, and fellowship, and affection between them that they wanted to widen the circle to create other beings who could participate in that life and that love. So that deep longing in your heart for relationship and for connection, that longing makes a whole lot of sense. It's what you were created for.

Now, our challenge is to remember that the Trinity is not a mystery to be solved, but a mystery to be worshiped, and a wonder to be loved. God is one, and God is also three in one, a relationship of love we are invited to enter into and participate in until we exclaim with Julian of Norwich, "The Trinity suddenly filled my heart with the greatest joy. And I understood that in heaven, it will be like that forever for those who come there. For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity, the Trinity is our maker and protector, the Trinity is our dear friend forever, our everlasting joy and bliss through our Lord Jesus Christ."

If you desire to be led into the abundant life Jesus wants to give you, you must have a sufficiently good and beautiful picture of God. The good news is, as you detect distortions in your picture of God, you can ask God himself to begin to heal them, and that healing will change not only the way you see God, but also, the way you see yourself. We'll talk about that in the next session. Until then, may the peace of our very good God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

---

### ***From the Inside Out***

#### **Session Three: What is My Picture of Myself?**

How many people do you know who have a warped or toxic picture of themselves? Folks who can barely think about the noise of the loop stuck on repeat in their heads, playing hits like, "I'm not good enough," "I'm unlovable," "I need to prove myself." Or, maybe you know some people who seem to have the opposite problem - people who have a voice in their heads saying things like, "I am the center of the universe," "life owes me," "I must make the world conform to my needs."



The writer Anne Lamott suggests that many of us somehow manage to have both types of tapes playing in our heads in a very unhelpful mashup - both "I'm not good enough" and "I am the center of the universe" - until we become, if I may paraphrase Anne, "the piece of garbage the world revolves around."

The distorted and toxic pictures we have of ourselves are both a symptom of our malformation and an ongoing cause of it. So Christian spiritual formation must take the way we see ourselves very seriously.

Back in the 1960s, a British mission agency was concerned about how many of their missionaries were burning out in the field. These missionaries would head out to their posts full of hope and zeal, but they would soon become exhausted or bitter in their work. The mission society reached out to a British psychologist named Dr. Frank Lake to see if he could diagnose what was going wrong. After countless interviews, Dr. Lake concluded that the problem for many of these people was that they were trying to use their work to achieve acceptance, to prove their worth to God, to others, and to themselves. Lake argued that we can only do healthy, sustainable work when we are operating from a place of acceptance rather than for acceptance. When we realize that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and that there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.

I'm willing to bet that this principle, that you can only do healthy work when you are working from acceptance rather than for acceptance, is abundantly evident in your daily life. Have you ever been on a committee where one of the committee members feels a need to really prove his or her worth? It almost always derails the work.

I see this often in my context as a musician. When we are recording a new album in the studio, it's critically important that every musician in the room feels like they belong. When they do, they have nothing to prove. If they suggest a musical part and it works, great. If it doesn't work, no problem. They are there to serve the music. But if anyone in the room feels that they are not yet accepted by the group, if they feel like they still have something to prove, the creative process just doesn't work as well. A musician who's working for acceptance is not free to selflessly serve the music. If they offer a musical idea that we don't end up using, it feels to them like a personal rejection. This problem of working for rather than from acceptance can show up in our parenting, in our work, and yes, even in our ministry and our service.

Remember that William Temple quote about our picture of God? Temple observed that if our picture of God is off, then the more religious we become, the worse it gets. In much the same way, if your picture of yourself is off, if you have a default idea running under the hood that you must earn God's favor, then the more religious you become, the worse you'll get. In fact, you may become a danger to yourself and to others.

So an important movement in healthy Jesus-centered spiritual formation is learning to surrender your need to achieve acceptance, even and especially in your relationship with God, and to begin to realize that you are already wholly accepted and wholly loved.

Given that the picture you hold of yourself is so incredibly critical to your formation, what are some true things you can say about who you really are? The first and most fundamental, unalienable thing to know about yourself is that you are made in the image of God. Do you remember the creation account in Genesis 1? God gets quite a bit done in the first five days, creating light, sky, land and seas, galaxies upon galaxies and creatures of the sea and the air. We're told that at the end of each of those five days, God surveys what he's made and calls it good. Then on the sixth day, God creates in two parts. First, all the animals that live on the land are created and God calls it good. Then comes the moment when humans, made in the image of God, are created. Listen to Genesis 1:27. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Then God looks at what he has made and for the first time, he calls it very good.

A bit later, in Genesis 2, we're told that human beings are distinct from all other animals because God himself actually breathes the breath of life into the first human's nostrils. So here's the deal. Human beings are immeasurably valuable to God because we are his little image bearers. You are immeasurably valuable to God because you are his beloved little image bearer.

One of the things I've loved about working with theologian and previous Renovaré President Chris Hall is his ingrained habit of referring to all people, all the time as image bearers. If you start thinking of yourself as God's beloved image bearer, it becomes a lot harder to say nasty things to yourself. And of course, if you start to see others as God's beloved image bearers, that changes everything as well. The next time someone cuts you off in traffic, be sure to include the term "image bearer" in whatever you have to say about that person. You might find that it changes what you have to say quite a bit!

The second thing we can say about who you are is that, no matter what happens, you are God's beloved. Remember how we talked in the last session about the fact that the Father, Son and Spirit made you because they wanted to include you in their life and love? As Trevor Hudson likes to say, "You were desired into being. You were made from love, by love, for love."

When Dr. Lake was working with those burned out missionaries, he decided to search for ideas by studying the life of someone who was able to participate in demanding mission work without burning out. Ultimately, Dr. Lake partnered up with a Swiss theologian named Emil Brunner, and together they decided that the best example they could possibly study was the life of Jesus. After all, the Bible tells us that Jesus often had the whole town at his door seeking healing, and yet he was able to continue on in the work he was called to do without becoming bitter or exhausted.

As Lake and Brunner studied the life of Jesus, they discovered something very striking. At two critical junctures in Jesus' life and ministry, he experienced profound, concrete moments of acceptance and identification as his Father's beloved. In the first instance, right before Jesus began his public ministry, the Father declared publicly at his baptism, "You are my Son, the beloved. With you, I am well pleased." And in the second instance, about three years into Jesus' ministry, right around the time things began getting more difficult and Jesus began to warn his disciples about his impending death, the Father declared publicly at the transfiguration, "This is my son, the Beloved. With him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Wow, thought Lake and Brunner. If even Jesus needed to be reminded of his belovedness and his acceptance, how much more do we need that same baseline of affirmation and acceptance and awareness of our own belovedness?

Unless we be tempted to think that only Jesus, as God's only Son, is God's beloved, we need to take note of what Jesus tells us in John 15:9, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you." In just the way that Jesus is the Father's beloved, so are we his beloveds.

If we read the gospels we can see that while Jesus was here on earth, one of his main emphases was affirming the belovedness of every image bearer he met, including and especially folks who often found themselves on the margins. I love the fact that one of Jesus' best friends, the Apostle John, referred to himself as "the one Jesus loved," and I actually suspect that all of Jesus' friends saw themselves that way. Jesus came to show us that image bearers are God's beloved, as they are, before they've done anything to earn that love. Think of a familiar verse like John 3:16. That verse reads, "God so loved the world that he sent his only beloved son," not "God sent his son so that the world could become lovable." God's love always comes first. So this is your baseline identity. You are God's little image bearer. You are wanted into being. You are his beloved.

So the most fundamental fact about you is that you are God's beloved image bearer. But there is also another quite important fact about you and it's this: you are deeply bent. Let me try to explain what I mean. When I say

that you were made from love, by love, for love, I'm saying you were made from agape love, by agape love, for agape love. Agape love is the highest form of love, the only love completely free of mixed motives.

It's the unconditional, self-sacrificing, others-focused love that the Father and the Son and the Spirit have always shared and that we see extended to us from the Father through Jesus on the cross. That means that you are meant to find yourself and flourish as a human being by giving yourself away to God and to other people just in the same way that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit give themselves away to each other and to us.

But, left to our own devices, agape love doesn't come naturally to us at all. When sin entered the world, the center of gravity shifted in our own natures. Instead of our focus and energy and love flowing outward to God and to our fellow humans, we began to put ourselves at the center, and all our love and focus and energy began to flow in the wrong direction, toward ourselves. Augustine, and Luther after him, use a Latin term to describe our condition. They say that we are *incurvatus in se*—curved in on ourselves.

Luther argues that the Bible "describes man as curved in upon himself to such an extent that he bends not only physical, but also spiritual goods towards himself, seeking himself in all things." And of course, a world that seeks to train us into needy consumers only reinforces that malformation. In this condition, we still have an impulse to love, but that love has very little chance of blossoming into self-giving, unconditional, others-centered love. It always has to have something in it for us. So that's why sometimes our human relationships that start out so promising can become obsessive or possessive or destructive or codependent.

*Incurvatus in se*, we're curved in on ourselves. The love of God is the only thing in the universe powerful enough to uncurve us. We need God's love to captivate us to such an extent that we begin to get the focus off of ourselves, and we need to cultivate an openness to God's love so that it can gradually pervade us, giving us the power and grace necessary to begin the unbending process. God wants to unbend us. We should expect it to be sometimes very challenging. It will take oodles of time. Remember, spiritual formation is the slowest of all human movements, and it will require our cooperation. This unbending process is in fact a huge part of what Jesus-centered spiritual formation is all about.

But you must never, ever be tempted to think that God wants to unbend you in order to make you lovable. It's not true. God wants to unbend you, not to make you lovable, but because He loves you so much. It is out of His great love for you that He desires to unfurl you into the flourishing human being He created you to be.

So here's the truth. You are deeply, deeply beloved, and you are also deeply bent. It's only when you live into your belovedness that you can begin to trust the unbending. Later in this course we'll get into a world of spiritual disciplines and practices you might want to experiment within your formation adventure. But for now, I want to suggest just one. Every morning when you wake up, ask God to give you an awareness of his personal love for you. Just do that. And even if you don't sense any answer to that prayer at first, keep asking. See what happens.

James Bryan Smith is fond of teaching people a simple two-part phrase. The first part goes like this: "I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights." As you brush your teeth tomorrow morning, you might want to look yourself in the mirror and try that one on for size. "I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights." And then the second part of that phrase is this: "And I live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God."

"I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights and I live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God." What does it mean to live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God? Well, we'll explore that in the next session, which is all about your picture of the Gospel. But until then, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus. And may you know, friend, how much he loves you.

## ***From the Inside Out***

### **Session Four: What is My Picture of the Gospel?**

You may know that the word "gospel" comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means "good news." It's a word that pops up in the New Testament with a whole lot of history behind it. Check this out from RC Sproul. "In the Old Testament, the basic meaning of the term 'gospel' was simply an announcement of a good message. If a doctor came to examine a sick person and afterward declared that the problem was nothing serious, that was gospel, or good news. In ancient days when soldiers went out to battle, people waited breathlessly for a report from the battlefield about the outcome. Once the outcome was known, marathon runners dashed back to give the report. That is why Isaiah wrote, 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news.' The watchman in the watchtower would look as far as the eye could see into the distance. Finally, he would see the dust moving as the runner sped back to the city to give the report of the battle. The watchmen were trained to tell just by the way the runner's legs were churning whether the news was good or bad. If the runner was doing the survival shuffle, it indicated a grim report, but if his legs were flying and the dust was kicking up, that meant good news. That is the concept of 'gospel' in its most rudimentary sense."

So let me ask you this about the picture you hold of the gospel that Jesus came to bring. Is it the sort of news that has your heart pounding and your legs flying, or does your picture of the gospel have you doing something more like the survival shuffle? Your picture of the gospel matters, just as we end up becoming like the God we worship, we also end up living out the gospel we believe.

Much like your picture of God and your picture of yourself, your picture of the gospel emerges out of the primordial soup of your own spiritual biography. Let me tell you a bit about mine, in the hopes that it gets you thinking about yours. When I was four years old, I heard a Sunday school teacher recite scripture in a way that captured my heart. My family and I were in the town of Victoria on Vancouver Island visiting my grandparents.

After church, we went back to my Nana and Granddad's place for lunch. At some point, I tugged on my mother's sleeve and I asked her to tell me more about the verse I had heard that day: John 3:16. She smiled and repeated the verse for me, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." She told me that, if I wanted to, I could become a 'whosoever,' too. Keen to not perish, I nodded my assent. My mom took me into the living room. Now, my Nana, like many women of her generation, had a very firm belief that no upholstery should be exposed to the atmosphere ever. So when you came into her house, there was a plastic runner over the carpet and in the living room, the couches were covered in thick protective plastic. So my mom and I knelt on the plastic runner and we put our elbows on the plastic protected couch, and right then, and right there, I asked Jesus into my heart. When we said amen, my mom told me that the angels in heaven were throwing a party over their newest little convert. And then of course we had to peel ourselves off of all that plastic. I've always said that moment was an experience that really stuck with me.

Truly, I will be forever grateful for that moment. It really did start me on a lifelong adventure of friendship with God. But for many years following that day, right into my adult faith, I held only a truncated understanding of Jesus' own message and invitation. That smaller, more manageable version of the gospel was appropriate developmentally when I was four. But as I grew up in many ways, my picture of the gospel did not. For all those years, if you had asked me what the gospel of Jesus was, I would've said something like, the forgiveness of sins. And if you had told me that wasn't complete enough, I would've said something like the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life in heaven after I die. And if you had said that still wasn't the whole picture, I might have whipped out a book of the four spiritual laws and rattled them off for you.

Now, all of those answers were and are wonderfully and beautifully true. It really is good news that Jesus' life, death and resurrection make it possible for our sins to be forgiven and for us to spend eternity with him. But even still, my picture of the gospel was incomplete, in the sense that it failed to include the way Jesus himself describes the good news he came to bring.

Let's read three New Testament passages that record Jesus announcing his gospel in his own words. First, let's look at Matthew 4:17. Jesus has just begun his public ministry, first with his baptism and then with a kind of a 40-day ordination retreat in the wilderness.

Jesus emerges from the desert and Matthew reports, "From that time on, Jesus began to preach, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Now let's look at Mark 1:14, 15. "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said, 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" Thirdly, let's look at Luke 4:42, 43. "At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.'"

Are you noticing the theme here? Jesus primarily proclaims his gospel by announcing the fact that with his arrival, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is now close at hand. We see this kingdom language in the Lord's Prayer, too, where Jesus teaches us to pray for God's kingdom to break more and more fully into the world with that petition, 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.' So why would Jesus define his gospel primarily as the coming of God's kingdom? Well, the kingdom of God is the place where God reigns, where what he wants to be done gets done. And because what God wants done is love and mercy and justice and healing and wholeness, the kingdom of God is a very good place to be.

The apostle Paul describes God's kingdom as a kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Jesus' good news is that with his arrival on the human scene, the kingdom of God has become accessible like never before. It has broken into earthly reality in an unprecedented way. Jesus is proclaiming not only the forgiveness of sins and the promise of heaven, but the availability of a completely different kind of life - a life that changes us from the inside out, starting now.

So my picture of the gospel has always included some of the really beautiful parts of what Jesus offers us, including the forgiveness of sins, the possibility of an intimate friendship with God, and the promise of an eternity spent enjoying the inexhaustible mystery of God's goodness and beauty. But in overlooking Jesus' kingdom announcement, here are three dimensions of the gospel that I had missed.

One of the things that happens when your picture shifts from a gospel that deals solely with the forgiveness of sins to a gospel that announces the availability of the kingdom of God is that you begin to realize that your personal decision to say yes to Jesus has very public, even cosmic implications. Trevor Hudson likes to say that the gospel is personal but never private, and I think he's right. Even as a little kid kneeling at my grandma's couch, I was making a personal decision, but not a private one. That's because when you decide to follow Jesus, you agree to become a part of his kingdom mission. You sign up to partner with him to bring his truth and justice and love and liberation to every corner of his creation. You become part of something much bigger than yourself and the adventure of kingdom living begins.

Let's go back to a passage earlier in Luke chapter four to get even more insight into how Jesus describes his gospel. This is Luke 4:16-21 and he's quoting Isaiah 61:1-2. Luke writes, "When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was

written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll and he gave it back to the attendant, and he sat down and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"

Jesus' picture of his gospel includes justice for the poor, healing for the sick, and liberation for the oppressed. This means that as his follower, the calling on your life is to become a kingdom person. Wherever you go, at home, say, or work or the supermarket, you get to serve as a portal for God's justice and mercy and liberation.

We've seen that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus talks about his gospel primarily in terms of the availability of the kingdom. Interestingly, in John's gospel, Jesus uses less kingdom language and talks more about the gospel using a little Greek word that packs a lot of punch: the word *zoë*, which means eternal or abundant life. Notice how Jesus defines *zoë* in his prayer in John 17:3. "Now, this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Jesus seems to be saying that eternal life does not begin when you die but rather it begins when you come to know the

Father through Jesus himself. For those who say yes to Jesus, *zoë*, eternal life, starts now. Eternal life is the abundant life we discover when we live in the kingdom of God. This is why Richard Foster is so fond of saying, "The goal of the Christian life is not simply to get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us."

A third thing you may notice as you allow Jesus to adjust your picture of the gospel is that the life he offers requires your active participation. To quote Richard Foster again, "This life, this *zoë*, is ONLY for participants, not consumers or observers. The consumer approach says it is MY life and I'll utilize this with-God life to suit my needs and purposes. But frankly, this life doesn't work that way. To enter this *zoë* - this eternal, uncreated life that originates in God - I must surrender my life. In entering this with-God life, it is not my life anymore; it is Christ's life and I'm privileged to be a participant in that life." Maybe this has something to do with why Jesus said you have to lay down your life in order to find it. You've got to surrender to life in the kingdom in order to receive it. Now, that's not because God is holding out on you until you show the appropriate levels of enthusiasm. It's just the nature of reality.

Imagine you are outside on a blistering summer day and you spot a swimming pool. That swimming pool is good news for sure, but you've got to actually enter into the swimming pool in order to get wet. In much the same way, you've got to enter into the life of Christ in the kingdom in order to really experience the gospel. That's probably the reason why the New Testament writers never separated being a Christian from being a disciple. Jesus can lead us to living water but we can decide whether or not to drink it.

At the beginning of this session, I suggested that you will live out whatever gospel you believe. If you think Jesus came only to make a way for you to get to heaven after you die, you will say yes to the gospel and then potentially go on living much as you did before. If, however, you understand that Jesus came to invite you to a completely different life, serving a different king, living in his kingdom, and directly experiencing his love and life and power, your life will become radically different. You are invited to say yes to the gospel Jesus actually proclaimed, and to step into the kingdom of God now. You are one in whom Christ dwells and delights, and you live in the strong and unshakable kingdom of God. So how might this gospel life transform you? Well, we'll explore that in the next session, which is all about the way people change. Until then, may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus, the one who offers you very good news.

## ***From the Inside Out***

### **Session Five: How Do People Change?**

Do you believe that people can change? Do you believe that *you* can change? I'm tempted to say that the goal of Christian spiritual formation is spiritual transformation, but that's not quite right. The goal of Christian spiritual formation, the goal of our whole lives really, is intimate, loving connection and relationship with the Trinity. But one of the really beautiful outcomes of that friendship is transformation.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus seemed to specialize in helping his friends change and grow, often transforming facets of their characters from liabilities into gifts. I love the fact that Jesus chose the salty Apostle Peter, a guy whose big mouth got him into all kinds of trouble, as the cornerstone of his Church, confident that the machinations of grace would transform Peter's tendency to blurt things out into a great gift for proclaiming the truth. And it wasn't just Peter. Think of the woman at the well and the way that in just one encounter with Jesus, she changed from a social outcast, drowning in shame, to the greatest evangelist in her community. Think of Zacchaeus and his transformation from corrupt thief to generous benefactor. Or consider James and John, two of Jesus' more rough and tumble disciples, brothers known as the "Sons of Thunder." Early on they were restless youths eager to be first in the kingdom, ready to reign down fire from heaven on those who wouldn't receive Jesus. Later in their lives, James had the unspeakably holy honor of becoming the first martyred disciple and John became known as the Apostle of Love. What happened? Friendship with Jesus.

Today, Jesus still helps his friends change and grow. And this is good news, because all of us have cracks in our characters and our personalities, parts of ourselves that need healing and deliverance. Jesus offers us hope and freedom. "If the Son sets you free," he says in John 8:36, "you will be free indeed." Christian spiritual formation takes that promise of freedom seriously. It dares to dream that we can become people who know how to love and live well. "I dream of a day," Richard Foster once wrote, "when spiritual formation has so saturated all who follow hard after Jesus that they become known to all as experts in how to live well. How to love a spouse well. How to raise children well. How to study well, how to face adversity well. How to run business and financial institutions well. How to form community life well. How to reach out to those on the margins well. And even how to die well." The journey towards this capacity to live and die well is a journey of progressive healing and wholeness in Jesus. It begins with the hope-giving conviction that transformation is actually possible. People really can change and you can be living proof.

So how, you might logically ask, does the change actually take place? Well, the process is both utterly practical and deeply mystical. In one sense, it's as simple as just saying yes to Jesus' offer of friendship. On the other hand, it's an incredibly complex undertaking of cooperating with the Holy Spirit to detect and then gradually reform a countless number of ingrained ways of thinking and behaving and relating. Sometimes, transformation will happen in a holy flash of supernatural healing. Much more commonly, we will undergo change at a tentative dance of two steps forward, one step back, ever so slowly learning to trust the deep love and patient work of God.

Your transformation journey will be different from mine because we've each had our own unique formation and because God is much more of an artist than He is a factory foreman. He is endlessly creative and the ways He woos and stretches us will be unique to each of us. But all of that does not mean we are only passive observers in our own transformation. We've been invited to cooperate with God in His desire to heal us and make us whole. And so in the spiritual formation conversation, we give special attention to the things we can do on our part to open ourselves up to what God has for us.

The process of human transformation was an area of intense interest for Dallas Willard. He applied his personal experience, his deep knowledge of scripture, and his keen mind for philosophy and psychology to come up with

a model he called "The Golden Triangle of Spiritual Growth." He argued that though each person's journey is unique, we find some common transformational elements at play in the lives of people who are growing in Jesus.

In the middle of his triangle of transformation, Dallas wrote the words "Centered in the mind of Christ." As a philosopher, he was convinced that we live at the mercy of our ideas, and so he felt that the renewing of our minds in Jesus was critically important. The work we've been doing in this course to look at the way we think about God, about ourselves, and about the gospel has all been a movement towards centering our mind in the mind of Christ. A movement toward learning to see things the way that Jesus does. At the apex of his triangle of transformation, Dallas placed "The work of the Holy Spirit," emphasizing that it is God's power that actually changes us. On the bottom left point of his triangle, Dallas placed the "Ordinary events of daily life," especially the hard stuff, to suggest that God tends to shape us through the nitty gritty circumstances and relationships of our actual lives. On the right point of the triangle, Dallas placed "Planned discipline to put on a new heart," pointing to the transformation that can take place when we make use of a variety of spiritual disciplines as intentional ways of connecting with God and opening ourselves up to His grace.

It's interesting to look at the ways others have continued to work with Willard's Triangle and tweak the model. Let me show you Trevor Hudson's adaptation. In the center of his triangle, Hudson has placed "Divine friendship with the Trinity," believing that an intimate, loving connection with God is the real engine of transformation. At the apex of the triangle, Trevor has put "Our picture of God," agreeing with William Temple that if our picture of God is off, spiritual formation cannot take us anywhere good. Trevor has kept the bottom corners of his triangle essentially the same as Dallas's, pairing the ordinary events and relationships of our daily lives with intentional rhythms of spiritual practices and disciplines. But then Trevor has placed the entire triangle within a circle, to symbolize the critical role of community.

All spiritual formation language, Trevor argues, is social language. The Bible always assumes our growth and transformation will take place in an interconnected context of fellow disciples. This emphasis on community also helps us see that our closest relationships will be the litmus test of our growth. If you are practicing spiritual disciplines but you are not becoming more patient and more loving in your closest relationships, something is off.

Let's look at one more variation of the model, this time from James Bryan Smith. In Smith's triangle, the action of the Holy Spirit is moved to the center. At the apex of the triangle, Smith has put "Adopting the narratives of Jesus," which is another way of emphasizing the critical importance of the pictures we hold of God, ourselves, others, and the gospel. On the left corner of Smith's triangle, he has placed "Soul-engaging exercises," which is his terminology for spiritual disciplines and practices. On the right, he has placed "Participating in community," evidently sharing Hudson's conviction that our relationships with other people, especially with fellow disciples, are a key ingredient in transformation.

I wanted to show you all three of these triangles to get your own wheels turning. How do these models of transformation map on to your own growth process? Do some of the elements resonate more than others? You likely notice that the Willard, Hudson, and Smith models all include spiritual disciplines or practices as one point of the triangle, so we should probably talk about those.

Followers of Jesus throughout the centuries have pointed to certain practices, sometimes called spiritual disciplines, as means to help us connect and cooperate with God. Richard Foster's modern classic, *Celebration of Discipline*, is a helpful catalog of 12 of these practices: meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.



I can still clearly remember the first time I became aware of Richard Foster's book. Years ago, on a long concert tour, I noticed that our bass player, Dave, was reading a book called *Celebration of Discipline*. I found the title confusing and maybe even a little bit irritating. Discipline didn't seem to me like something you celebrate. See, Dave was already notoriously more self-disciplined than your average musician. He ate raw vegetables while the rest of us devoured pizza. He went for morning jogs as we slept.

His tour bus bunk was always unnaturally tidy. So when I saw Dave reading *Celebration of Discipline*, I thought, "Of course Dave would celebrate discipline." But after Dave finished the book, he began gently insisting that I read it. When I finally acquiesced, I discovered that Richard Foster's famous treatises on the classic spiritual disciplines had something to say not only to neat freaks like Dave, but also to messier folks like me. "Willpower will never succeed in dealing with the ingrained habits of sin," I read in the introductory chapter. That rang true. There were small but insidious habits of my heart - petty pride, stubborn self-reliance, almost unconscious strains of selfishness - that seemed hopelessly entrenched. "The demand is for an inside job," I read, "and only God can work from the inside."

In the Book of Romans, the Apostle Paul refers to righteousness as a gift from God 35 times, emphasizing repeatedly that no one can achieve a justified and rightly ordered life on her own. So far, *Celebration of Discipline* was reassuring. I shouldn't expect my willpower to be sufficient. Amen. I should understand that inner transformation is purely a gift of God. Amen again. But just when I was beginning to relax, Foster's argument took an interesting turn. "We do not need to be hung on the horns of the dilemma of either human works or idleness. God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace. The disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so He can transform us." That caught my attention. Let me say that again. The disciplines, practices like prayer and meditation and worship and fasting and service, they allow us to place ourselves before God so He can transform us.

Reading those words, a picture came to my mind. I could see a pool at the bottom of a beautiful waterfall that I knew represented the blessings God had for me - peace and love and acceptance and wholeness and the fullness of His presence. There was no fence around the water. I could jump in anytime I wanted, but I was running distractedly around the shoreline, sweaty, parched and complaining about my need for refreshment. It occurred to me that maybe the disciplines were simply ways I could wade into the pool and stand beneath the waterfall.

As I read through Richard's list of classic disciplines, I found myself thinking about a season back in high school, after my first serious boyfriend and I had broken up. My youth pastor's wife, Pam, sent me a card and at the bottom she wrote, "Psalm 37:4, 'Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.'" Well, there was little doubt about the desires of my heart. So I considered Psalm 37:4 a contract. All I had to do was delight in God and He'd give me back my boyfriend. I wasn't exactly sure what sort of "delighting in the Lord" would meet my end of the bargain. So I picked up an "Our Daily Bread" devotional from my church's foyer and began reading it at breakfast and right before bed.

Pam had also given me the devotional classic, *Practicing the Presence Of God*, and I decided I'd try to be like the book's author, a 17th century monk named Brother Lawrence, by practicing God's presence all day long. "I'm walking to my locker now," I'd whisper to Jesus between classes. "I'm going to my science class." Two strange things happened. First, I started to genuinely delight in God, to look forward to our set aside times together and to have a sense that He was with me throughout the day. Second, the more I delighted in God, the more the desires of my heart changed. After a while, I didn't want my boyfriend back. God had literally given my heart new desires. An inner transformation had taken place and I was learning to want the things God wanted for me. The disciplines I had almost inadvertently practiced in that season, prayer and study and meditation and guidance, had indeed been means of grace.

Years later, sitting on that tour bus, reading *Celebration of Discipline*, I began to remember that spiritual practices are meant not to be chores or burdens, but rather invitations to dive into the waterfall. So let me ask you, is there a particular practice, a way of connecting with God and opening yourself up to His grace, that the Holy Spirit is inviting you to right now? It could be a classic discipline from Richard's list of 12 or it could be something else - a practice of engaging your senses as you ride your mountain bike, or a season of giving your loving attention to great art as a form of listening prayer, or a ritual of drinking your morning coffee with a heightened sense of gratitude. As you talk with God about how He might be inviting you to grow, think of spiritual formation not as an exam you have to pass, but as a laboratory or even a playground, a place where you can freely and joyfully experiment with a thousand different ways to say yes to the God who loves you.

The 18th century priest, Jean-Pierre de Caussade once offered a delightful picture of the way this life can be. "In this," he wrote, "the soul is as light as a feather, fluid as water, innocent as a child, responding to every movement of grace like a floating balloon." It is we who make our spiritual formation heavy and burdensome. Jesus wants to set us free. Will you take him up on that offer? We'll explore that heart pounding question together in our final session. But until then, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus and may your soul, light as a feather, respond ever more swiftly to His grace.

---

## ***From the Inside Out***

### **Session Six: How Do I Follow Jesus?**

Together we've explored five big questions.

1. What is spiritual formation? And, especially, what is Christian spiritual formation?
2. What is my picture of God? Is it sufficiently good and big and true and beautiful?
3. What is my picture of myself? Do I understand that, most fundamentally, I am God's beloved image bearer and there's nothing I can ever do to change that?
4. What is my picture of the gospel? Does it match up with Jesus' cosmos-changing announcement of the availability of his kingdom?
5. How do people change? What spiritual disciplines and rhythms might help me cooperate with God in His desire to heal and transform me?

We have one question left and it's the question beneath all the other questions. It's the invitation that has been pulsing at the heart of our journey all along. That question is, **how do I follow Jesus?** On numerous occasions in the gospels, Jesus meets a person, is moved with love for that person, and then invites that person to follow him. Sometimes, he makes his invitation with enticing metaphors, suggesting folks might want to follow him the way lost sheep follow their good shepherd or the way desperately thirsty people might go after life saving water. Other times, he delivers his invitation with considerably tougher love, suggesting that folks might want to follow him by taking up a cross or laying down their lives or drinking from his cup of sorrow. Some people, like the rich young ruler, count the cost of following Jesus and they decide it's too high, but other folks count the cost of not following Jesus and decide that following him is the only way to go.

There's a moment captured in the sixth chapter of John's gospel, after Jesus has offered some hard teaching and the crowds have started to turn on him. Jesus looks at his closest disciples and asks, "Do you also wish to go away?" You've got to love the Apostle Peter's answer of, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." It's like Peter is saying, "Lord, following you can be really hard sometimes, but you've ruined us for anything or anyone else. Now that we know you, life just doesn't make sense without you."

Often, learning to follow Jesus begins with the discovery that life just doesn't make sense any other way. Listen to the case that Dallas Willard makes for following Jesus in the appendix to his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. "The cost of non-discipleship is far greater - even when this life alone is considered - than the price paid to walk WITH Jesus. Non discipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring. The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is, after all, an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it with him and learn the meekness and lowliness of heart that brings rest to the soul."

The correct perspective is to see following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but also as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane. To whom else would we go? Only Jesus can give us abundant life. So, if you've decided to follow Jesus, how do you progressively live into that invitation?

I want to suggest five places to begin. It is not a cliché to say that to know Jesus is to love him and one of the best ways to get to know Jesus is by keeping company with him in the gospels. Develop a habit of regularly reading passages from Matthew or Mark or Luke or John. Take the odd Saturday afternoon and read a whole gospel in one sitting, immersing yourself in Jesus' story. You'll find, over time, that you develop more and more of a sense for the way Jesus thinks and acts and relates.

You might also find it helpful to pay special attention to how often Jesus engages other people with questions. Questions like, what are you looking for? Do you want to be made well? What do you want me to do for you? Do you believe? Why are you afraid? Why are you crying? Jesus approaches people with genuine curiosity. He doesn't presume. He gives people space to process and articulate their feelings. As you keep company with Jesus in the gospels, you might find him asking some of those questions of you. A spiritual director named Doreen Kostyniuk offers some beautiful instruction in the form of a poem. Follow Jesus around the scriptures - be an observer. Watch how he looks. Watch how he touches. Watch how he is present to people. Watch how he prays and takes time out. Let him look at you. Let him touch you. Let him hold you. Let him heal you. Let him be present to you. Then become the look. Become the touch and become the presence.

Do you remember that movement several years ago when many folks around the world wore a bracelet that asked, "What would Jesus do?" The idea was that, in a moment of decision or crisis, a person could look at the bracelet on her wrist and be encouraged to act how she imagined Jesus would act in the same situation. A more helpful question, although one too long for a bracelet, might be this: "What did Jesus do in his private life that enabled him to respond the way he did in his public life?" In the opening chapter of Mark's gospel, we see Jesus intentionally alternating demanding sessions of teaching and healing with quiet hours of prayer and connection with his Father, sometimes much to the annoyance of his disciples, who do not yet understand the rhythms of grace. The gospel accounts of Jesus' days consistently suggest that he cultivated private habits - prayer, solitude, silence, fasting, scripture memorization, and even hiking, that empowered him for a public life of love, healing, teaching, and preaching. It's easy to get discouraged if you find yourself unable to respond with Jesus-like grace, when you are in high pressure situations, but the answer is not just to try harder next time. The key is to cultivate off the spot practices that will grow your character and infuse you with the divine power you're going to need when you are on the spot.

Another way you can grow into the invitation to follow Jesus is to pay attention to what and who he loves and then ask him to help you to learn to love it too. In his teaching, Jesus always connects loving him with loving others, and especially with loving the poor and the marginalized. In seasons when you are finding it hard to sense Jesus' presence, if you visit someone who is suffering or in need, you may be surprised to discover that you encounter his manifest presence most readily there. But even if a felt perception of his presence eludes

you, you will know that you are keeping him company with the least of these. You knew this one was coming, right? There's no getting around the fact that Jesus repeatedly invites his followers to lay down their lives, but what does he mean?

Let's spend a few minutes keeping Jesus company in John, chapter 13. The disciples are reclining around the dinner table in the upper room. Jesus starts talking about having to go away and the Apostle Peter becomes alarmed and asks, "Lord, where are you going?" And Jesus replies, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asks, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." And then Jesus answers, "Will you really lay down your life for me?" Imagine that today, just where you're sitting right now, Jesus walks into the room, he sits next to you, and maybe he lets you lean against him a bit, the way the apostle John describes himself doing, and he says to you, very quietly, but intently, "Will you lay down your life for me?" How will you answer? And what does he even mean?

If you're like me, the first thing that springs into your mind is that Jesus is extending an invitation to literal martyrdom. There is certainly a long and painfully beautiful list of Christ followers who sacrifice their physical lives for their faith. But interestingly, the Greek word used for life in this particular passage is not 'bios,' the word for bodily life, but '*psyche*,' the word used to describe the inner life of a human being. '*Psyche*' is the origin of the English word psychology. So Jesus is asking, not, will you lay down your 'bios' for me, but will you lay down your '*psyche*' for me? In other words, will you lay down your inner orientations and agendas for mine? He's not talking about the total obliteration of self here. He's talking about recalibration, about reorientation, and about a willingness to organize your life around a new center. He's asking if you will allow him to slowly unbend you at whatever pace you can stand, from a curved in focus on yourself to a new posture of self-giving, open-armed love.

This might actually be harder than a heroic martyrdom. Oswald Chambers once said, "It is much easier to die than to lay down your life day in and day out with the sense of the high calling of God." And yet, as hard as it may be, the folks who follow Jesus in this way are some of the most radiant people you will ever meet. They've been unfurled into the selves they were always created to be. They've discovered that Jesus' invitation to lay down your curved in life is really part and parcel of his desire to give you abundant life. In the book, *Fearfully and Wonderfully*, Philip Yancy tells the story of Dr. Paul Brand, an orthopedic surgeon who gave his life to working on leprosy patients in India. Brand noticed that when he closed his eyes and reflected on his life, sifting through memories to recall rare moments of intense pleasure and fulfillment, to his surprise, the best memories weren't gourmet meals or vacations or award ceremonies. Instead, the sweetest moments he could recall were of times he was able to work closely with a team to save a life, often in terribly primitive conditions and 110 degree heat operating under a flashlight. "We sometimes think of sacrificial service with a self-focused sense of martyrdom," Dr. Brand wrote. "In fact, denying ourselves leads to a more abundant life. In the exchange, the advantage clearly rests on our side: crusty selfishness peels away to reveal the love of God expressed through our own hands, which in turn reshapes us into God's own image." And so, we learn to lay down our lives as we learn to follow Jesus.

Finally, if you want to learn to follow Jesus, you will learn to practice his presence. You'll cultivate a habit of greeting him in the morning. You'll return your thoughts to him throughout the day. You'll experiment to find out which rhythms and rituals most help you remember that he's right there, whether that's an empty chair at the kitchen table or a candle flickering away next to your office computer or a Post-It note on your bathroom mirror. You will take the Eucharist every chance you get, remembering and receiving the work of Jesus with reverence and gratitude. You'll spot him in every image bearer you meet, especially the poor and the needy. You'll call out to him when you're excited and when you're scared. You'll tell him when you believe, and when you need him to help your unbelief. When life crushes you with its brokenness, you'll bring him the fragments. And when the world astonishes you with its beauty, well, you'll know exactly who to thank.

Let me close by reading you a poem about the spiritual formation journey, written by a man named Joseph Whelan, SJ. It goes like this. "Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in Love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Friends, we are most formed by what we most love. So fall in love with Jesus, and stay in love with Jesus, and it will decide everything."

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus, our ever-living Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend.