

12 Rules for Intentional Spiritual Formation
a Workbook Written by Pastor David Hentschel



MILLINGTON
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Cultivating the Christian Life

Rooted in Christ, Growing in Faith and Bearing the Fruit of the Spirit

12 Rules for Intentional Spiritual Formation

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This workbook is a practical manual for spiritual growth. If you're a parent, a pastor, a teacher, a coach, a business executive, a social worker or anyone committed to changing and helping others change, this book will have great application for you. Using twelve *rules* (a "rule" is an organized way of living), this workbook will overview time-tested principles of discipleship, designed to make you more like Jesus Christ, the goal of spiritual formation, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This workbook is designed for individual use, but is best processed together in a group study setting.



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How to Use This Workbook



Pray and Worship

Begin your time in prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand where you need to grow. Use the “sermon notes” pages to record what God is teaching you during Sunday morning worship.



Read and Study

Read the chapter out loud as a group, passing from time to time to another participant. Read with a pen or a highlighter and make asterisks and marks on those sections you want to remember.



Ask and Answer the Questions

Take time to consider the questions embedded in each chapter. This material is best processed in the context of a small group. Use the glossary to help you understand new terms.



Memorize Scripture

Each chapter will offer a Scripture passage to commit to memory. Write them out on index cards and look at them throughout each week.



Do the Exercises

This book is designed to be a catalyst for real change. Such work demands vigorous engagement and a willingness to participate fully in the experiential learning exercises at the end of each section. Don’t skip over them. They are invitations for you to meet with God in a life-altering way.



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“Introduction to Spiritual Formation” My Sermon Notes



Introduction to Spiritual Formation

*“They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.”
(Isa 61:3, NIV)*

For approximately 619 years, a white oak tree grew – thrived – in our church’s township of Basking Ridge, New Jersey.

It’s a bit hard to bring 619 years into focus in our mind’s eye, but that would place its first germination at around 1398 AD. For our historians, that’s 52 years before Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press; 94 years before Columbus sailed the ocean blue; 378 years before Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence. Historical record speculates that George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette had a picnic beneath the tree, discussing plans for the Revolutionary War. The tree hosted funerals, weddings, casual conversations, and everything in between for six centuries.

Several years ago, close family friends visited us in New Jersey, and we went to see the tree. We had our 7 combined kids stand together with linked arms; they couldn’t quite manage to make a full circle around its trunk. It was massive – immovable, ancient, wise, longstanding.

There was a clear reason why *Millington Baptist Church* took on the symbol of a tree: The Bible has a lot to say about trees. It all started with a tree. There was a tree in the garden of Eden that became a test for all of humanity. Trees were part of God’s good creation. Trees are used for shelter, shade and food. Most often, however, the tree is used as a metaphor for the spiritual life. God said to us:

You will “be like a tree” (Ps 1:3, NIV).

The *Centers for Disease Control* estimates that today, the average American spends 90% of their time indoors. As generations have gone by, we have, to some degree, become more and more separated from this inheritance of truth that God desires for us to know. The average American watches more than 30 hours of television every week. This was not always the case. Even less than a hundred years ago, instead of working in office buildings, most people worked outside in nature. Instead of driving around enclosed in climate controlled cars listening to the radio, people walked or rode horses and enjoyed the landscape. Instead of going to the grocery store, people planted seeds

and harvested their food from the ground. For some of us, our appreciation of nature and God's lessons for us all around throughout His creation are being lost.

Trees are mentioned in the Bible more than any living thing other than God and people. Forests cover about 30 percent of the planet's land, and may make up as much as 80 percent of Earth's biomass. That is, if you were to put all the organisms on the planet on a giant set of scales, trees would account for 80 percent of the total. Trees are the oldest living things on earth. There are trees alive today that were already ancient when Jesus walked the earth.

The Bible refers to itself as a tree of life (Prov 3:18). Abraham sat under a tree (Gen 18:1). God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush (Ex 3:2-5). The Messiah is referred to as a tender tree (Isa 53:2). Zacchaeus climbed a tree to find the Lord (Luke 19:1-4). The nation of Israel is likened to a tree, and the Gentiles are grafted into it (Rom 11:17-18). As a symbol of Israel in her self-righteousness, the only thing Jesus ever cursed was a tree (Mk 11:12-25). Why did Jesus die, cursed on a tree? (Deut 21:23, Gal 3:13) Do you realize a cross is just a tree that is stripped of all its roots and branches? After He was raised, why is Jesus likened to a gardener (Jn 20:14-16)? Is He a second Adam? (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:45) What gardening is He doing and how does this all relate to our spiritual formation? Suffice it to say that trees will provide lots of lessons for us. These are the images and truths we will unpack together.

Welcome. You are about to embark on a deliberate and practical pursuit of your own spiritual formation. Spiritual growth is likened to the kind of organic growth we

find in nature. I remember in first grade learning to grow a plant. I filled a Styrofoam cup with soil and pressed a seed into it. I poured water over the cup and placed it on a sunny windowsill. Within a week, there were signs of life. Roots grew, sprouts emerged, then a stem. A plant shot out of the soil with its tiny leaves unfurled. This is a good metaphor for the Christian life. A seed of faith is planted in the heart and life begins by God's grace. Growth emerges and must be carefully tended as it flourishes in strength and stature. **"The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God" (Ps 92:12-13, ESV).**

Nourished with food, over time, deep roots are established, and growth stretches up far above the ground displaying leaves and then fruit. Using this as an object lesson, God says if you abandon your relationship with me as your source of life, you will wither and die. But if your roots are planted firmly by the rivers of living water, your leaves will not wither and your spiritual life will be prosperous. God has planted us ... like trees in His garden.

Discussion:

How does the metaphor of the tree help you understand the process of spiritual formation? What will happen if we continue to miss these lessons in nature?

The journey in front of you is a well-worn path toward spiritual maturity. This is the path of **Discipleship**. A disciple is a learner, a follower, a student or a pupil. Discipleship is the commitment to following the Lord Jesus with every area of our lives. We believe all followers of Jesus should be

pursuing spiritual growth. **“For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess 4:3, ESV).**

The biblical term **“sanctification”** means to be “set apart” or “holy.” Do you see this as God’s perfect will for your life? How *intentional* are you willing to be about your own spiritual growth? What is your plan and what are your metrics of success? Are you measuring that which when you stand before the Lord He will be rewarding?

Sanctification has three aspects. The first is called **“positional sanctification.”**¹ This is simply the position of every believer in the family of God by faith in Christ (1 Cor 6:11). The second is called **“progressive sanctification.”** This is the process of experiencing spiritual growth and maturity over time (1 Pet 1:16). The third aspect is called **“ultimate sanctification,”** which awaits our complete glorification when we receive our resurrected bodies (Jude 24-25). This workbook is primarily concerned with our *“progressive sanctification.”*

It’s almost impossible to picture our township’s 600-year-old Oak as once a single, tiny acorn. In the Christian life, we all start from the acorn-place, and many of us can’t picture becoming who Christ will have us be – a rooted, grounded, mature, and multiplying tree. It is the aim of this workbook to guide you along the path to growth, no matter how many rings you have around your trunk.

The late Dr. Howard Hendricks gave a definition of the spiritual life at Dallas

Theological Seminary: “The Spiritual life is the life of Christ reproduced in the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit in obedient response to the Word of God.”² Spiritual formation is about becoming the persons we will ever be for eternity.

Our salvation is holistic, it involves a salvation from the penalty of sin (past), from the power of sin (present) and ultimately we will be saved from the presence of sin (future). God’s grace is more than pardon. It is also power. Our justification is concerned with the penalty of our sin, but as theologian Anthony Hoekema says, our “sanctification is concerned with the pollution of sin.”³ It is essentially the “mopping up” of sin in the believer’s life. Before Christ, our lives were an unmitigated jungle of weeds and invasives, but the Gardener has come to do His work of purification. We pray as the hymn writer prayed, in order that He might,

*“Be of sin the double cure,
save from wrath and make me pure.”*⁴

After accepting the Gospel by faith alone, the dominion of sin has been crucified, crushed by the work of Christ. After salvation, the Holy Spirit now indwells us. He moves His street address into our hearts and soon thereafter He begins to unpack His bags. The Westminster Confession states: “They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them are further sanctified, really and personally...the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more

¹ This is sometimes called “definitive” sanctification. See John Murray, “Definitive Sanctification,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 Vols. (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:277-284).

² Dr. Howard Hendricks. *Dynamics of Leadership*. Dallas Theological Seminary, 2002. Course notes.

³ Anthony Hoekema. “Five Views on Sanctification.” Ed. Stanley Gundry. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 61.

⁴ These words were taken from the hymn “Rock of Ages” written by Augustus Toplady.

weakened and mortified...so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”⁵ All our lives must come under Jesus’ Lordship.⁶

Sin is not immediately eradicated from the Christian’s life. The dawn does not immediately expel the darkness; nevertheless, sanctification is real. In my own life, as I look upon old photo albums, I see myself as I used to think, feel and act, and I am confident a real change of God is occurring. All of us are being transformed into **“His likeness with ever increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18, NIV).**

Sadly, many people don’t think of their sanctification process as “intentional.” They become casual, complacent and stagnant, even though they are commanded to **“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:17-18, NIV).** The word “grow” here is in the present tense, indicating a continual process. A.W. Tozer said, “Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth.”⁷ Of course we are dependent on God working in us by His grace, yet still Dallas Willard says, “Spiritual formation is no passive process.”⁸ He continues, “Spiritual formation is not something that may, or may not, be added to the gift of eternal life as an *option*. Rather it is the path that the eternal kind of life ‘from above’ naturally takes. It is the path one must be on if his or hers is to be an eternal kind of life.”⁹

When I ask most Christians: “Do you think Christians should be growing spiritually?” The answer is almost always, “Yes.” But then if I ask most Christians a follow up question: “OK, how are you growing *right now*?” I will often get a blank stare. This to me is a major problem. Remember the tree mentioned at the beginning of this workbook? There was great intentionality given to preserving the health of this local treasure for its flourishing. Why should those in the local parks and recreation profession be more intentional than those in the spiritual health profession?

This is tragic. Even Christian leaders are unclear about discipleship, thinking that if they just get people in the door and “they’ll catch on,” it is going to work. You can put a cat in the oven, but that doesn’t make it a biscuit. Let me be plain and clear: If we do not become intentional about our spiritual growth, I believe the results will be catastrophic. This is the crisis of our day. Brett McCracken, senior editor at *The Gospel Coalition* agrees: “Behind the evangelical identity crisis is a crisis of formation. Largely cut off from history, biblically illiterate, and catechized more by cable news than by the creeds, today’s evangelical Christians are naturally being shaped more by the ideological zeitgeist than by theological orthodoxy ... We need to foster better ways of doing formation that keep people thinking and living in distinctly

⁵ John Leith. *Creeds of the Churches. The Westminster Confession of Faith*. (Westminster John Know, Louisville, 1963), 208.

⁶ In 1990 John Piper wrote a long letter worthy of reading called “A Letter to a Friend Concerning the So-Called ‘Lordship Salvation.’” It can be found at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/letter-to-a-friend-concerning-the-so-called-lordship-salvation>. Accessed June 22, 2021.

⁷ A.W. Tozer. *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst for the Divine* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publishers Inc., 1982), 17.

⁸ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 23.

⁹ Ibid., 59.

Christian ways in very secular environments.”¹⁰

The Scriptures are clear that as believers we are to be “*transformed*” (Rom 12:1-2). The Greek word for transformed is where we get our English word “metamorphosis.” It means a complete change, from one kind of thing to another kind of thing. Indeed, we are being conformed into the very image of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29). This is the goal we need to focus on as believers. Richard Foster says it well, “Heaven is not the goal, it is the destination. The goal is that ‘Christ be formed in you.’”¹¹

This leads us to ask a foundational question: How does real change happen? Too often we think the way to change is to change our environments. We move away. We change schools. We change jobs. We change relationships. But running away from our circumstances never produces lasting change and we end up recreating exactly what we were trying to get away from. There’s a saying, “Whatever we resist will persist.” Most of us desire to grow spiritually, but we don’t know how, we have no plan. Sadly, a desire without a plan is just a *wish*.

Spiritual growth is not “automatic,” it is something that needs to be cultivated. It takes *effort* and *exertion*. We are to “fight” (1 Tim 6:12), “strive” (Lk 13:24), and “strain” (Phil 3:12-14). We ought to toil, struggle and labor. The apostle Peter said, “**For this very reason, make every effort ...**” (2 Pet 1:5-8, NIV).

Intentionality is not to say that spiritual formation is merely the result of human effort. It does not occur just by putting pressure on the will. This does not sustainably work. There is a humorous sketch from *Mad TV* that illustrates this point. Comedian Bob Newhart plays a psychologist telling his clients to conquer their issues and fears with just two words: “Stop it!” The audience laughs, immediately knowing the folly of this simplistic advice, knowing the problem with will power is that our wills lack power. They fatigue over time. Dallas Willard states, “Just resolving not to do it again will be of little use. Will alone cannot carry us to change.”¹²

Activism and Quietism

There are two errors to avoid when it comes to spiritual formation. False teachings often come in pairs, and this is no exception. In this case the two false teachings are called **Activism** and **Quietism** and both will lead you astray.

Activism is the heresy which places spiritual maturity entirely in your hands. But how much is mankind alone capable of doing? Can a tree grow without proper soil and sunlight, good nutrients, avoiding storms and lumberjacks, and regular rainfall? What about our dependence on God, apart from Whom we can do nothing? (Jn 15:5) Theologian Dr. Robert Pyne states, “The issue of human ability shapes our expectations for individual morality, social reformation, and spiritual regeneration.”¹³ John Owen says that trying to be holy “from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-

¹⁰ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tgcs-leaders-share-5-challenges-and-5-opportunities-facing-the-church/>.

¹¹ Quote taken from article “Becoming like Christ” by Richard Foster. *Christianity Today* (Feb 5, 1996) Vol. 40, No. 2.

¹² Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 143.

¹³ Robert A. Pyne. *Humanity and Sin: The Creation, Fall and Redemption of Humanity*. (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1999), 170.

invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world.”¹⁴ Activism fails to recognize the passive voice of Scripture, such as “be filled” with the Spirit (Eph 5:18) and “be transformed” (Rom 12:1-2). Activism is born out of our pride and will lead only to failure and despair.

Quietism, on the other hand, is the heresy which says just “Let go and let God.”¹⁵ This view fails to take into account the active voice of Scripture. Jesus *commands* His followers to obey all the things He has taught us (Matt 28:18-20). Imperatives are found all over the epistles, for example: “Do not let sin reign” (Rom 6:12) and “Present yourselves to God” (Rom 6:13). Jude assumes you will be “building yourselves up” (Jude 20). Whereas *activism* can lead to self-righteousness, legalism, and Phariseism, *quietism* can lead to moral laxity, license, and antinomianism.¹⁶ God’s work in us is indeed a miracle, but as John Piper says, *we* must “act the miracle.”¹⁷ A tree cannot fail to produce leaves, grow roots to gather water, or develop bark to protect itself from the world around.

Discussion:

How do activism and quietism both offer something helpful? Where can they lead us astray?

The Christian life is an active one, but it is active in its passive reliance upon the unction of the Holy Spirit. An intentional effort coupled by a humble reliance upon the Holy Spirit’s power balances out this tension. John Calvin states, “When he truly feels that he has no refuge but in humility” is when the Spirit may begin His magnificent transformation.¹⁸ The classic text which brings both of the two sides together is as follows: **“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:12-13, NIV).**

Four Myths about Spiritual Formation

People are often confused about spiritual formation. Some are not quite sure they are on the right track, whereas others believe they have already arrived at their destination. There are several faulty models of spiritual formation which are popular today, let’s call them the four myths:¹⁹

Myth # 1: The “Miracle-Gro” model. This is the quick-fix myth that believes one can be “zapped” into spiritual maturity in a moment of crisis, perhaps while at a conference or a retreat. This is the myth that seeks to obtain “mountaintop experiences,” often in large ad hoc assemblies with

¹⁴ John Owen. *The Mortification of Sin*. (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1996), 23.

¹⁵ For a full critique of this Keswick theology, see Andrew David Naselli. *Let Go and Let God? A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology* (Bellingham, WA: 2010). For an overview of the differing models of sanctification, see article, “Models of Sanctification” by Andy Naselli, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/models-of-sanctification/> Accessed June 30, 2021.

¹⁶ The word antinomianism comes from two Greek words, anti, meaning “against”; and nomos, meaning “law.” Antinomianism means “against the law.” Theologically, antinomianism is the belief that there are no moral laws God expects Christians to obey. In an extreme form, it would imply that disobedience to the law actually causes God’s grace to increase and is a positive thing. To this notion, Paul says “May it never be.” (Rom 6:1)

¹⁷ John Piper. <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/i-act-the-miracle>. Accessed June 22, 2021.

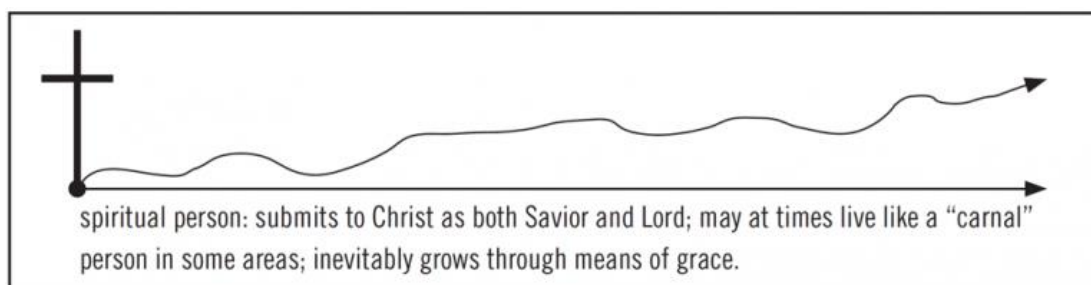
¹⁸ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. By Henry Beveridge. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 2:2:11, 164.

¹⁹ This list is adapted from James C. Wilhoit. *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

compelling keynote speakers. This is the myth that we must pursue heightened spiritual experiences to change. We must “feel” the Holy Spirit’s presence. To be sure, our emotions are affected by our spiritual formation, but our emotions can also be deceptive and misleading. The Holy Spirit will no doubt have a deeply profound impact on our emotions, but we must not seek the gifts over the Giver.

The spiritual life will be filled with times of both **consolation** (the felt presence of God), and **desolation** (the felt absence of God). Both have value in our spiritual formation. While there is great value in setting aside time to pursue God, spiritual growth is not dependent on an emotionally-laden environment. God can do anything, but He doesn’t usually “zap” or change His people instantly. Instead, it’s a life-long process. Author Eugene Peterson calls the spiritual

life, “A long obedience in the same direction.”²⁰ Dr. John Coe, from Biola University, defines spiritual formation as “The divinely sanctioned **process** by which the person (spirit and body) is conformed to the image of Christ by union with the Holy Spirit and in conjunction with our own will and efforts which begins in this life and continues in the next.”²¹ Notice the word “**process**.” Martin Luther said it this way: “This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.”²² Here is a timeline graphic which depicts our journey of spiritual growth after we embrace Jesus’ work on the cross.²³



The spiritual life sometimes feels like a yo-yo going up and down and up and down. But there is progress, so you are more like a yo-yo in the hands of a man going up an

escalator. Dallas Willard defines spiritual formation as “*the lengthy process of subduing all aspects of the self under God.*”²⁴

²⁰ Eugene Peterson. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Commemorative Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2021).

²¹ Lecture notes from Dr. John Coe. Lecture One on Spiritual Formation. Biola University.

²² Martin Luther, “Defense and Explanation of All the Articles,” in *Luther’s Works*, Volume 32: Career of the Reformer II, ed. George W. Forell & Helmut T. Lehman (Fortress, 1958), 24.

²³ This chart represents the Reformed view of sanctification, taken from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/models-of-sanctification/> (Accessed December 11, 2021).

²⁴ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 41.

Myth # 2: The “Professional Botanist” model. This is the myth that gravitates towards gaining more information as the primary catalyst and incentive for spiritual growth. Read, study, memorize Scripture, and engage your mind with the “facts only.” Just as knowing the specific genus of a plant won’t make it grow, the problem here is pouring into people lots of theological information will not necessarily make one become more mature, as knowledge can also “puff up” (1 Cor 8:1). Dallas Willard critiques our society’s “shallow solutions to the human problem, such as ‘education.’”²⁵ Information is indispensable, but insufficient to get to the root of the problem. The summons of the Gospel is not to contemplate or even to get educated, but to repent and believe.

Myth # 3: The “Dryad” model. (In Greek mythology, a Dryad is a nature spirit who lives in the trees.) This is the myth that all the need for change is rooted in the supernatural world of the demonic. Tending to see a demon behind every sin, problem or mental health issue, this view seeks to pursue deliverance, and places all the blame on the enemy of our souls, the devil. While we certainly believe in the supernatural (we will dedicate an entire chapter to spiritual warfare later in this study), this view falls short of addressing the whole picture of our spiritual battles with the world and the flesh as well as part of our spiritual formation process.

Myth # 4: The “Tree-Hugger” model. This is the myth that pursues counseling insight, seeing spiritual growth as only coming through modern day therapeutic analysis and psychological introspection. The idea is we

can take Jesus into the pain and find His love for us and experience psychological healing. In some popular models, God’s love gets reduced to unconditional affirmation. Though therapy is extremely helpful, this view also falls short for two reasons: first it is too dependent on the modern methods of change popularized only within the last hundred years, denying ourselves a world of rich resources about sanctification given throughout Christian history, particularly in the Puritan era. Second, this can lead to an unbalanced focus only on our wounds and pain creating a “victim mentality” which alleviates responsibility and the need for repentance and humility. Emotional maturity is not identical to spiritual maturity. Our goal is not just to accept oneself with all our faults, our goal is to pursue God’s objective standard of holiness and appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit to change us into the image of Christ. The goal is not to “find our true selves.” The goal is to please God. This may sound old-fashioned or boring, but it just so happens to be true.

Discussion:

Which myths have you encountered? What myths are you drawn toward? What is attractive about each myth?

All of these models have some truth to them and are partly right and partly wrong. They each make the mistake of seeing themselves as a “silver bullet,” emphasizing one aspect of our spiritual growth while neglecting others. Holding only one view creates a system for change that is imbalanced. Spiritual growth comes from Spiritual health. Health is about *balance*. Disease is caused by imbalance. This is the problem

²⁵ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 192.

with some of the myths listed above; they are out of balance. This workbook presents an invitation for you, a balanced journey of experiencing and rediscovering theological truths that are not found indoors, but

outdoors. There we will find truths from God's creation that will be transformative. In this workbook, we will consider deeply five phases of spiritual formation:



Phase 1 – Planted. First, the seed of good news is sown and planted in the ground of our hearts as we receive the Gospel of Jesus by faith. This is the beginning of our spiritual life.

Phase 2 – Rooted. Next, our roots begin to sink down into the spiritual water sources of the gospel as we understand our new identity and we are “rooted and grounded” in love (Eph 3:17). We begin to be honest and authentic in our repentance. We do not pursue idols which leave us unsatisfied and thirsty again. We desire the living water offered by Jesus Christ (Jn 4:14).

Phase 3 – Growing. In this phase, we begin to see real growth happening above the surface. We practice the spiritual disciplines and exemplify Christian character and true integrity. We begin to wage war against the world, the flesh, and the devil. This growth has ups and downs. Just as in nature, spiritual growth can involve periods of apparent stagnation and dormancy. We will

experience “spiritual winters” and dry seasons where surface growth is hidden, while our roots grow deeper, preparing us for future fruitfulness. We are growing in our awareness of our sin and at the same time experiencing more and more freedom from our sin.

Phase 4 – Maturing. We are now experiencing a beautiful transformation. We have become a fully grown tree with the visible fruit of the Spirit. We are using our spiritual gifts and growing in love and community. We extend grace when wronged and learn to love our enemies.

Phase 5 – Multiplying. Finally, God uses us to share what we have learned with others. We become a source of wisdom. We begin to invest in others and cultivate spiritual growth in those around us. We embrace God's mission as salt and light. We long to share this new life with all those around us. This is our destiny as God's children: **“They will be called oaks of righteousness, a**

**planting of the Lord for the display of his
splendor” (Isa 61:3, NIV).**

12 Essential Ingredients

In this workbook we have compiled the best methods as time-tested tools with a proven track record for spiritual formation. Someone asked the first 100 sober alcoholics in AA (*Alcoholics Anonymous*) what they did differently that finally broke the deadly hold of alcoholism. AA founder Bill Wilson documented the process used to obtain sobriety and that was the beginning of the 12 steps. In this workbook we have gone through a similar process and determined that these 12 rules for the Christian life are the most important 12 ingredients for your spiritual formation:

12 Rules for Intentional Spiritual Formation

1. Plant Your Feet on Solid Ground (*or You Will Be Tossed Around Your Whole Life*).
2. Embrace the Seed of the Gospel Every Day (*It's the Key to Everything*).
3. Get to the Root of Your Problem (*or You Will Never Change*).
4. Know Who You Are (*and Whose You Are*).
5. Learn How Distinctively Christian Change is Unique (*and Powerful*).
6. Practice the Spiritual Disciplines (*or You Will Wither and Burn Out*).
7. Fight with Spiritual Weapons (*or You Will Wage the Wrong War*).
8. Discover Your Spiritual Gift (*and Find Your Purpose*).
9. Learn to Love (*or the Rest Won't Matter*).
10. Choose to Forgive (*or Bitterness Will Eat You Alive*).
11. Be Salt and Light (*and Make an Impact*).
12. Share The Gospel (*It's This World's Only Hope*).



Scripture Memory Verse

“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.” (Ps 1:1-3, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. Have you ever had the chance to either apprentice someone or be an apprentice yourself in sharing a trade or skill in life? What elements were important in this process? How does this relate to discipleship?
3. Small groups can be a powerful catalyst for spiritual growth, but if a group is characterized by certain negative characteristics, this can create barriers toward this goal. Take some time with your small group and establish some group “ground rules.” Discuss, what are some characteristics of a “bad” small group? What are some characteristics of a “good” small group? (Consider the aspects of commitment, confidentiality, care, etc.) Discuss expectations and desires for the group.

Recommended Resources

Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002).

John Bunyan. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Reprint. Originally published in 1678. (Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, 2014).

Robert Mulholland. *Invitation to a Journey*. (Downers Grove, IL, IVP, 2016).

Spiritual Formation Exercise: Assessment



All followers of Jesus are on a spiritual formation journey. God encourages his children to practice personal examination as an element of such growth when He says, “Examine yourselves.” (2 Cor 13:5) The psalmist prayed, “*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*” (Ps 139:23-24, NIV). (See also Gal 6:4, Eph 5:15, 1 Cor 11:28) This initial assessment can help you complete a careful search of your spiritual life. Please prayerfully answer each of the following questions about your own spiritual life. Avoid rushing. Use the following scale of 1-10 to rate how often you experience the following:

1-3 = Never or Almost Never
4-6 = Once in a while
7-10 = Frequently or Always

1. I am aware of many areas where I need to grow, as such I encourage and listen to feedback when I am criticized, and I have the ability to be thankful for the opportunity to grow in my self-awareness, my relationship with God and my relationships with others.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. I love the Bible, when I am asked a question about the Bible, I can answer with clarity and am excited to share how I have experienced powerful application in my own spiritual life in many areas.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. I am growing in grace for others. When I am wronged, I have a deep understanding of what forgiveness means and seek to pursue reconciliation with humility and courage.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. I understand my need for personal time with the Lord. I practice regular quiet time and other spiritual disciplines (prayer, confession, fasting etc.) and look forward to that time with the Lord.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. I seek to face trials with joy. I remain confident in God’s love during stress and difficult times.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. Generally, my public and private self are the same and others would describe me as a person of integrity, displaying the fruit of the Spirit.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. I want to be a good witness for Jesus Christ. I share my faith with non-believers through demonstration in my own life and proclamation of the good news of Jesus when given opportunity to share my own testimony.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. I am aware of my own spiritual gift(s) and use my gift(s) to love and serve others.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. I seek to contribute to God's kingdom. I give sacrificially of my time, talent and treasure.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. I know there is a spiritual battle raging. I am keenly aware of spiritual warfare around me and seek to put on the armor of God regularly to fight with spiritual weapons.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

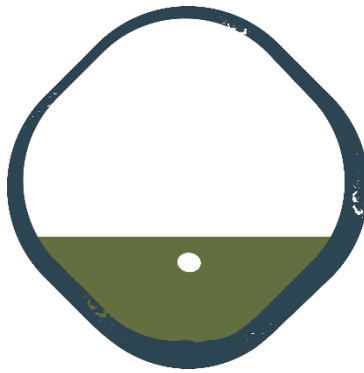
My Total Score: _____

0-50	51-80	81-100
If you scored in this range, there are lots of opportunities to learn and consider new ways of following God. That's exciting! This workbook will help you stop and think about where you're headed and where you want to be to improve your spiritual life and your relationship with God.	If you scored in this range, you may feel like your relationship with God is in a good place, but your score reveals there are some patterns that you want to pay attention to and make some adjustments in order to move from <i>good</i> to <i>great</i> . Take action to improve your spiritual life each week.	If you scored in this range, your relationship with God is in great shape at this time. Keep in mind relationships do not stand still. This is a great time to bring your relationship with God to the next level, prevent problems in the future and invest in others to help them grow as well.

This assessment is not designed to be a source of discouragement or pride, it merely shows areas in your life where the Holy Spirit has either already been at work in a powerful manner, or an opportunity for the Lord to continue to work in the future. Look forward with excitement and anticipation for what is ahead in this study. The best is yet to come. *(Use a different color pen and take this assessment again at the end of this study).* **“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil 1:6, NIV)**

**Out of the fertil ground he caus'd to grow
All Trees of noblest kind for sight, smell, taste;
And all amid them stood the Tree of Life,
High eminent, blooming Ambrosial Fruit
Of vegetable Gold; and next to Life
Our Death the Tree of Knowledge grew fast by,
Knowledge of Good bought dear by knowing ill.**

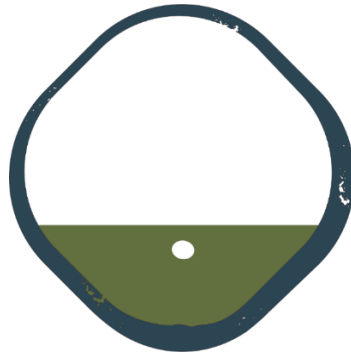
— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV



PHASE 1: Planted

*Embarking on your
Spiritual Adventure*

“Rule 1” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 1: Plant your Feet on Solid Ground *(or You Will Be Tossed Around Your Whole Life.)*

One of the most important foundational resources for your own spiritual formation is the Bible. There are many metaphors for the word of God used throughout the Scriptures: it is likened to a lamp, a mirror, a double-edged sword, and nourishing food sent from heaven. All of these are rich and important, but perhaps the primary image used to describe the word of God is that of a **seed**. The word of God is referenced in this way over forty times. For example, the book of James says you are to “...**humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you**” (Js 1:21, NIV).

The secret to spiritual formation is the renewing of the mind (Rom 12:2). The work of sanctification will necessitate studying the doctrines of the Bible. The strong meat of the Word of God is for the mature believer (Heb 5:14). The Bible must be the guide and test for all our experiences in the spiritual life. It’s amazing to me how much useless trivia is hidden inside our minds. Some of my closest friends are like sports encyclopedias – they can tell you who won the World Series in 1957, even down to who played third base. Do we know the Bible like that? God wants His people to apply our mental abilities to knowing His Word.

For many people the Word of God seems as lifeless and dead as the trees that were cut down to form the pulp for the pages. Seeds may seem lifeless too, but nothing could be further from the truth. Seeds are small, but mighty. It’s amazing how a tiny little seed can create a big tomato plant, a cherry tree, or an oak tree. There’s great power inside one seed.

Once a follower of Jesus embraces God’s word of good news, the apostle John says “**God’s seed abides in him**” (1 Jn 3:9, ESV). The Greek word for “seed” is “*sperma*,” from which we understand our modern concept of genetic origins.

One of the natural laws God has given His creation is the law of the harvest. “**As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease**” (Gen 8:22, NIV). If a farmer waits until he sees his neighbors reaping their crops to sow his own crop, it doesn’t matter how sincere he is, he will not reap a harvest. You cannot cheat or manipulate the law of seedtime and harvest, and you cannot cheat at sowing toward your own spiritual formation. Remember – there is no “Miracle-Gro.”

The apostle Paul said it this way: “**Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows**” (Gal 6:7, NIV).

The Word of God is Foundational

I remember one of the lessons we learned in basketball practice was about how to set a proper screen. A screen, also called a "pick," is a legal block set by an offensive player on the side of or behind a defender in order to free a teammate's path to take a shot or receive a pass. Picks in basketball are valuable weapons that will give the offense many opportunities to score. If you know how to properly set a pick, the other team will have trouble defending you. When setting the pick, you should do so with your feet spread out, creating a wide base, with your hips down, making it difficult to knock you off balance. You must be stationary with your feet firmly planted *prior* to any contact with the opposing player. If you are still moving, your pick is illegal and you will be called for an offensive foul. I can still hear the coach: "First, plant your feet!" A similar rule applies to spiritual formation. Everyone needs a firm place to stand in life. Where will you plant your feet? What ground is underneath you? What is your foundation? *For your own spiritual formation to flourish, you must make the Word of God your ultimate foundation.*

We assert that everyone has an ultimate authority in their lives. When there are questions or disagreements about life, meaning, morality or destiny, who or what has the final say? Is it your reason, your experience, your tradition or some other source of authority? The Bible is God's inspired revelation and serves as the only solid foundation upon which to build your Christian life. The prophet Isaiah wrote,

**"This is what the Sovereign LORD says:
'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a**

precious cornerstone for a sure foundation'" (Isa 28:16, NIV). The prophet Isaiah also said, **"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever" (Isa 40:8, NIV).**

The Word of God is the highest authority. Pastor Bryan Chapell writes, "The Bible makes it clear that the Word is not merely powerful, it functions without literary peer or human limitation."²⁶ The psalmist writes, **"You have exalted above all things your name and your word" (Ps 138:2, ESV).**

For the Christian, we believe God has spoken. (Ex 20:1-2, 2 Tim 3:16) Our God is not a silent God. He is a speaking God. The same voice that spoke from Mt. Sinai, speaks to us today. **"See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks" (Heb 12:25, NIV).** If the Scriptures are not given by God, then they are not authoritative and they are not enforceable universally. Without God's inspired word, all values and morals become relative to each person. All matters of right and wrong become just matters of personal preference and change with culture. But, the Scriptures do not claim to be the mere opinions of human beings, rather they claim to be the very words of God. As such, they are eternal, unchanging and always true.

If you don't have an authority in your life, you're going to listen to all different kinds of conflicting opinions. One day you'll decide this and another day you'll decide that and then one day you can't decide at all. But, if you decide that God's word is going to be the authority of your life, that simplifies decision making. There's an old hymn which says, *"How firm a foundation,*

²⁶ Bryan Chapell. *Christ Centered Preaching*. Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 5.

ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent word.”²⁷

I had a mentor early in ministry training whose name was Dr. David Babbitt. I appreciate so many of the lessons he taught me in those years. One of the things that most stood out to me was his Bible. He would carry around this really worn out New King James Version that looked like it had been thrown into the washing machine – and maybe it had gone through the dryer a few times too. As he would teach with that Bible, I wondered how many times he had gone through it and how *few* times I had gone through mine. Spiritual formation requires a well-worn Bible. There is transformative power in the Word of God.

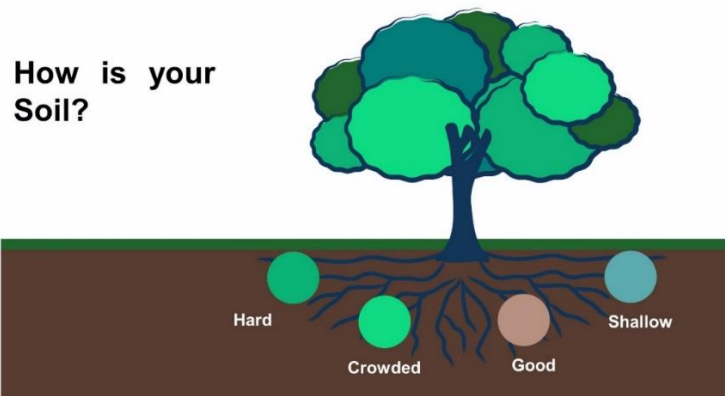
Discussion:

How has the Word of God impacted your own spiritual life?

The Parable of the Soils

The Parable of the Soils is one of the first parables Jesus told. As such, it serves as a prerequisite to understanding the rest of his parables because it reveals so much about why spiritual formation fails and we don’t bear fruit.

There is an area in New Jersey called the “Sourland Mountains.” Early Dutch settlers described the area with reddish-brown soil as ill-suited for farming. It remains undeveloped because of the hard rock, clay soil, slopes and wetlands. As the parable of the sower illustrates (Mk 4:1-20), the kind of terrain where the seed falls makes all the difference in the world. Is the soil of your heart prepared to receive the seed of the Gospel? Jesus described four kinds of soils:



The Hard Soil

Jesus said, **“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came**

and ate it up” (Mk 4:3-4, NIV). Some soil is hard. It needs to be plowed and made more fallow. What does it mean for our hearts to have hard soil? The answer is one

²⁷ “How Firm a Foundation” Author: (1787) George Keith (1787); R. Keen. Public Domain.

word – *pride*. Remember how Pharaoh was described with a hard-heart? (Ex 8:15). There is a similar, ugly obstinacy that exists inside each of us. We resist the Lord. When we are committed to self-justification, we end up denying what is true about us. Our lifestyles become self-centered and the soil of our hearts becomes hard. We become quick to speak and slow to listen. We have our own way of interpreting our world and anything that is incongruent with that interpretation is either ignored or perceived as a threat.

When we read God's Word, we must assume there are things we don't know. This inherently brings a sense of instability. Though this opens up potential for tremendous growth, it also confronts our desire to know everything, to look good, to be right, and to be in control. These are desires of survival mode and they often flare up when we are in unknown territory. But becoming what we have never been will require us to learn what we have never learned.

The prophet Hosea exhorts us with this passage, **"Break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you"** (Hos 10:12, NIV).

The Shallow Soil

Jesus said, **"Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root."** (Mk 4:5-6, NIV). Other soil has rocks right under the surface, preventing deep growth, and this soil becomes unfruitful as well. These kinds of people at first, in the spur of the moment,

accept the word, even with joy, but they were just being emotionally impulsive and so it's temporary. They lack commitment. When difficulty comes, they don't persevere. Their soil is too shallow.

When the trials of life come, they start thinking, "I signed up for eternal life and happiness, but I didn't sign up for the serving / sacrificing / suffering part, you can keep that, I'm out." When the pressure hits, they're gone. Just like you and I, Jesus has fair-weather friends. These people come around when things are easy. When the heat gets turned up, they fall away, they fizzle out and any growth dies like a thirsty plant in the hot sun. These were not genuine believers. They were marked by a false-profession of faith.

A true believer is marked by perseverance. (Js 1:2-4; Heb 10:36; Phil 1:6) God will personally make sure of this reality in your life. Notice this benediction from the apostle Paul, **"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."** (1 Thess 5:23-24, NIV)

The Crowded Soil

Jesus said, **"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain"** (Mk 4:7, NIV). Other soil is full of weeds and those need to first be extracted. Life is full of distractions, and life in the modern age is so divided with all kinds of cares and anxieties. Have you looked at your screen time lately? Sadly, the word of God is not a power many people tap into. We are in the middle of an epidemic of biblical illiteracy. Recent Barna

research shows that even amongst self-professed Christians, 48% of them could not name the 4 gospels. 52% of them could not identify more than three of Jesus' disciples. 60% of them could not identify even 5 of the 10 commandments.²⁸ Mark Buchanan writes: "Curious times, these. There is simultaneously a glut of the word of God and a famine of it, a drought and deluge. We have every translation of the Bible you can imagine – the NIV, the NEVG, the KJV, the NKJV, the SASR, NRSAB, the preacher's bible, the worshiper's bible, the spirit-filled believer's bible, the left-handed bald gypsy fiddler's bible... You can have it in hardback, paper, leather, cloth, in pink, red, oxblood, turtle shell, iridescent orange, psychedelic paisley, with maps and charts and indices and appendices and concordances and holograms of the temple in the back, and a little sleeve with a CD-ROM that takes you on a guided tour of the Holy Land. The food is out there – and it's a banqueting table. We're just picky eaters. Oh, we're buying bibles. And sometimes we're even reading them, but there's not much evidence that we're studying them."²⁹

We are reminded of the words of the prophet Amos, **"The days are coming declares the Sovereign LORD, when I will send a famine through the land, not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD"** (Amos 8:11, NIV). We need to read the Word of God. It contains transformative power.

Discussion:
What keeps people from reading the word of God?

The weeds represent other sources of joy and satisfaction in our lives that compete with God for first place (money, sex, career, athletics, hobbies, fill in the blank _____). John Calvin said the human heart is an idol *factory*. All these weeds mess up the soil of our hearts. Pulling weeds is painful. We resist it. But as long as all these weeds and thorns remain, the seed of the Gospel will get choked. Have you come to the place in your life where you're willing to admit your soil needs work? It's this kind of despair which is the starting place of all spiritual transformation. When we do this, the soil of our hearts becomes rich, receptive, and ready for the seed to take root.

The Good Soil

Jesus said, **"Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."** (Mk 4:8, NIV). The good soil receives the word of God and bears much fruit. We want to be like the fertile soil.

God's Word Is There for You to Know

We need to read God's Word every day, slowly, deliberately, devotionally. We need to read it to find guidance, to find truth, and to find out who God is. Immerse yourself in the Bible. If you're reading a narrative story in the Bible, picture the scene. If you're reading about Jesus walking on the water, what did it look like? If you're reading a letter from Paul, look at each word and repeat them. If you're reading a promise, personalize it. Insert your own name into the verse. For example, when you read John

²⁸ For updated statistics, see Barna's "State of the Bible report." <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-bible-2019/>.

²⁹ Mark Buchanan. *Your God is Too Safe. Rediscovering the Wonder of a God You Can't Control* (Portland: Multnomah, 2001), 200-201.

3:16, read it, **“For God so loved _____ that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but should have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16, NKJV).**

If you’re reading an exhortation, turn those passages into your daily prayer. For example, read the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 and say, “God I want this to be true in my life today.”

If you’re reading the psalms describing Who God is, pray them back to God, turning them into a form of worship, devotion and meditation. **“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” (Ps 1:1-3, ESV).**

The word **“meditate”** in the Bible is different from eastern meditation. Meditation in the eastern worldview is “emptying the mind.” In the Christian worldview meditation is “filling the mind” with the Word of God. In Hebrew, the word picture is that of digestion.³⁰ The picture is a cow chewing the cud. A cow doesn’t just eat grass. It eats it, then the gastric juices start working it, then the cow throws it up and chews on it more because it has renewed flavor. In other words, it squeezes every ounce of nutrients before finally digesting it.

That is the way we are to be when we take in God’s Word. It involves serious thinking. Do you seriously take time that you might know the Scriptures? Sometimes we get impatient in our study of God’s word, we don’t understand it or when we apply it, it doesn’t yield immediate results, but we must think like a farmer. What would happen if you planted a seed in your garden and then dug it up each morning to see if anything was happening? It would die and never produce fruit. You have to have faith that the seed is doing what God created it to do. The same is true for God’s word. Do you **know** God’s word?

God’s Word Is There for You to Stow

One of the weapons our Lord used to fight against the enemy was memorized Scripture (Matt 4:1-10). The psalmist says, **“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Ps 119:11, NIV).** There is no substitute for memorizing the Bible. Pastor John Piper said it this way, “Memorizing Scripture allows me to hit the devil in the face with a force that he cannot resist to protect myself and my family from his assaults. What are you hitting him with? He is millions of times stronger than you. And he hates you and your family, and your marriage, and this church, and God. How anybody walks through this devil-ruled world without a sword in their hand is beyond me.”³¹ Memorizing Scripture strengthens your faith. Paul said, **“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17, ESV).**

³⁰ The Hebrew concept of meditation (HGH = “Hagah,” Strong’s # 32, Ps 1:2, Josh 1:8) means to tax one’s own mind by repetitive mumbling and deep contemplation of God’s Word in a sincere pursuit of knowing what God is saying, in such a restless way that you chew on it day and night until understanding arises. Baker’s theological dictionary defines biblical meditation as “That silent and secret musing in which the children of God are to exercise themselves.” Harrison, *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960) 347.

³¹ This quotation was taken from John Piper’s sermon, “If My Words Abide in You.” January 4, 2009. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/if-my-words-abide-in-you--2> Accessed June 12, 2021.

Memorizing Scripture helps you overcome temptation to sin. God's warnings and God's promises are the ways in which we are able to overcome the deceitfulness of the devil.

God did something amazing for me years ago when I sat in a summer class in a seminary classroom and I heard Dr. Mark Bailey, the president of Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS), look at us students and recite a small portion of Isaiah 53. Probably just 4-5 verses. I was stunned at the beauty of God's Word spoken like that. I had never heard it before like that. He just recited it by memory, no commentary, just the Bible. It was one of the most powerful things I have ever heard in my life. I had never heard anyone do that before and it absolutely blew me away. I made a decision right then and there to begin the process of Bible memory and I cannot tell you how helpful in my spiritual life this one thing has been. There is incredible value of memorizing Scripture.

I challenge you to stow God's Word in your heart. Each lesson in this workbook has a scripture memory verse at the end of the chapter. Take that verse, write it out on a 3x5 card, and work on it each day until you have it memorized.

Discussion:

What Scripture(s) have been meaningful to you to memorize? What do you hope to memorize?

God's Word Is There for You to Grow

The apostle Paul writes, **"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"** (2 Tim 3:16-17 NIV). The

Word of God is one of the primary means of our sanctification. The Father sanctifies believers through His Word (Jn 17:17). One of my professors at DTS, Howard Hendricks, used to say, "The Bible was not written to make you a smarter sinner, but to make you more like the Savior." Reading the Bible is not just to gather information, we read it for the purpose of transformation. The apostle Peter says it this way, **"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation"** (1 Pet 2:2, NIV). To read the text with any goal in mind other than spiritual formation is to read it incorrectly. Paul tells the church at Rome to **"Be transformed by the renewing of the mind"** (Rom 12:2, NIV). Notice Paul uses the present tense; this is a continuous action. Notice also it's passive, as this is the work of the Holy Spirit. Notice finally that it is an imperative, indicating *we* have a responsibility in this process as well. The word for "transformed" there is the word for "metamorphosis." It's the idea of a cocooned caterpillar which emerges into a beautiful butterfly. If you've ever watched that, it's not a pretty sight. It actually looks like something out of a horror movie. The point is sometimes spiritual growth is a messy miracle. It requires us to investigate the congruity between what we say we believe and how we live life. This growth process can be painful, but it leads to true freedom. Jesus said, **"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"** (Jn 8:31-32, ESV).

True Freedom

We need to apply God's Word to our lives; it's very valuable. Theologians speak of three uses for God's Law. First, the Law

convicts us of sin and leads us to Christ. (Gal 3:23-26). Second, the Law restrains wickedness in this world. (1 Tim 1:9-11) Third, the Law is a help to us to learn the nature of God's will.³² It's this third use we are speaking about here which points us toward universally true moral principles. Psalm 119:14 says **"I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches."** (NIV) Great riches? Think about that. Sometimes we think about God's Word and we think, "This is life *restricted!*" It's all about do's and don'ts. Thou shalt not this and thou shalt not that. That's not the case at all. The psalmist says, **"I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free"** (Ps 119:32, NIV). God created you and He knows how the design works best. A life lived in accordance with the Bible is life unleashed, a life running on all cylinders. This is life how you were meant to live and His commandments are **"not burdensome"** (1 Jn 5:3, ESV).

If you're a relatively new Christian, do you have a Bible you can read? Buy one. Do you need a recommendation? Ask others in your small group.

Discussion:

Which Bible do you use? What kind of reading plan has been helpful to you?

If you've been a Christian for a while, but know you need to grow in this area, then I'd challenge you to make reading the Bible a daily practice. If you're already doing that, memorize a verse or an entire chapter of the

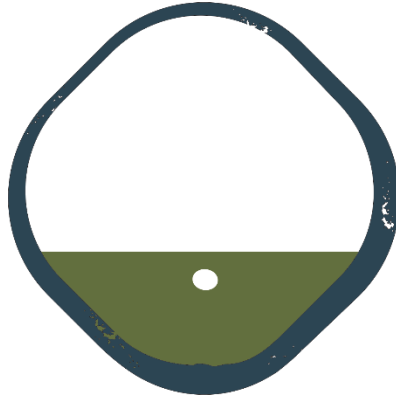
Bible (such as Psalm 103), or if you're ready, memorize a whole book of the Bible (such as Philippians). If you are already engaging in the Word, then dig even deeper. Join a Bible study. Perhaps you're ready to volunteer to teach others. Friends, there's one thing that should just blow your mind, and it's this: The God of the universe wants to communicate with you and He wrote his message down in a book called the Bible.

Sometime in the year 386 A.D., Augustine and his friend Alypius were spending time in Milan. While outdoors, Augustine heard the voice of a child singing a song, the words of which in Latin were *Tolle Lege* ("Pick it up and read it. Pick it up and read it.") He thought at first that the song was related to some kind of children's game, but could not remember ever having heard such a song. Then, considering that this song might be a command from God to open and read the Scriptures, he located a Bible, picked it up, opened it and read the first passage he saw. It was from the letter of Paul to the Romans. Augustine said, "No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended, —by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart, —all the gloom of doubt vanished away."³³ One word of God transformed Augustine's heart and the rest is history. Friends, Christianity makes an amazing claim, that God can be found by reading the pages of a book called the Bible. Pick it up and read it.

Plant your feet on solid ground or you'll be tossed around your whole life.

³² For more on the issue of the Law in the Christian life, see Thomas R. Schreiner. *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010).

³³ Saint Augustine. *Confessions*. Nelson's Royal Classics. Book Eight. (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1999) 171-172.



Scripture Memory Verse

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

(2 Tim 3:16-17 NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. Who is the most spiritually mature person you know? Why do you look up to them?
3. There are many forces (family, school, media, politics) competing to “form” us. Which forces seem to have the most influence over your own formation?

Recommended Resources

Howard Hendricks. *Living by the Book*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007).

Ken Ramey. *Expository Listening*. (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2010).

John Owen. *The Mortification of Sin* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1996).

Scott Larson and Dan Tocchini. *Groundwork: Preparing the Soil for God’s Transformation*. (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2015).

Spiritual Formation Exercise

Silently read the following passage and consider what God is saying to you for the next 10 minutes from Isaiah 40:21-31 (NIV).

Walk through the three phases of inductive Bible study and make notes in the chart below.

1. *Observation* (Jot down the ‘who, what, where, when’ of the passage).
2. *Interpretation* (briefly describe what this passage means to you, what is the main thought?).
3. *Application* (consider how this passage connects to your own life?)

Isaiah 40:21-31, NIV

²¹ Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

²² He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

²³ He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

²⁴ No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

²⁵ “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:

Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one

and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

²⁷ Why do you complain, Jacob?

Why do you say, Israel,

“My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”?

²⁸ Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;

³¹ but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.

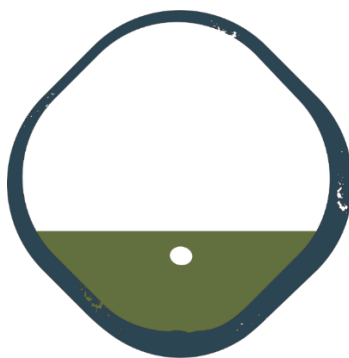
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Inductive Bible Study (Isa 40:21-31)

<p>Observation (What do I see?)</p>	
<p>Interpretation (What does this mean?)</p>	
<p>Application (How does this apply to me?)</p>	

Ideas for additional meditation passages: Psalm 103; Isaiah 53; Matt 6:25-34; Romans 8; Phil 3:7-14.

“Rule 2” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 2: Embrace the Seed of the Gospel Every Day *(It's the Key to Everything.)*

Francie Nolan is the heroine of Betty Smith's semi-autobiographical classic *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*. Francie is idealistic, smart, and determined to rise above her circumstances as an Irish-American immigrant living in poverty in the inner city. She provides for her younger siblings after her father passes from alcoholism, lying about her age to work in a flower factory, a press clipping office, and as a teletype operator. Though she loves learning, she sends her younger brother Neeley to high school in her place, educating herself via books instead. That's where we get the classic line: "The world was hers for the reading."

The book has another heroine, though — the sturdy tree in Francie's front yard, *Ailanthus altissima*, also known as the Tree of Heaven. Without water, soil, or sunlight, it "grew out of neglected rubbish heaps, and it was the only tree that grew out of cement." The tree's hardiness is traced throughout the book as a metaphor for Francie's own flourishing despite horrible adversity. We'll

revisit their story once more at the end of this chapter.

The most tenacious of trees, like the Tree of Heaven, can survive in the most difficult of circumstances. This is a picture of the power of the Gospel. In this chapter, we will discuss what role the Gospel plays in our spiritual formation. Spoiler- alert: It's a central one. *The Gospel is the seed of all spiritual growth.*

In the last section, we discussed the power of the Word of God. The Gospel is the central message of the Word of God. Sally Lloyd Jones writes, "There's lots of stories in the Bible, but all the stories are telling one Big story. The story of how God loves his children and comes to rescue them. It takes the whole Bible to tell this story. And at the center of the story, there is a baby. Every story in the Bible whispers his name. He is like the missing piece in a puzzle — the piece that makes all the other pieces fit together, and suddenly you can see a beautiful picture."³⁴

³⁴ Sally Lloyd-Jones. *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2007) 14-16.

The Bible is all about this Jesus: His life, His ministry, His death, His resurrection, His ascension and His return. The Bible is all about Him living the life we should have lived, dying the death that we deserved, and rising to life again with the keys of death in His hands. We proclaim Him. We urge all people to repent and place their faith in Christ. This is the starting point of all spiritual growth. The life we live, we live by faith in the Son of God Who loved us and gave Himself for us. (Gal 2:20) To embrace this news by faith, we must first come to the end of ourselves.

Discussion:

How does the Gospel relate to our spiritual formation?

The Bad News: Our Sin

Author Walker Percy used to describe humanity as “Waiting for news.” We are always waiting for news. The central message of the Bible is good news. The term “gospel” means “good news.” The Bible is all about the good news of the Son of God coming as the Savior of the world to rescue a people for Himself from the slavery of sin.

What is the problem with us? Is our main problem low self-esteem, or a lack of education or economic hardship through oppression? The Scriptures paint a different picture of humanity’s greatest problem than our society does. The problem is soul-ruin. The problem is spiritual malformation. No amount of intellectual information, therapy, or economic stimulus is going to change a malformed heart. This is the problem the Bible calls **sin**. The word for “sin” is *hamartia* which in archery terms means to

“miss the mark.” When someone misses the bulls-eye, that person has sinned. We all miss the mark. **“There is no one who does not sin” (1 Kgs 8:46, ESV).** The apostle Paul in Romans 1-3 describes the plight of humanity as bleak, having rejected God and turning away from our Creator. We all sin and fall short of God’s glory. (Rom 3:23) In our sin, we have the capacity and desire to leave God, our Creator, completely out of our lives. We live in rebellion. Theologians call this **“total depravity,”** the teaching that human nature is totally corrupt as a result of the fall. As such, humankind is unable to please God. The wages of sin is death, separation from our Creator. (Rom 6:23) Our condemnation is just.

The Flesh

The “flesh” in Paul’s letters is a technical term that is used to describe the sin nature. (It is not equivalent to the human body, nor is it the mere epidermis although at times it is used this way also in the New Testament). The flesh denotes that selfish desire which exists in all mankind. Its deeds are evident and abhorrent to God. It is contrary to the Spirit and His fruit. (Gal 5:19-26) It is self-righteous and prideful.

The book of Judges records the story of an arrogant leader named Abimelech who is likened to a tree, but not to an olive tree, or a fig tree or even a vine, but he is likened to **bramble**. (Judges 9:8-14) Have you ever worked with wild thorn bushes? They are very destructive and a menace to farming. They produce no fruit, no shade and have no real value, in fact, they are part of the curse (Gen 3:18). This is a picture of life in the flesh. Paul says **“The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so”**

(Rom 8:7, NIV). The flesh produces no fruit. The flesh is always self-serving. As maturity grows, awareness of the filth in one's flesh grows also.

If we are ever going to become the kind of tree God wants us to become, first we must admit the kind of tree we are right now. Jesus said it this way, **"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briers. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of"** (Luke 6:43-45, NIV).

St. Augustine tells a story in his *Confessions* about a time in his life before he became a Christian when he and some friends stole some pears from someone else's pear tree. As he reflected on this incident, he saw how strange it was as he noticed first of all he was not even hungry and secondly, he didn't even like pears! He simply did it because there was something disobedient in his nature which does things *because* they are wrong. This is our sin nature's desire for autonomy.

Herman Melville describes the condition of sinful humanity in the book *Moby Dick*, when one of the characters says, "I am dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending."³⁵ Our sin is an inescapable problem with no human solution. For some, this is a tough pill to swallow, but it is the diagnosis we need to motivate us to take the medicine.

People are sensitive to these charges, but we must look squarely at our problem as a doctor looks squarely at the disease of cancer or AIDS. Dallas Willard writes, "Few today have discovered that they have been disastrously wrong and that they cannot change or escape the consequences of it on their own. There is little sense of **'Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts'** (Isa 6:5, KJV). Yet, without *this realization of our utter ruin* and without the genuine revisioning and redirecting of our lives, which that bitter realization naturally gives rise to, *no clear path to inner transformation can be found*. It is psychologically and spiritually impossible. We will steadfastly remain on the throne of our universe, so far as we are concerned, perhaps trying to "use a little God" here and there.³⁶ Do you believe that assessment of your condition?

We must come to terms with our own sin. We must, like Paul, experience a kind of death before new life can begin (Rom 7:9). The solution to this defeat is found only in surrendering to Christ and embracing the Gospel. **"Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord"** (Rom 7:25, NIV).

Discussion:

Why is it difficult to accept this bad news?
How can this be overcome?

Gregory the Great, at the end of the sixth century A.D., divided all sin into seven

³⁵ This quotation was taken from Herman Melville. *Moby Dick*. Chapter 17.

³⁶ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 60.

categories called the “seven deadly sins” or “seven cardinal sins.” Many theologians and Christian leaders have agreed and found this grouping profitable.³⁷ These sins are not mentioned collectively anywhere in the

Bible yet they are all condemned in various places. Here is a chart exploring their definitions, manifestations and their opposite Christian virtues:

The Seven Deadly Sins

Sin	Manifestations	Christian Virtue
Anger (wrath): Expressing strong and passionate feelings of irritation and aggression, desiring retaliation to cause harm to others.	Quarreling; Rudeness; Yelling; Use of profanity; Rage; Physical abuse; Need to be right; Blaming God and others for all our negative conditions; Refusing to accept our part; Cynicism; Bitterness; Moodiness; Snubbing; Passive-Aggressive uncooperativeness; Turning anger inward through depression.	Slowness to anger; Peacemaking; Forgiveness. (Prov 29:11; Matt 5:21-22; Eph 4:26-27; Col 3:8; Js 1:19-20; 3:8-10)
Envy : The sin of being chronically dissatisfied with our lives and comparing with jealousy our circumstances with someone else. The resentful awareness and begrudging of any advantage of others.	Covetousness; Contempt for another person’s talent or authority; Jealousy, Rivalry, Belittling, Slander; Dissuading others from admiring someone who is the focus of our envy; Planting seeds of doubt about someone’s character; Gossip; Sinister planning to destroy someone with premeditation. Sarcasm, Antagonism, Teasing.	Thankfulness (Ex 20:17; 1 Sam 18:6-9; Prov 6:16-19; 14:30; Js 3:14-16)
Gluttony : The ravenous indulgence of desires (typically food or drink); seeking happiness and pleasure in substance that can be harmful.	Self-indulgence; Addictions; Escapism; Neglecting health through lack of rest; exercise or wholesome diet; Refusing to seek help for dependency;	Self-Discipline (Prov 23:2; 20-21; 1 Cor 6:12, 19-20; Phil 3:19)

³⁷ For a contemporary resource on this topic, see Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2020).

Greed (avarice): The selfish and excessive desires for more money, possessions or material goods than is needed; at times manipulating others for personal gain in spite of the harm done to them.	Entitlement; Discontentment; Overly competitive; Engaging in illegal or unethical activities for possessions; Refusing to be involved with people of lesser means; Cheating; Living beyond one's means; Being wasteful; Playing on the good will of others; Being stingy; Indifferent toward homeless and hungry.	Contentment (Heb 13:3; 1 Tim 6:6-10)
Lust : The intense and unbridled sexual desire which pursues indulgence and gratification despite God's intended boundaries.	Pursuing inappropriate physical intimacy outside of marriage; Adultery; Fornication; Pornography; Fantasizing; Perversions.	Abstinence; Purity (Ex 20:14; Matt 5:27-28; Eph 5:3)
Pride : The quality of being boastful and conceited. Seeking autonomy; superiority and overall self-absorption.	Haughty spirit; Acting as if we are better than others; Demanding respect; Fierce independence; Self-pity; Territorial about status; Refusing to accept criticism; Exaggerating; Talking too much; Ostentatiousness; Taking center stage; Bigotry; Overbearing and argumentative.	Humility; Interdependence. (Prov 16:18; Isa 14:13-15; Jer 9:23; Rom 12:3; Phil 2:4-10; Js 4:6-10)
Sloth : The lack of motivation for work, action or labor; apathy; inactivity; refusing to use talents for growth.	Neglecting responsibilities and loved ones; Placing minimal effort; Not following through; Procrastination; Living in a dream world; Spending inordinate time with recreation; Looking for shortcuts; Wasting time; Complaining; Failing to fulfill spiritual obligations; Overly attached to grief because of past failures.	Diligence; Conscientiousness; Servanthood; Viewing work as good, not part of the curse. (Gen 1:28; Phil 3:12-16; 1 Thess 3:10-13; Titus 1:12)

It is important to understand these vices to comprehend how sin manifests itself and what is at the bottom. The picture of spiritual malformation that medieval Christians used was a tree. Often this is referred to as "the tree of vices." The root was pride and these other sins are all

outgrowths and offspring of this corrupted source, smaller branches that bear sinful fruit. Frederick Buechner said these are all sad efforts to fill the empty place where love belongs.³⁸ Why study the vices? C.S. Lewis once said because, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex

³⁸ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993).

and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”³⁹

Repentance

We all must acknowledge our need for repentance. **Repentance** means we change our minds and turn away from and hate our sin. We express genuine contrition and sorrow. Thomas Brooks said, “Repentance is the vomit of the soul.”⁴⁰ I don’t know about you, but I don’t like to throw up. When we vomit, it means something is horribly wrong. The same is true when we recognize our sin. Godly sorrow is not just being sorry we got caught, or sorry we were hurt by our own stupidity. This is worldly sorrow which leads to death (2 Cor 7:10). Godly sorrow is vertical. It says to God, **“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” (Ps 51:4, NIV)** It doesn’t blame anyone but one’s self. It’s beating our breast and crying out to God for mercy. Repentance is acknowledging that we need a solution that goes beyond outward, external acts of righteousness. We need healing from the inside out.⁴¹ We must cry out with the psalmist, **“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps 51:10, ESV)**. This is the process of spiritual formation (it is a kind of re-formation). Repentance is a spiritual U-turn as we turn back toward God.

At this point we must address a great temptation in the Christian life. There is a temptation to perfect oneself by one’s own efforts to relieve the burden of spiritual failure. Even after we embrace the Gospel,

we attempt to use obedience, service, ministry, or just being “good” (or all of these things) to relieve the burden of our spiritual guilt. We may hear a sermon and the sermon is to “love your neighbor” or to “love your wife” or “to pray without ceasing” and we respond by thinking, “Oh God, I don’t do that enough. God, I need to do that more.” Then we seek to obey in our own strength. This is called **moralism**. This is the trap that the Galatian church fell into. Listen to the Galatians 3:1-3, where Paul says: **“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (Gal 3:1-3, NIV)**.

No amount of human effort can relieve our burden of spiritual failure. It can only be relieved by Christ. Any gospel which says only what we must *do* and never announces what Christ has *done* is not the gospel at all. Therefore, in living out our freedom, we must face with brutal honesty the hard truth about ourselves, including not just our brokenness or our wounds, but our residual sin. Like the psalmist we must cry out, **“Search me, O God” (Ps 139:23, ESV)**. This is the beginning of the work of repentance. The first of Martin Luther’s famous 95 Theses was as follows: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said ‘repent,’ willed that the whole life of

³⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 26.

⁴⁰ Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies against Satan’s Devices* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997 (1652)), 63.

⁴¹ Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*. 25th Anniversary Edition. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013).

believers should be repentance.”⁴²

Repentance is when we experience godly sorrow and remorse over our sins.

The Good News: God’s Grace

The Scripture describes God as rich in mercy. He has made a way to wash our sins away through the Gospel. **“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit” (1 Pet 3:18, NIV).** It’s important we understand that we come to Christ by faith alone (Eph 2:8-9). It is not our own good works that earn us standing before God. It is the work of Christ on our behalf.

We stand before Him by faith in the white robes of the righteousness of Christ. This is not just good news, it’s *great* news! Have you placed your faith in Christ? If so, rejoice! Jesus gave you this promise, **“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (Jn 5:24, NIV).**

There are a lot of examples of trees in the Bible, but we must remember that trees bear fruit, fruit does not bear trees. We cannot earn our way or work our way into God’s favor, we must rely upon God’s work of grace. When we embrace the Gospel by faith, the Holy Spirit plants this new seed into our hearts and then we can become the tree we were meant to be and eventually bear His fruit.

But Wait, There’s More!

There is a sense in which salvation is a one-time event; this is called *justification*; through which we are declared righteous through faith alone (Eph 2:8-9). But there is another sense in which salvation is ongoing as we are saved from sin’s power (1 Cor 1:18). This is *sanctification*. The Gospel is not just freedom from sin’s penalty, it’s also freedom from sin’s power. A future free from the presence of sin is our great hope of glorification (Rom 8:30).

Discussion:

What is the relationship between justification and sanctification?

WHAT IS SALVATION?

Justification	Sanctification	Glorification
PAST Eph 2:8	PRESENT 1 Cor 1:18	FUTURE Rom 5:9

⁴² Martin Luther. 95 Theses. <https://christian.net/resources/disputation-of-doctor-martin-luther/> Accessed June 12, 2021.

This is important when we consider clarifying the Gospel. Dallas Willard laments when he says today the church “aims to get people into heaven rather than to get heaven into people...It creates groups of people who may be ready to die, but clearly are not ready to live.”⁴³

Understanding this *present* aspect of salvation is important to combat what Author Jen Wilkin describes as the problem called “**Celebratory Failure-ism**.”⁴⁴ This is a defeatist perspective on the way we live the Christian life. It is a way of thinking about failure in the Christian life as almost something worth *celebrating*. In this mindset, we should almost be glad about breaking God’s law because it magnifies God’s grace. To this, the apostle Paul says, “May it never be” (Rom 6:1-2). Sometimes people value God’s grace because they came out of legalism and didn’t have an understanding of God’s mercy. But in this overcorrection, the idea of obedience is missing, almost like it’s a bad word. We cannot reduce the Gospel to merely justification. Justification is good news, but sanctification is also good news.

Justification is the good news that by faith, you don’t have to pay the penalty of your sin. **Sanctification** is the good news that you don’t have to live in your sin anymore.

Author Jen Wilkin tweeted it out this way: “Don’t reduce gospel-centered to justification-centered. The good news is more than our freedom from sin’s penalty. It is also our progression from sin’s power and our ultimate freedom from sin’s presence. Justification, Sanctification and Glorification are all the Gospel.”⁴⁵

In this sense, we never ever graduate from the Gospel. Pastor Tim Keller says it this way, “The gospel is not the ABCs of Christianity – it’s the A-Z of Christianity.” In other words, God saves you by His grace and then He grows you by His grace. Then, one day He will present you faultless before His throne by His grace. Theologian John Murray said it this way: “Christ’s blood is the laver of initial cleansing but it is also the fountain to which the believer must continuously repair (go). It is at the cross of Christ that repentance has its beginning; it is at the cross of Christ that it must continue to pour out its heart in the tears of confession and contrition.”⁴⁶

Author John Stott said it this way, “All progress in the Christian life depends upon a recapitulation of the original terms of one’s acceptance with God.”⁴⁷ That word **recapitulation** means a reenactment. Eugene Peterson says it like this, “In the Christian life, our primary task isn’t to avoid sin, which is impossible anyway, but it’s to recognize sin.”⁴⁸ Spiritual growth occurs backwards. It is not moving “up” it’s

⁴³ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002), 239.

⁴⁴ The coining of this term can be found in the article, “Failure is not a virtue” by Jen Wilkin (TGC 2014) <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/failure-is-not-a-virtue/> Accessed June 12, 2021.

⁴⁵ Tweet taken from @jenniferwilkin February 21, 2018.

⁴⁶ John Murray. *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 143.

⁴⁷ John Stott. *The Cross of Christ*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 27.

⁴⁸ Eugene Peterson. *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christian* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1998).

moving “down.” The godlier you become, the less godly you will feel. This is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in you through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Consider this well-known story from Jesus’ teachings: **“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.” (Luke 18:10-14, NIV)**

Jesus often referred to the Pharisees as “hypocrites.” In classical Greek, the word “**hypocrite**” meant someone who wore a mask in a play. God desires truth in our inward parts. He desires authenticity. This is what is commended in the tax collector in the story above. This leads to justification.

What’s wrong with the Pharisee? His problem is that he is conceiving the spiritual life like it’s a path up a mountain that he has to climb. However, the Bible doesn’t teach that you achieve new levels of spiritual maturity by your own efforts. Spiritual formation is not a climb up a mountain, instead it is more like a slow descent into a cave. Our growth is not up, but down.

Growth in Christ, advancing in spiritual maturity, comes as we discover more and

more of our sin and neediness for Christ. The more mature you become, the more aware of your sin you become. Eventually you will get to the point where you will be like Paul who, at the end of his life, began to refer to himself as **“the chief of sinners” (1 Tim 1:15)**. Paul said it this way, **“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (Rom 7:24, NIV)**

This means growing in grace, requires grace. Paul Zahl describes sanctification in this way: “It is the carrying of good news to the unevangelized territories of our person and social being. If Justification is God’s regarding us as perfect through the mirror of the Son’s perfection, then sanctification, which is growth in grace, is our receiving that regard palpably and with larger and larger extension throughout the complex geography of our being. For Paul, sanctification is this continuing process of receiving the word of imputation. The process is as long as life itself, reaching to darker continents within ourselves and our culture than we ever knew existed. Sanctification is justification extended.”⁴⁹

Justification cancels the penalty of my sin. Sanctification breaks the power of my sin. J.C. Ryle was right, “We must be holy, because this is the one grand end and purpose for which Christ came into the world ... Jesus is a complete Saviour. He does not merely take away the guilt of a believer’s sin, he does more – he breaks its power.”⁵⁰ There’s an old hymn which has a line which says: *“He breaks the power of cancelled sin.”*⁵¹

⁴⁹ Paul Zahl. *Who will Deliver us?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 76.

⁵⁰ J.C. Ryle. *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan, 2011), 49.

⁵¹ Words were taken from the hymn “O for a thousand tongues to sing.” Written by Charles Wesley. Public Domain.

This is the power of the good news. It breaks the power of cancelled sin in your life and mine.

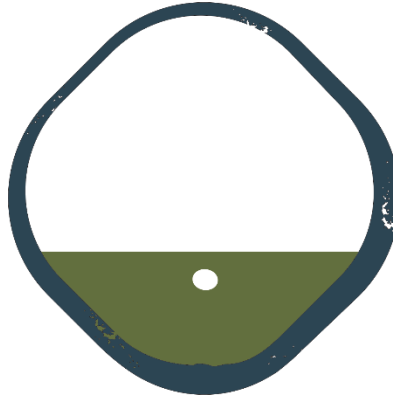
At the end of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, just before she heads off to the University of Michigan to get her education and escape the dark circumstances of her old life, Francie walks through her old neighborhood and spies a young girl sitting on the fire escape. She's reading a book just as Francie used to, in the same spot, and beneath her, the Tree of Heaven has re-sprouted despite all efforts to destroy it. She says quietly to herself, watching the girl: "Hello, Francie."

We must acknowledge who we used to be in order to grow into who we are.

Remember, spiritual formation is less a climb up a mountain than it is a slow, terrifying descent into the cave of our truest selves. We must carry the torch of the Gospel into our darkness, our filth, and our decay and say: "Hello, _____."

As Francie turns to leave her old life behind, she whispers to the young girl, but really to the young girl inside herself: "Goodbye, Francie." As we go deep and deeper into the cave of our hearts, we allow the Spirit to do His work there. This is what God calls us to do. Only then can we say: "Goodbye, _____" and become who God would have us be.

**Choose to embrace the Gospel every day.
*It's the key to everything.***



Scripture Memory Verse

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.”

(1 Pet 3:18, NIV)

For Further Discussion:

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. Choose three words to describe God. _____, _____, _____
_____ How is our understanding of God important to our spiritual formation?
3. Why is a correct understanding of sin important to our spiritual formation?
4. Discuss how the gospel is the foundation to spiritual formation.

Recommended Resources

Brennan Manning. *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2005).

Chris Lundgaard. *The Enemy Within: Straight Talk about the Power and Defeat of Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1998).

John Miller. *Repentance*. (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2009).

Kevin DeYoung. *The Hole in our Holiness. Filling the Gap Between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness*. (Minneapolis: Crossway, 2014).

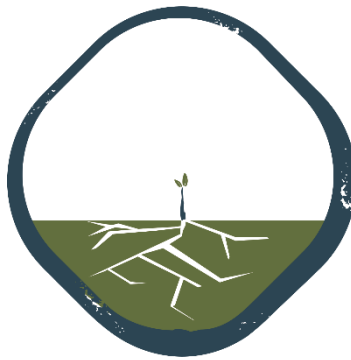
Spiritual Formation Exercise

What are the motivations for godly living? As a group exercise, discover the many motivations for pursuing holy living by looking up the Scriptures listed in the exercise below. Pull out the words used in the verse as motivation and write it down.

Scripture	Motivation	Scripture	Motivation
Eph 4:32	Because of Christ's example	1 Cor 6:19-20	
Eph 6:1	Because it's right	2 Cor 5:11	
Prov 14:34		Eph 2:10	
Eccl 12:13		Eph 4:26-27	
Eccl 12:14		1 Tim 6:18-19	
Matt 6:27		Heb 10:26-27	
Matt 7:26-27		Heb 12:1	
Luke 17:10		1 Pet 2:11	
Jn 14:15		2 Pet 1:7-8	
Rom 12:1		2 Pet 1:10	
Rom 12:19		2 Pet 3:10-12	

Notice the variety. God is our Heavenly Father. As a good parent, often God will give us a variety of reasons "why" we are to obey His will. At other times the answer is beyond the child's capacity to understand and we will need to just trust Him.

At times people search for a "silver bullet," in spiritual formation, but the reality is there are many different aspects of how and why we are motivated during different seasons of our spiritual lives. Circle the ones that are the most motivational to you right now in this season.

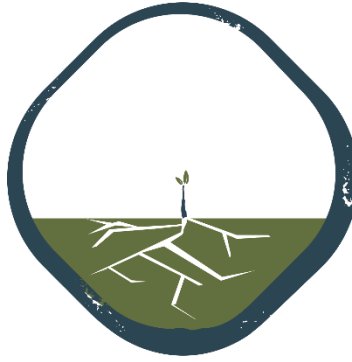


PHASE 2: Rooted

Established in

Truth

“Rule 3” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 3: Get to the Root of Your Problem (or You Will Never Change.)

Every tree needs a root system to draw nutrients and water to survive. Our spiritual lives will need a spiritual root system as well. Our desires are like spiritual roots, motivating us to find sources of life and nourishment. These sources can either be pleasing to God or they can be sinful and idolatrous. Letting our spiritual roots go down into the wrong sources below the surface will result in a fruitlessness above the surface.

We all have our own system of thinking and our own way of viewing the world. When we commit habitual sins, we may often berate ourselves, asking, “Why did I do that? Why did I think that? I’m not that kind of person.” Often, the truth is that our system of thinking and acting is producing for us exactly what we want – we *are* that kind of person. If we seriously consider the results of our behavior, we have to admit that we are stuck in a rut because there is something we prefer about the way our life currently is. People don’t usually make decisions against their own self-interest. We all have spiritual root systems seeking nourishment and satisfaction. Everyone is spiritually thirsty. The question is, “Where do *you* go to quench *your* thirst?” God wants

to satisfy your desires with Himself and bring them under the lordship of Christ. Jesus said, “**Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.**” (John 7:37, NIV)

Discussion:

What spiritual root systems have you seen people create? What offers nourishing life but in the end, doesn’t satisfy?

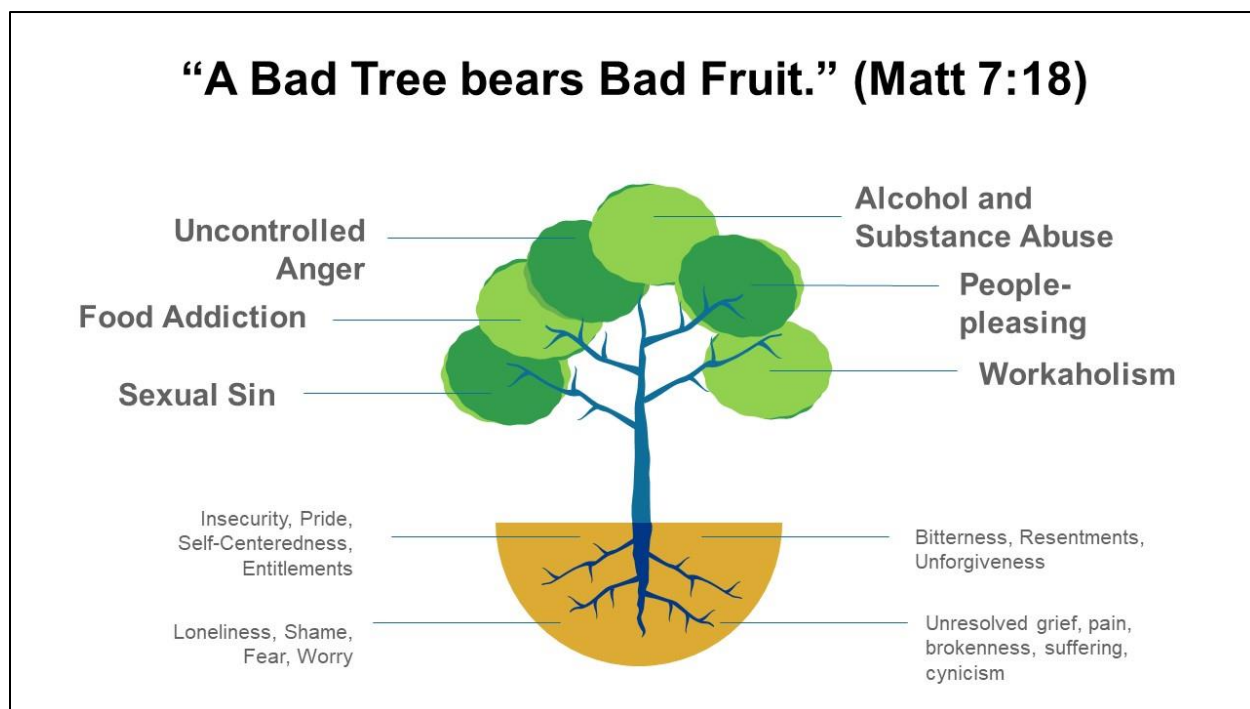
Our desires can be physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. We desire comfort, security, belonging, intimacy, etc. We are all thirsty. There are places we go looking for comfort rather than running to the God of all comfort. In sin, instead of pursuing holy sources, we pursue unholy sources. Instead of pursuing good sources, we forsake God and dig broken cisterns with no water. (Jer 2:13) For example, the prophet Jeremiah warned against those who would seek as their source of life the approval of man.

“This is what the Lord says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in

the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It

has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”
(Jer 17:5-8, NIV)

To change, we must dig down and get to the root of our problems. Consider this graphic:



Jesus told a short story in Luke 13 that provides great insight for this subject:

“Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.”
(Lk 13:6-9, NIV)

In this parable, the owner of the vineyard is God the Father. The gardener is Jesus and we are the fig tree. There are a few things we can learn from this story. Like the fig tree in the parable, we all begin with a need for change in several key areas. The owner of the vineyard – who represents God – comes with an expectation of fruit, and that is a good thing. God wants His people to bear fruit. Theologian R.C. Sproul writes, *“We live in a highly competitive, results-oriented society, and there has been a backlash in the Christian community; as a reaction to this preoccupation with results*

*and achievement, many Christians have taken the position that God really doesn't care whether we ever produce fruit. However, this position can't be justified from Scripture, for one of the central themes of the teaching of Jesus is the call to bear fruit. He calls us to make our lives count; to make our ministries count; to make our labor fruitful. The patience of the farmer with the fig tree underscores God's patience with us. He expects us to be productive, but if we are not in the first or second year, God is patient. But, secondly, there is a limit to God's patience, there is a limit to God's grace. God will not strive with men forever. The Holy Spirit does not endure patiently forever. God is long-suffering; God is slow to anger, but he does get angry, and there will be a time when that unproductive plant will be ripped up. The implications of this for us are many, both in the spiritual realm, and also in the realm of the world in which we live. In the spiritual realm the point is obvious: we do not have forever to repent; we do not have forever to come before God and bear fruit in our lives. We must take this call seriously."*⁵²

Though we (hopefully) want to bear fruit, even though we try, we often don't see progress. Thankfully, rather than cutting our tree down, a skilled Caretaker – Jesus, who cultivates us, brings us to fruitfulness, and gives us living water – steps in and begins His three-part plan.

1. Dig around.

In the parable, the gardener begins his work by “digging around.” Digging around means loosening up or breaking up the soil,

removing the weeds and examining the soil, thus allowing water and fertilizer to sink into the ground. In order to change, we must first “dig around” and do an inventory of our lives.

The degree to which a person can grow is directly proportional to their ability to face the truth about themselves. Jim Collins in his book, “Good to Great,” studied the most successful companies and determined one of the key factors in their success was something he called “The Stockdale Paradox.” The idea was to confront the brutal facts of your current reality, but without losing faith that you will prevail.⁵³

To be right with God, we need to “dig around” our roots and ensure they are in the truth and our desires are met in God.

Most don't take time to dig around. Most people live in denial. The truth is too painful to share with others and sometimes even too painful to face ourselves. Dallas Willard writes, “Denial – usually in the form of rationalization – is the primary device that humans use to deal with their own wrongness.”⁵⁴ Our problem is not just that we sin against God – it's worse. It's that we are so committed to self-justification that we blind ourselves to our own sin.

One time Jesus got into a conversation with a lawyer about the call of God to love our neighbors, but just when the conversation turned convicting, the man's response was telling as it says **"but wanting to justify himself ... "** (Luke 10:29) How much of our speech is characterized by this same exact motive? This is the power of self-deception. We rationalize, we blame, and we excuse,

⁵² R.C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999). 278-279.

⁵³ Jim Collins. *Good to Great* (San Francisco: Harper Business, 2001) 83-85.

⁵⁴ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002), 49.

until we are convinced of our own exoneration. Denial is not just a rejection of the truth; it is also an affirmation of what is not true. Like sin, denial thrives in darkness. Consider the story of when King David sinned with Bathsheba. Trapped in his sin, he didn't "feel" like an adulterer or a murderer, he felt like a lover and a king. He needed Nathan to confront him with reality. Likewise, we need real Christian friends who love us enough to tell us who we are as Nathan did to David, right to our faces, saying, "**You are that man**" (2 Sam 12:7, NLT). Then we need to pray a prayer like David in Psalm 51 from our hearts, "Have mercy on me, O God" (Ps 51:1, NIV). We should pray that God may break us from self-deception and make us tender toward sin again. God desires truth in the inward parts. (Ps 51:6)

If we want to grow spiritually, we must come out of denial. The degree to which a Christian can grow spiritually is in direct proportion to the amount of truth they can hear about themselves without avoiding it, running away, or becoming defensive.

Discussion:

What gets in the way of authenticity and vulnerability?

What is the root cause of denial? We assert the root cause of denial is a troubled conscience assuaged through self-justification. This means the solution to denial is through the justification of Christ alone. Self-justification is antithetical to the Gospel message. Through Christ's sacrificial work on our behalf, we believe we received an "alien" righteousness which

frees us from all **accusation** and the prison of living in denial. Free from all condemnation, we no longer fear the rejection of God, others or even the fear of facing the truth ourselves. "**If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed**" (Jn 8:36, NIV).

Here is the great paradox. When we embrace our deepest fears and inadequacies, we experience the very things we were most afraid of losing by sharing them with others. It is when we reveal our failures and shortcomings that we experience real intimacy, connection, and love. This is a step of faith in God's promises.

Sadly, often we are too ashamed to go there, especially with others, and so we live in denial and shame. Secular researcher Brene Brown has made several important observations that are helpful regarding shame. She noticed that when you ask people about love, they tell you about heartbreak. When you ask them about belonging, they tell you excruciating experiences of being excluded. When you ask them about connection, they tell you about disconnection. The reason for this, she says, is because our desire for connection is resisted by intense competing feelings of shame. Shame asks, "Is there something about me, if people see it, that makes me unworthy of connection?"⁵⁵ The problem with shame is that no one wants to talk about it, but the less you talk about it, the more you have it. It's a vicious cycle. What is the solution?

Brown states that people who experience strong connection with others have the

⁵⁵ Brene Brown. Speaker session at TEDx Houston 2010, "The Power of Vulnerability." Accessed June 12, 2021.

courage to be imperfect. They have fully embraced vulnerability.⁵⁶

This is the problem with many testimonies we hear in the church which can be called a “past tense” testimony. Often, testimonies within the church go something like this, “I was not a Christian, but God did (fill in the blank) in my life and now I’m at this *amazing* place and I’m not struggling anymore at all!” We have a tendency to prefer telling dramatic stories about dark recklessness which all turned around suddenly in a moment of great clarity. This story stirs the emotions, but it does not reflect the ebb and flow of the faith journey of most Christians. Our struggles are constantly coming and going.

That’s the problem with the “past tense” testimony. There is no space for anything that isn’t okay *right now*. What about our *current* brokenness? It doesn’t fit the mold.

We must get real.

The way we do testimonies needs to change. Our struggle against sin does not magically disappear when we accept Christ. It’s two steps forward and one step back. Yes, we can and should work toward spiritual formation, but in order to get anywhere, we must be honest. Growth spurts and dry seasons are *normal*. Being vulnerable is scary, but this is the way. Vulnerability is when we are courageous enough to allow our outward appearance to match our inward

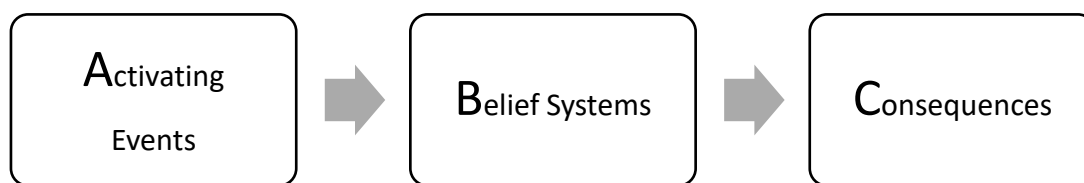
state. Often, we need to let go of who we think we should be in order to be authentic about who we are. We need to be real about what we struggle with, what we are going through, and allow other people to see us struggle. We need to draw strength and courage from God in order to extend an invitation for others to love us right there, despite our flaws, just as Christ does.

Authenticity, like faith, is risky. It is not something you either have or don’t have, it is a collection of choices that we have to make in every day circumstances. What if people judge us or don’t like us? What if people misunderstand us? What if they hurt us? What if they reject our true self?

This is where *faith* enters. Although being honest can produce pain and rejection, Christ calls us to do it anyway. There will inevitably be people who don’t like us, who judge us, who misunderstand us, who hurt us, and even those who reject us. There is no doubt. Nowhere are we promised a life without difficulties or pain; however, the clearer we are about who we are before Christ, the less significant this pain will be. The more faith you have in God and His ways being the best for you, the less courage is required as you surrender to Him. We must determine what’s going on at the root of our behaviors, as they are linked to our internal belief systems. Our belief systems determine our behaviors. Consider this simple ABC model of human behavior:⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Brene Brown. *ibid*.

⁵⁷ This simple model is reflected in the work of Albert Ellis, RET therapy, and from a Christian perspective, is adapted in works such as Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*. 25th Anniversary Edition. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013).



One of the ways we dig deeper is by exploring psychological brokenness with a skilled clinician. There are some who seek to pit the fields of psychology and theology against one another. We would prefer an integrative and cooperative model. Spirituality is not a substitute for sound Christian psychology or biblical counseling. Psychological brokenness may need treatment in the same way that a broken bone needs to be reset to heal. Good Christian therapy, carried out with a biblical understanding of human nature, can richly enhance the process of spiritual formation. Are you willing to dig deeper and get to the root cause of your sin issues? That's step one.

2. Fertilize.

After the gardener digs around, he then adds fertilizer to cultivate growth in the tree. In our lives, one of the growth stimulants God uses is *adverse circumstances*. Fertilization in a garden often involves adding some manure, which sounds a little *unpleasant*, but as you look back on your life, it's often the difficult, disgusting, hard stuff you went through that caused you to grow.

Whenever I ask people to describe times of intense growth, more often than not they include some defining moments that involve pain and suffering. Whether it's suffering a career disappointment, the loss of a friend or family member, or experiencing a prolonged

illness, these circumstances can either greatly damage our faith or strengthen us in amazing new ways. These opportunities are impossible to plan for. We don't mark our calendars and look forward to them. God alone can sovereignly and wisely allow these things in His providential plan for our lives. We've all had family challenges, work challenges, and health challenges, but in all of these difficulties, God has been at work developing our character and using these things for good (Rom 8:28). Circumstances may pile up against you, but they cannot stop what God is doing. In fact, they can only advance His plan. They are a **crucible** in which God works.

CRUCIBLE: "A place or set of circumstances where people or things are subjected to forces that test them and often make them change."⁵⁸

Discussion:

What has been an adverse circumstance that has stimulated spiritual growth in your life?

Failures in life can be great catalysts for growth. Often we experience failure as a setback, as something we want to forget about and move beyond quickly. But what if we saw our failures as merely helpful feedback, creating a deepening sense of possibility for trying again? With faith in a good God, the fertilization process can be

⁵⁸ Encarta World English Dictionary (North American Edition).

painful, but fruitful. We learn during difficult seasons what we are really depending on and what is ultimately not dependable. It is not unloving of God to reveal these things to us and shape us to be more dependent on Him alone. Allow God to use circumstances as fertilizer to help shape you and grow you in your faith.

There are other stimulants for spiritual growth besides adverse circumstances that we will cover in later chapters such as exposure to practical teaching, personal ministry involvement, engaging in authentic relationships, and utilizing the spiritual disciplines. However, the primary source of fertilization in our spiritual lives will always involve the **Gospel**. We learned about this in Rule # 2. Faith in the Gospel is not just how we begin. It is how we continue to grow every day. **“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught. (Col 2:6-7, NIV)**

No matter what we face in life, the Gospel is always what we can depend upon. Even in times of drought, we are trees planted by streams of living water which can survive and thrive. There is life-giving nourishment in the Gospel for every circumstance we face in life.

3. Give it time.

After the steps of digging around and adding fertilizer, the gardener graciously asks for a year of time to foster new growth. Often gardening involves waiting. Spiritual formation is not instantaneous, but if we are *patient*, over time, new growth will come. New fruit will come. New levels of maturity will come.

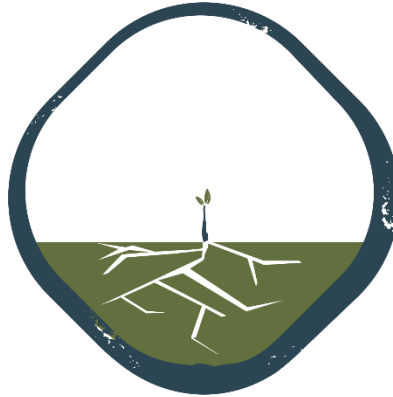
Christian growth is gradual. If you try to watch a tomato or a cucumber grow, it's a slow and somewhat mysterious process that you cannot see happening daily. As a father, I never saw my children growing, but when they stood up against the wall and we marked their new height, most of the time it had moved a little bit. You don't see spiritual growth happen overnight. This implies that we need to be *patient*, both with ourselves and with others. Often we can get discouraged, but we must remember that growth is gradual.

Discussion:

How does this understanding of the fig tree parable impact your understanding of spiritual formation?

To be victorious, we must submit to the gardener and His three-part process. All Spiritual formation involves a decision of **surrender**. We must raise the white flag, recognizing our spiritual limitations and admitting our utter dependence on God for spiritual growth. To win, we must admit we have lost. To live, we must admit we were dead. To become fruitful, we must admit we are fruitless. The shape of our spiritual lives is **cruciform**. This means that all of life is focused onto and re-shaped by the cross upon which Jesus died for us. A dying to self is involved in our growth toward righteousness. Paul said, **“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20, NIV).** Are you ready to surrender to the gardener?

Get to the root of your problem (or you will never change).



Scripture Memory Verse

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught.”

(Col 2:6-7, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. Why are some superficial models of change attractive?
3. Which growth stimulant has been most effective in your own spiritual formation?

Recommended Resources

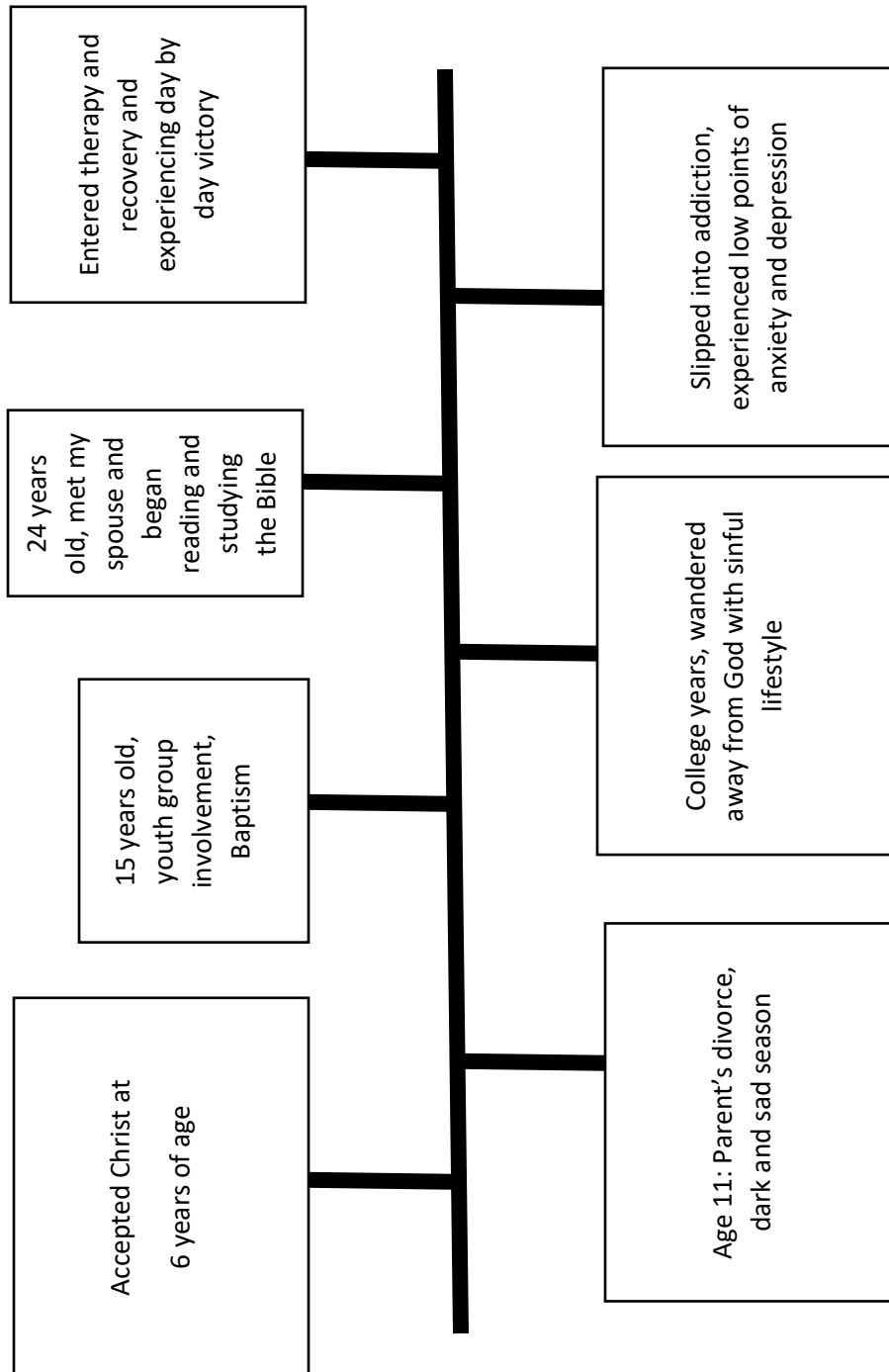
Henry Cloud. *Changes that Heal*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

Larry Crabb. *Inside Out*. 25th Anniversary Edition. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013).

Timothy Keller. *Counterfeit gods: The empty promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the only hope that Matters*. (U.K.: Penguin Books, 2011).

Spiritual Formation Exercise: “Spiritual Timeline”

Draw a spiritual timeline with your own spiritual highs and lows. Hold the paper sideways (landscape view). The horizontal line from one side to the other represents a timeline of your life. Put short vertical marks above the line representing spiritual growth periods. Put short vertical marks below the line representing spiritual low points or regressions. Label these marks accordingly. Here is a sample:



My Spiritual Formation Timeline



Make Observations On Your Timeline:

How would you describe each of those key stages using one word each?

What made the highs high and the lows low, spiritually and emotionally?

What lessons were there for you in the lows?

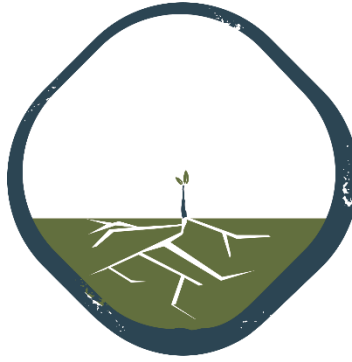
What lessons were there for you in the highs?

What similarities if any do you notice about your lows and the highs respectively?

What is God teaching you through this exercise?

Optional exercise: Share some observations about your timeline with a partner or with your group.

“Rule 4” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 4: Know Who You Are (and Whose You Are).

During the pandemic, many people took up a new hobby: cultivating indoor jungles. There was a never-before-seen industry shortage of houseplants and gardening materials; online specialty retailers sold out of humidifiers and bug spray; new apps such as *Agrio*, which can identify plant ailments from a single photo using AI technology, soared in downloads. While we were trapped indoors, many a would-be botanist brought nature inside in dozens of clay pots, placed them carefully in front of windows, and watered them on a strict schedule. However, unless those plants were transferred into bigger vessels as they grew – “repotted” – they often died. Have you ever pulled a houseplant up out of a too-small container? You can see how it grows a network around and around in circles, searching endlessly for somewhere to take root.

In the same way, we believe our spiritual growth begins by taking a look at our spiritual root system. By getting under the surface, we begin to discover what drives our behavior and where we go as our source for life and identity. The fundamental question to discovering our identity is, “Who am I?”

What three things would you want people to know about who you are?

Describe who you are by filling in these three blanks: I’m _____,
_____, _____.

Group Discussion:

Answer the “who am I” questions above.
(Note: Don’t overthink it)

Did you talk about your role at home? *I am a mom, I am a dad, a granddaughter, somebody’s son or daughter, or somebody’s spouse?* Did you talk about your personality? *I love to laugh. I love my dog. I am stubborn.* Did you talk about your intellect, job, or education? *I went to this college. I have a Ph.D. I am a nurse, I save lives.* Did you talk about where your family is from? *I am American. I am Italian. I am Mexican. I am black. I am white.*

Ancestry.com has seen a huge increase in their sale of DNA testing as people are desperate to identify their roots. Did you identify most closely with your politics? *I am a Republican, I am a Democrat, I am a Libertarian?* How about your age group? *I*

am a *Baby Boomer, a Gen X, Millennial, a Gen Z*? Did you talk about your relationships? *I am single. I am married. I am divorced.* Who were you as a kid – the firstborn, the middle child, the baby in the family? What were you like? Were you the funny kid? Were you the nerdy kid? Did you have a nickname? How about now?

Do you know who you are?

Are you growing around and around in circles? All of the above traits are important facets of our identity, but when it comes to spiritual formation, we must be clear about our spiritual root system because our *identity* drives our behavior. Scripture declares concerning any man: **“For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (Prov 23:7, NASB)**. In other words, who you really believe you are will have an impact on what you do.

Being comes before Doing

There is always a great temptation in the spiritual life to reverse the roles of being and doing. We measure and evaluate our own value and success in terms of what we do and how effectively we do it. This is partly why in our culture the statistics for depression among those who are retired increases. Without something to do, we don’t know who we are.

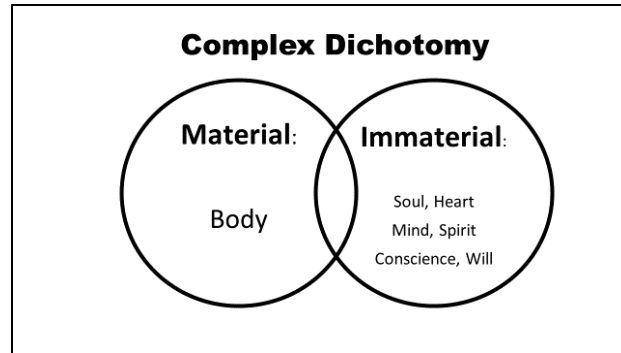
In many languages, there are “indicative” and “imperative” tenses of the same word. In English, we usually determine the difference by tone or context (“*I talk* to my mom every day,” vs. “*Talk* to your mother!”), though some languages, such as Spanish, use a totally different verb form. There are also clear distinctions between the

indicatives and the **imperatives** in the Bible. As you may have guessed, indicatives are statements of fact, whereas imperatives are commands. The indicatives tell us *what is true*. The imperatives tell us *what to do*. For example, an indicative would be: **“You are accepted in the Beloved” (Eph 1:5-7)**. An imperative would be: **“Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church” (Eph 5:25)**. Indicatives tell us who we are. Imperatives tell us how we are to live. This is important because if you get them in the wrong order, they won’t work. “Being” must come before “Doing.” The imperatives of the Bible, “the Law,” show us what it looks like to be holy, but they don’t have the power to generate holiness. The imperatives show us what love looks like in action, but they don’t have the power to generate love. Instead we must realize that our behavior is driven by our identity as indicated to us in Scripture. We must understand (and embrace) the indicatives before we can carry out the imperatives. Therefore, an essential ingredient in all spiritual formation is knowing both who you are and Whose you are. As such, this chapter will focus on embracing our biblical identity as God’s children through both creation and redemption.

Discussion:

How does the idea that “being” comes before “doing” inform our spiritual formation?

Scripture teaches that human beings are made up of both material and immaterial. This is a complex dichotomy as displayed in the graphic below:



Our modern world denies the spiritual realm and tells us we are purely physical – just animals, atoms, clumps of cells, remnants of stardust from the beginning of the universe. They tell us that love and sorrow are nothing but firing neurotransmitters, reducing the entirety of our existence to the brain sitting between our ears. But the Lord says something very different: The psalmist asks that timeless question, **“What is man?” (Ps 8:4, ESV)**. God’s answer is that we are crowned with glory and honor. We are prized and precious possessions, valued and bestowed with worth and made in the image of God.

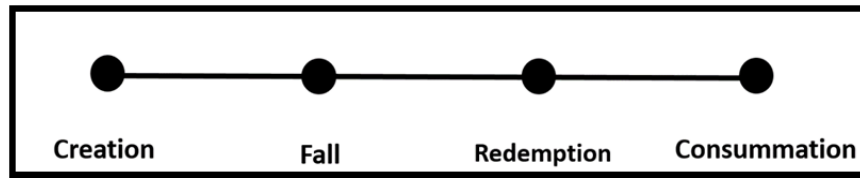
John Calvin said in the beginning of his Institutes that to understand who we are we must first properly understand who God is. “No one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves’ (Acts 17:28). For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves.”⁵⁹ Calvin

continues, “Without the knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of self... Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating Him to scrutinizing himself.”⁶⁰ Consider the experience of the prophet Isaiah. There was probably not another human being in the Jewish nation at that time with a more upstanding reputation. He was about as righteous as human beings could be. And yet, when he has a vision of the holiness of God, the first thing he does when he sees the Lord is to pronounce judgment upon himself: **“Woe is me! For I am undone” (Isa. 6:5, KJV)**. We learn about ourselves when we learn about God.

One way to answer the question of identity is to consider the story we believe we are living in. What story are you living in? Theologians describe the story of redemption in four parts; therefore, we will survey the question of identity with those four basic movements:

⁵⁹ John Calvin. Institutes of the Christian Religion. Book 1. Chapter 1.1. (Retrieved on March 26, 2021) <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes/institutes.iii.ii.html>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.



Movement One: Creation

In the beginning, Scripture tells of humankind's creation in the first chapter of Genesis. **"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness'" (Gen 1:26, NIV).** Right away we learn that we are not just highly evolved accidents, but that we are created beings with bestowed worth and value.

Dallas Willard notes that "Identity restricts freedom. If I am a human being, as opposed to, say, a brussel sprout or a squirrel, that places a restriction upon what I can do, what I ought to do, or what should be done to me."⁶¹ The poet William Ernest Henley declares proudly in *Invictus*, "I am the master of my fate! I am the captain of my soul!" However, if we are created by God, then there is someone to whom we are responsible. We are not the master of our own destinies. We are not our final authority. There is Someone to Whom we must give an account.

Knowing God is essential to understand who we are since we are made to reflect God in so many ways: our reason, our creativity, our capacity for relationship, and even our moral character. The Westminster Catechism asks, "What is the chief and highest end of man?" "Answer: Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully

to enjoy him forever."⁶² All of this was God's design and all of it was declared "very good," and it was, until sin entered the world through **the Fall**.

Movement Two: The Fall

The Fall refers to that moment in time when sin entered God's good and perfect world, resulting in brokenness, decay and death for all creation. (Rom 5:12) In Genesis 3, we read of the instigation of the enemy and the temptation of Adam and Eve which resulted in sin entering the world. The serpent tells them that God is *holding out on them*. He suggests: *God knows if you eat this fruit you'll be in the place of power, not him*. The devil calls into question the goodness of God. He instigates what many theologians believe to be the root, the chiefest of sins, pride. This is the essence of sin: questioning God's right to rule in perfection and putting ourselves at the center of the universe. Instead of glorifying God, sin makes humankind as Augustine and Martin Luther taught **"Incurvatus in se"** ("curved in on itself"). Sin exalts ourselves to the position of highest authority, destroying our relationship with God, and subsequently destroying our relationship with each other and even with ourselves. Since God is the Source of all life, severing our relationship with Him is catastrophic, the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). We may live for a short

⁶¹ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 28.

⁶² Westminster Larger Catechism. (Question 1). <https://ccel.org/ccel/anonymous/westminster2/westminster2.i.html> (Accessed June 13, 2021).

while, but like cut flowers, we are withering and destined to die. We are like a treasured piece of artwork that has been damaged beyond repair, yet right after the fall, God promised a Redeemer, “the seed of the woman” (Gen 3:15).

Movement Three: Redemption

Jesus Christ came to this earth as the exact image of God (Col 1:15). He is the second Adam (1 Cor 15:45). He was sinless and lived as the perfect man. He lived the life we should have lived, died the death that we deserved, and offered a perfect sacrifice to God through His substitutionary death on the cross (Mk 10:45). He came to rescue us. This is the good news of the Gospel! When a person hears this good news with humility and acceptance, they experience a conversion, resulting in a new birth.

Conversion is a spiritual turning point, it is the moment a person responds with repentance and faith to the invitation of God through the work of Christ and they are given new spiritual life. (For a dramatic example, see the conversion of Saul in Acts 9:1-19) All who place their trust in Christ are justified (made righteous) and adopted into God’s spiritual family. “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 Jn 3:1, NIV).

Exercise:

If time permits, turn to the final page in this chapter and do the spiritual formation exercise as a group.

Look at the blessings for those with faith found in Ephesians 1. This passage is packed with spectacular truth. Like the grand finale of a fireworks display, the

apostle Paul has rattled off blessing after blessing after blessing. Paul uses the phrase “In Christ” more than two hundred times in the New Testament. The phrase “In Christ” is one of the most important doctrines underpinning your spiritual formation. Formerly, we were “In Adam,” and now by the miracle of God’s grace, we are placed “In Christ” (Rom 5:12-21). If I am in Christ, I am a saint. I am blessed. I am chosen. I am forgiven. I am redeemed. I am adopted. I am sealed. I have been lavished with grace. Theologically, this is called our “**union with Christ**” (John 14:20). This means we have solidarity and communion with Him. We are united to Him as His bride in covenant love (Eph 5:22-33; Rev 19:6-8). We are now on the road of sanctification (being made holy).

The Work of the Holy Spirit

To become who God intends for us to become, we need power, and that is exactly what we have received, or we should say that is exactly “who” we have received. Before Jesus departed into Heaven, He gave us the promise of the Holy Spirit. “**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you**” (Jn 14:6-7, NIV).

Since the Day of Pentecost, every single believer has been given the promised Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit’s work can be categorized in four distinct ways. First, there is the work of spiritual **regeneration** (the new birth). You have been “born again.” (Jn 3:3) Second, there is the work of spiritual **indwelling**. The Holy Spirit lives inside of you. As a result, the Spirit convicts you of

sin (Jn 16:7-11), teaches you truth and wisdom (1 Cor 2:6-16), and reveals the glory of Jesus (Jn 16:14).

There are two key terms to be aware of regarding the Spirit's work inside of us. The first term is **mortification**, this is the putting to death the old, sinful desires. The second is called **vivification**, the giving of life, strength, energy and empowerment in our spiritual lives. (We will study more on this in Rule #7.)

Third, there is the work of Spirit **baptism** (1 Cor 12:13). Spirit baptism is a one-time, unrepeatable experience where you are spiritually placed (immersed) into the body of Christ.⁶³ (1 Cor 12:13). This is pictured by, but not to be confused with, water baptism. Fourth and finally, you are **sealed** by the Spirit, given the deposit of the Spirit and you are guaranteed your full redemption. We are to “reckon” these things to be true, leading us to victory in our Christian lives. (Rom 6:1-14).⁶⁴ Kevin DeYoung writes this: “In effect God says to us, ‘Because you believe in Christ, by the Holy Spirit I have joined you to Christ. When he died, you died. When he rose, you rose. He’s in heaven, so you’re in heaven. He’s holy, so you’re holy. Your position right now, objectively and factually, is as a holy, beloved child of God, dead to sin, alive to righteousness, and seated in my holy heaven – now live like it.’”⁶⁵

There is another work of the Spirit we are taught about in the New Testament called

the “**filling of the Spirit**.” Charles Ryrie writes, “To be filled with the Spirit means to be controlled by the Spirit. The clue to this definition is found in Ephesians 5:18 where there is a contrast and comparison between drunkenness and Spirit-filling. It is the comparison which gives the clue, for just as a drunken person is controlled by the liquor which he consumes, so a Spirit-filled Christian is controlled by the Spirit.”⁶⁶ Like being drunk with wine, being filled with the Spirit is a temporary state, one which can go away.

The Holy Spirit is in our lives because our God has come to save us and restore us back into His image (Rom 8:29). His work of sanctification is peeling back and reversing the results of the fall. Our lives are again re-centered around God. Does this mean we are perfect now? No.

Saint and Sinner

Martin Luther coined a phrase, **Simul Justus Et Peccador**: “simultaneously a saint and a sinner.” “Thus a Christian person is righteous and a sinner at the same time, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God.”⁶⁷ Our justification, our salvation by grace, our being made righteous before God, has been legally accomplished – yet the sin nature still resides inside of us. We will battle the flesh until we get to our glorious consummation. Author Brennan Manning said it this way: “I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad

⁶³ The Greek tense of “baptize” in 1 Cor 12:13 indicates an unrepeatable experience.

⁶⁴ For more on this important truth, see John Murray, “The Pattern of Sanctification,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:311.

⁶⁵ Kevin DeYoung. *The Hole in our Holiness*. (Minneapolis: Crossway, 2014), 105.

⁶⁶ Charles Ryrie. *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1994) 13.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther. *Luther's Works. Lectures on Galatians*, 1535. Vol. 26, J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999). 232-236.

about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.”⁶⁸ This brings about great humility.

Why do people do the bad things they do? The contemporary answer is that people do bad things because they have too *low* a view of themselves. That is, they lack self-esteem and need a *higher* view of themselves. Tim Keller writes in his book “The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness” that the traditional answer is that people do bad things because they have too *high* a view of themselves. That is, they are proud and need a *lower* view of themselves. Both of these extremes are partly right and partly wrong.

Swiss psychologist, Paul Tournier, writes about this issue in his book, “The Strong and the Weak.”⁶⁹ The main thesis of the book is this: “Everyone is desperately insecure.” Furthermore, he says, people express that insecurity in two primarily different ways. Some people express their insecurity through portraying **strength**. For this person, it’s all about their performance and their success. They often have strong personalities to create distance between them and others, but in fact, it’s just insecurity.

Other people express their insecurity through portraying **weakness**. These people are always portraying themselves as the *victim*. They are always mistreated, needing help and feeling unworthy. Paul Tournier says there’s not a nickel’s worth of

difference between the two. Everyone is desperately insecure, it’s just some people express their insecurity through portrayed strength, and others through portrayed weakness.

Every once in a while I go bowling and I try to imitate the guys on TV who always make the ball curve. When I do that, I get a gutter ball to the left. Then I overcompensate, and I throw it to the right a little more, but then it goes in the right side gutter. Both mistakes get me zero pins. There are two ways to go wrong with self-assessment: thinking too high or thinking too low. Which way do you lean? Both totally miss the mark.

Tim Keller argues that the Bible’s “approach to self-regard” utterly differs from both the traditional and contemporary answers.⁷⁰ As a Christian, you solve this problem by recognizing that we all have strengths and we all have weaknesses. Both serve a divine purpose. Your strengths are the way you will impact the world and serve others. Your weaknesses teach you to be dependent and humble, and show you how you need to rely on others. This brings a humility into our hearts that we desperately need. It gets the focus off ourselves and onto loving God and loving others.

The apostle Paul states, “**Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.**” (Rom 12:3, NIV) Keller argues, in the vein of C. S. Lewis, “The essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less.”⁷¹ It’s very

⁶⁸ Brennan Manning. *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2005), 11.

⁶⁹ Paul Tournier. *The Strong and the Weak*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1963).

⁷⁰ Tim Keller. *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (Chorley, England: 10 Publishing, 2012), 12.

⁷¹ Keller, *Ibid.*, 31-32.

important that we think of ourselves with sober judgment. We need to be brutally honest with ourselves. In this life we are both a saint and a sinner, until the great consummation.

Movement Four: Consummation

Our blessed hope is in the coming of Christ who will appear to finish His work of restoration. His work will consummate in Him bringing in His kingdom to reign over all the earth. We live in the sure hope of resurrection, and the coming new heavens and the new earth. One day there will be no more dying, no more pain, no more tears, for the old things will be passed away. And behold he makes all things new (Rev 21:3-5).

This is what we all long for. We long for a world of goodness and beauty because we were made for His glory (Isa 43:7). C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Weight of Glory*: “Remember that the duller most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.”⁷² This is our hope.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What is your only comfort in life and death?” Answer: “That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and

makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.”⁷³ We long for our heavenly home. Our citizenship is in heaven. Biblical hope is a “happy certainty.” Can you see why this kind of hope is absolutely essential to understanding our true identity?

Let’s make some overall observations. We’ve seen humanity in these four stages and we must draw out some important observations. First, because we’re created by God, our lives have purpose, dignity, worth, and value. Second, because we’re fallen, we all need to admit that we have brokenness inside that needs to be made right. Third, because of the work of Christ in redemption, we can now find forgiveness, mercy, and grace as we have a Savior Who knows us and loves us. Fourth, because of our hope of consummation, we can persevere and wait for God to work all things together for good (Rom 8:28). The Christian worldview can best explain both the beauty and the brokenness of our world.

Discussion:

How does the “story of redemption” inform your spiritual formation? What other “stories of reality” are out there?

When the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome with an extensive treatise of the gospel, he said he was writing these things to “strengthen” or “establish” his audience in the truth of the gospel. (Rom 1:11, 16:25) The word “establish” there means to make firm and steadfast; deeply rooted and resolved in their core beliefs. This was Paul’s heart for the church, that their roots would go down deep. The purpose of

⁷² C.S. Lewis. *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 45-46.

⁷³ Heidelberg Catechism. (HC) Q 1. <https://www.ccel.org/creeds/heidelberg-cat.html>, accessed June 12, 2021.

Romans is to encourage godly behavior by establishing its readers in a thorough understanding of who they were in light of the Gospel. Life is hard. When the winds of difficult storms blow hard all around us, it can knock us off our feet and uproot us if we are not firmly established. We need to be well-grounded.

Who are you? Who has the right to answer that question? Who has the right to give you your identity? The answer is the One who

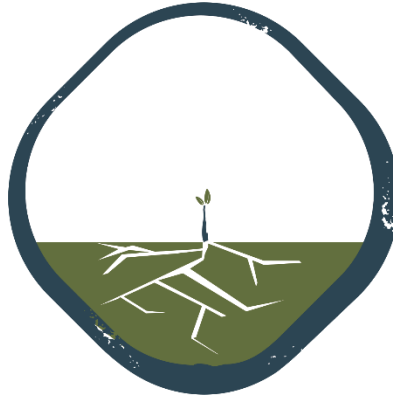
made you. This is God and He is also the One who has redeemed you. Kevin DeYoung writes, “God *does* want you to be the real you. He *does* want you to be true to yourself. But the ‘you’ he’s talking about is the ‘you’ that you are by grace, not by nature.”⁷⁴ This identity reformation is the work of the Holy Spirit, and now we can be “rooted and grounded in His love” (Eph 3:16-17). In conclusion, read this poem about our rooted identity by David Ward:⁷⁵

*Though I was born an orphan, abandoned and alone,
Enslaved and bound in darkness, without a hope or home,
The God of grace and mercy, from his eternal throne
Ordained to be my Father, and claim me as His own.
That I might be adopted, the Father sent his Son
To live in full obedience, and die for what I’ve done.
Now through his resurrection, through faith, with him I’m one.
A member of his household, I am an heir, a son.*

Know who you are (and Whose you are).

⁷⁴ Kevin DeYoung. *The Hole in our Holiness*. (Minneapolis: Crossway, 2014), 100.

⁷⁵ Eric Schumacher & David L. Ward. © 2009 ThousandTongues.org, admin by Thousand Tongues. CCLI Song #5662799.



Scripture Memory Verse

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

(1 Jn 3:1, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. Is it difficult to apply to yourself in the terms of acceptance (i.e. friend of God, new creation, chosen, holy, loved etc.) the way the scriptures portray your identity in Christ? Why?
3. How does it help to see other believers in these same terms of acceptance?

Recommended Resources

Paul Tournier. *The Strong and the Weak*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1963).

Robert McGee. *The Search for Significance: Seeing your True Worth through God's eyes*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003).

Tim Keller. *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (Chorley, England: 10 Publishing, 2012).

Spiritual Formation Exercise

Read the suggested passages below and list as many aspects of your old and new identities as you can find. Begin with Ephesians 1 vs. Ephesians 2. (15 minutes)

Column A (Old Identity)		Column B (New Identity)	
Eph 2:1-3	I was dead.	Eph 1:1-14	I am a saint
	I was		I am
	I was		I am
	I was		I am
	I was		I am
Jn 8:34		Jn 1:12	
Jn 8:44		Col 1:13	
Rom 5:10		Col 3:12	
Rom 6:20		Rom 3:24	
Rom 8:6-7		Rom 5:10-11	
Rom 13:11-14		Rom 6:14	
Col 3:5-7		Rom 8:17	
James 4:4		James 2:23	
Isa 64:4-6		1 Pet 1:9-10	
		Isa 49:16	
		Zeph 3:17	

Note: This list of scriptures above is not comprehensive, continue searching the scriptures for who you are and Whose you are.

**We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place;
Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.**

— John Donne, from "Hymn to God, My God, In My Sickness"



PHASE 3: Growing

Exemplifying

Integrity

“Rule 5” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 5: Learn How Distinctively Christian Change is Unique (*and Powerful*).

It's estimated that the self-help book industry is valued at \$800 million per year. There are a lot of models of personal change, each of them promising instant and total transformation: there's the psychological therapeutic approach (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *The Power of Positive Thinking*), the educational approach (*The 7 Habits*, *Outliers*, *12 Rules for Life*), the eastern meditative approach (*Think Like a Monk*, *Practicing Mindfulness*, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*), and on and on and on. But what kind of change does the New Testament present us?

The New Testament presents a *botanical* metaphor: **"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."** (Gal 5:22-23, NIV).

Of all the metaphors Paul could have used here, why does he use "fruit"? Why doesn't he say "traits" or "characteristics?" The reason is that the organic model in nature best parallels the spiritual formation process. This is very important to understand. The nature of Christian change is different from every other model of change.

Discussion:

Why would God choose this organic metaphor?

If you want to understand Christian change, you must realize it is totally different from the world's idea of change. The world craves sudden and instant growth, obtained by reading a book, attending a seminar, or joining CrossFit. While all of these can result in positive change, they all have one thing in common: the world typically thinks of change in terms of sweat, struggle, and visible transition. Spiritual change, like botanical growth, is more of a natural process. Jesus said, **"All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head."** (Mk 4:28 NIV).

Let's look at a passage which further unlocks this concept for us from the Gospel of John: **"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to**

you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (Jn 15:1-11, NIV)

Here are the interpretive keys to this parable.⁷⁶

1. The Vine is Jesus Christ.

The Vine is Jesus Christ – He connects Himself with us so that we become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:3-4). This means that our spiritual growth has a power source that is incredibly robust. This is why we should never be defeatist or cynical as Christians. Nothing is impossible with God. In fact, verse 7 gives us a promise that whatever kind of fruit you want, you can have. He is not saying we can ask for any wish in the world, like a genie in a bottle. No, the context here is fruit bearing. In other

words, Jesus says, “Any kind of character quality you see in me, that you want in you, ask of me, draw it out from me. I’ll produce that fruit in you too.”

Christian growth is produced by God. It’s called the “fruit **of** the Holy Spirit” because it’s His fruit. The fruit of the Spirit is not about natural abilities, developed skills, IQ, or a personality type. Christian fruit is produced spiritually and internally by the Holy Spirit.

2. The Branch is the Believer.

Disciples of Jesus are like branches. We are connected to Jesus Christ, with His life flowing into us by the sap of the Holy Spirit in such a way that we are the ones who bear the fruit. This is a partnership with God.

3. The Vinedresser is God the Father.

Jesus says, “My father is the vinedresser,” or the Gardener. It’s important that we understand what the Father does. Look at verse 2. It says every branch in Me that does not bear fruit **He** takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit **He** prunes, that it may bear more fruit. A vinedresser has one job, and that is to get the most grapes out of each branch as possible. He works on this all year long. What does He do? There are at least two things. First, He takes away fruitless branches. Second, He prunes fruitful branches. In other words, He cuts away the lifeless, and He cultivates the living.

4. The Fruit is the Believer’s Good Works.

You were destined to do these good works. The apostle Paul says it this way, “**For we are his workmanship, created in Christ**

⁷⁶ I am indebted in my understanding of this parable to Bruce Wilkerson. *The Secrets of the Vine*. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2001).

Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10, NIV). You are destined as a believer for holiness, a life marked by *virtue* instead of by *vice*. Notice that there are four fruit-bearing levels: (1) No Fruit, (2) Fruit, (3) More Fruit, and (4) Much Fruit.

Level 1: No Fruit

Some people bear **no fruit**. This person is in v 2 and in v 6. Though there is some debate about these verses, this most likely refers to non-believers who have some association with the church, but who are not true disciples of Jesus. They have what is called a “false profession of faith.” Hebrews chapter 6 speaks a sober warning to those who profess faith in Christ but whose lives do not produce any spiritual fruit. **“Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned” (Heb 6:7-8, NIV).** Do we find thistles on fig trees? Do we find figs on thorn bushes? Everybody knows we don’t. To produce absolutely no fruit as a believer is a contradiction in terms. As such, this person is in great danger. The only way to move beyond this level is to place one’s faith in Christ and get connected to the true vine.

Level 2: Fruit

Once one places their faith in Christ, this person begins to bear fruit. This is the person who is a genuine follower of Jesus and whose life reflects the fruit of the Holy Spirit to one degree or another. How does one move from this fruit-bearing level to the

next fruit-bearing level? The answer is found in v 2, “pruning.” To prune means “**to cut.**” This is a technique that the gardener uses to increase the fruit. The sap is limited, and so the gardener must prune the vine to redirect the sap from the branches and the leaves to the fruit. This happens continually throughout the season. The purpose of pruning is to cut back in order to bear more fruit.

Discussion:

Where have you seen God’s discipline produce greater fruitfulness?

Level 3: More Fruit

The wise gardener knows you have a choice: you can either have a lot of leaves or you can have a lot of fruit, but you can’t have both. Spiritually speaking, this is called “discipline.” Hebrews 12:8 says that “God treats us with discipline as sons.” This can come in the form of a trial, perhaps it could be physical, relational, financial, or something else. God is doing what He has to do to get our attention to allow us to bear more fruit. This brings us to the final level.

Level 4: Much Fruit

The key principle that brings us to level four is called “**abiding.**” It means “to remain.” Agriculturally, abiding is the idea of deepening the connection between the vine and the branch. Spiritually, this means “staying connected” with God. To put it simply, we are to grow in our intimacy with Christ. First, Jesus says “remain in My Word” (Jn 15:7). If you want to bear much fruit, you need to build a lifelong habit of regular daily devotional time with God. Paul said, **“Let the word of God dwell in you**

richly” (Col 3:16, NIV). Oswald Chambers put it this way: “Get into the habit of dealing with God about everything. Unless in the first waking moment of the day you learn to fling the door wide back and let God in, you will work on a wrong level all day; but swing the door wide open and pray to your Father in secret, and every public thing will be stamped with the presence of God.”⁷⁷ Remain in His Word.

Secondly, Jesus says, “Remain in my love” (Jn 15:9). Do you truly believe that God loves you? Do you abide in His love? Do you know what the sad thing is? The sad thing is we find other abiding places. There are many false vines that promise joy through pleasure, power, fame or fortune, but these produce nothing and ultimately lead to destruction.

The world doesn’t love you, the company you work for does not love you, the NY Yankees don’t love you, your favorite dessert doesn’t love you, but Jesus Christ does. Remain in His love and you will bear much fruit. Notice, the end result of a fruitful life is joy for you and glory for God.

Discussion:

How have you found “abiding” produces a greater fruitfulness?

In our home at Christmas we like to decorate the tree as a family, preferably the day after Thanksgiving, if we’re not too tired out. We

put on lights and ornaments and tinsel – usually while my daughters argue about whether the lights should be colored or white this year or flash between them, or which ornaments from their elementary school art classes should be featured. At the end, it sparkles and is gorgeous. As beautiful as a decorated Christmas tree is, it is nothing like a tree which produces real fruit. Real fruit comes from inside, not outside. Real fruit is not artificial, it’s natural. There is a counterfeit version of spiritual fruit you need to be aware of and avoid.

Watch out for Counterfeit Fruit

Remember the Pharisees produced a kind of external religious morality that was not pleasing to God. Legalism is a great enemy of spiritual formation. Charles Ryrie defines legalism as “a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting (the) self.”⁷⁸

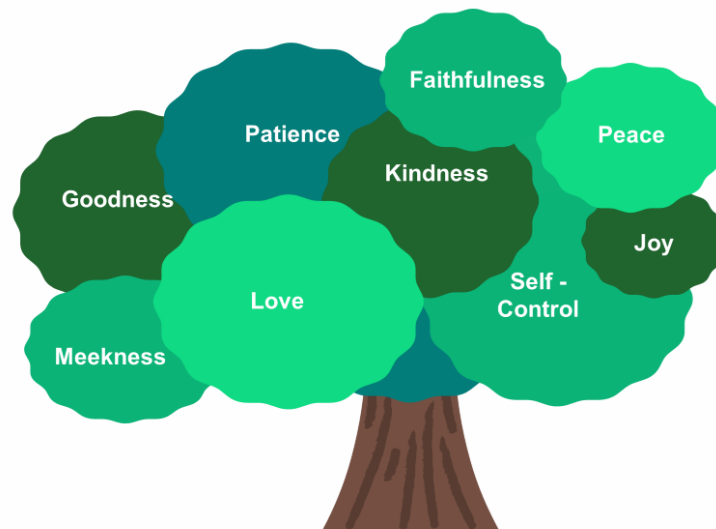
How can we tell the difference? Here is the answer: Christian growth is comprehensive. Notice Paul uses the word “fruit” in Galatians 5, which is singular, but then he provides a list. The subject is singular, but the predicate is plural. There is a reason for this: all of these characteristics come together. Philip Ryken says, “These virtues are not nine different gems, but nine different facets of the same dazzling jewel.”⁷⁹ Is it possible to say I have a lot of love, but I lack patience? No, love is patient. (1 Cor 13:4). Patience is a part of love. They go together.

⁷⁷ From August 23 “Prayer Choice and Prayer Conflict.” In Oswald Chambers. *My Utmost for His Highest*. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1935).

⁷⁸ Charles Ryrie. *The Balanced Christian Life*. 25th Anniversary Edition. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 168.

⁷⁹ Phillip Ryken. *Galatians*. Reformed Expository Commentary. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2005), 234.

The Fruit of the Spirit



Jonathan Edwards taught that there is a “**concatenation**” of the graces of Christianity. That is a rather large word that just means “holistic,” “integrated” or “symmetrical.” If you want to know if you have the real fruit of the Spirit and not something counterfeit, or artificial, then you will see all these aspects of spiritual fruit working together comprehensively in your life. God desires to produce **integrity** in His people. The word integrity is rooted in the idea of being whole. It means we are not compartmentalizing our lives. It means we are growing to love God with all we are, heart, soul, mind and strength.

Each aspect of the fruit of the Spirit has an opposite and also a counterfeit. For example, some people seem to have a certain kind of *peace*, almost like they are unshakeable, but then they are not kind. The fact that both are not present working together speaks to the counterfeit nature of their peace. The reality is the reason they have peace is because they don’t care. That is a false peace, because the peace brought about by the Holy Spirit is also kind. Desire the fruit of the Spirit that is real and genuine. The following chart will explain these dimensions further. Take a moment to explore how the gospel produces each aspect of the fruit.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ This fruit of the Spirit chart has been crafted building on the work of in Tim Keller. *Galatians for you*. (U.K.: The Good Book Company, 2013) 153-155.

Fruit of the Spirit Chart

Definition	Opposite	Counterfeit	How does the belief in the Gospel produce this?
Love: Purposeful and self-sacrificial service for the good of another person.	Fear, self-protection, and abuse of others.	Selfish affection, being attracted to a person based on what they can do for you.	<i>We believe we are loved with an everlasting love, we do not need to live in fear, prove ourselves to anyone or use others. We have what we need, we are set free to love.</i>
Joy: A delight in God for the beauty of who He is.	Hopelessness and despair.	Happiness, good feelings based on good circumstances.	
Peace: Confidence and trust in the wisdom and control of God over your life.	Anxiety and worry.	Indifference and apathy.	
Patience: Ability to endure difficulty without getting angry and blowing up.	Resentment toward circumstances, others and God.	Cynicism, jaded negativity, “what’s the use?” thinking.	
Kindness: Warmth and vulnerability toward others, rejoicing with others.	Jealousy and envy.	Manipulation, doing good deeds with ulterior motives or to congratulate yourself.	
Goodness: Integrity, being the same person in every situation.	Hypocrisy, being phony.	Venting, speaking the truth without discretion or grace just to make yourself feel better.	
Faithfulness: Loyalty and courage, reliability.	Fair-weather friendship, opportunism	People-pleasing, unwilling to ever challenge or confront	
Gentleness: Meekness, humility, self-forgetfulness.	Pride, superiority, self-absorption.	Inferiority, self-deprecation.	
Self-Control: The ability to say “no” to unhealthy impulses.	Gluttony, laziness, addiction.	Confidence in one’s own willpower.	

Discussion:

Study and complete the fruit of the Spirit chart. How does believing in the Gospel produce each aspect of the fruit and eliminate the opposite in our lives?

If you truly believe the Gospel, this fruit will be produced naturally and sin will be defeated. We tend to become like the people we spend the most time with. Abiding, spending time with the Lord will inevitably result in our becoming like Him. There is a principle in the Bible that we become like that which we worship. (Ps 115:8, 2 Cor 3:18) Remember, our beliefs impact our behavior. One of the keys of the spiritual life is learning not to listen to yourself, but to talk to yourself.⁸¹ Use the psalmist's method of talking to his own soul. **"Why are you in despair, O my soul?" (Ps 42:5)** Remember and remind yourself of all you have in the Gospel and you will bear its fruit. Here are some specific examples of how right believing produces the fruit of the Spirit:

Love: In the gospel, we believe we are loved with an everlasting love, we do not need to live in fear, prove ourselves to anyone or use others. We have what we need, we are set free to love. (Jn 13:35) **Joy.** We can have joy because our belief in the gospel brings a joy not based on circumstances which can change, it is rooted in God who never changes. (Mal 3:6; Hab 3:17-19) **Peace.** We can have peace because no matter what happens, we know our future is totally secure. We can be "struck down but not destroyed." (2 Cor 4:9) Our peace has

buoyancy. We believe God sovereignly will work all things together for the good. We can have peace. **Patience.** We believe in God who is slow to anger and has been so patient with us. We believe vengeance belongs to Him. (Rom 12:17-21) We trust Him to do justice and do not need to pick up the sword of anger ourselves. **Kindness.** If we believe in Christ, we are heirs to the entire world. Why should we be jealous or envious? As recipients of so much kindness, we can be open and kind to others.

Goodness. We believe God is always watching, therefore we always live **"Coram Deo"** before God's face. This eliminates phoniness and moves us to live for an audience of One, producing real integrity and goodness. (Micah 6:8) **Faithfulness.** We believe God always keeps His promises to us. He will never fail us or leave us.

Therefore, we can be loyal and courageous, no matter what, knowing He is always with us. We live faithfully knowing we will give an account. (Matt 25:14-30) **Gentleness.** The gospel frees us from "powering up" and exalting ourselves (or self-loathing). We can rest in being "average" and still loved. There is no need to prove anything. Like Christ, our strength can now be leveraged not for ourselves, but for others. (1 Cor 4:7) **Self-Control.** In the gospel, we find our happiness in God. We don't need fleshly pleasures to satisfy, we already have the thing that will satisfy our hearts the most. (Rom 8:12-13)

Learn how distinctively Christian change is unique (and powerful).

⁸¹ For more on this concept, see Martin Lloyd-Jones. *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963).



Scripture Memory Verse

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

(Gal 5:22-23, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. Do most people realize the gospel is more than just “forgiveness of sin”? Do you think Jesus’ promise of “abundant life” (Jn 10:7-10) is something most people understand? Why or why not?
3. What experiences have you had spiritually with God the father as the gardener tending to your life? (Pruning, Abiding, etc.)

Recommended Resources

Bruce Wilkerson. *The Secrets of the Vine*. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2001).

Charles Ryrie. *The Balanced Christian Life*. 25th Anniversary Edition. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).

David Powlison. *How does Sanctification Work?* (Minneapolis, MN: Crossway, 2017).

Tony Evans. *The Promise*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996).

Spiritual Formation Exercise (Option 1)

This is a reflective exercise in repentance in four areas crafted by Tim Keller.⁸² Take 15 minutes to prayerfully consider **one** of these areas in repentance toward God:

Deep Humility (vs. Pride)

Have I looked down on anyone? Have I been too stung by criticism? Have I felt snubbed and ignored? Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until I sense: (a) decreasing disdain (since I am a sinner too), and (b) decreasing pain over criticism (since I should not value human approval over God's love). In light of His grace I can let go of the need to keep up a good image – it is too great a burden and now unnecessary. Consider free grace until I experience grateful, restful joy.

Burning Love (vs. Indifference)

Have I spoken or thought unkindly of anyone? Am I justifying myself by caricaturing (in my mind) someone else? Have I been impatient and irritable? Have I been self-absorbed, indifferent and inattentive to people? Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is: (a) no coldness or unkindness (think of the sacrificial love of Christ for you), (b) no impatience (think of his patience with you), and (c) no indifference. Consider free grace until I show warmth and affection. God was infinitely patient and attentive to me, out of grace.

Wise Courage (vs. Anxiety)

Have I avoided people or tasks that I know I should face? Have I been anxious and worried? Have I failed to be circumspect or have I been rash and impulsive? Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is: (a) no cowardly avoidance of hard things (since Jesus faced evil for me), and (b) no anxious or rash behavior (since Jesus' death proves God cares and will watch over me). It takes pride to be anxious – I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. Consider free grace until I experience calm thoughtfulness and strategic boldness.

Godly Motivations (a 'Single eye')

Am I doing what I am doing for God's glory and the good of others or am I being driven by fears, by need for approval, for love or comfort and ease, by need for control, for hunger for acclaim and power, or by the "fear of man?" Am I looking at anyone with envy? Am I giving in to any of even the first motions of lust or gluttony? Am I spending my time on urgent things rather than important things because of these inordinate desires? Repent like this: How does Jesus provide me what I am looking for in these other things? Pray, "O Lord Jesus, make me happy enough in You to avoid sin and wise enough in You to avoid danger, that I may always do what is right in Your sight, in Your name I pray, Amen."

⁸² For the full article, see https://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/All_of_Life_Is_Repentance-Keller.pdf Accessed June 30, 2021.

Spiritual Formation Exercise (Option 2)

Study the fruit of the Spirit chart and journal about one aspect of the fruit you currently lack. Pray that God would help you understand how the Gospel can produce this fruit in your life.

One area of fruitfulness I would like to grow in is ...

The tangible evidence that I fall short in this area is ...

The reason the Gospel of Jesus produces this fruit is because ... (Ask your small group for help here if needed)

Other Scriptures which support me in producing this fruit are ...

“Rule 6” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 6: Practice the Spiritual Disciplines (or You Will Wither and Burn Out).

One of my favorite movie series is the *Rocky* film franchise. There's something so compelling about watching Sylvester Stallone face and surmount all different kinds of challenges, from Apollo Creed to his wife Adrian's passing from ovarian cancer. I think many people's favorite part of the series are the training sequences – each installment has an extended scene of his training for whatever upcoming fight. The training is never instantaneous; the viewer watches the slow progression of Rocky getting stronger, doing a little more every day. We love his character because he has the discipline to persevere, and we follow him from the gym floor all the way into the ring. If there's one thing the *Rocky* movies are about, other than 80's culture and Philadelphia, it's *discipline*. It is not accident that this word is related to the word “disciple.”

Discussion:

How do you relate to the word “discipline”?

Author Robert Mulholland speaks of two pitfalls to avoid: first, **avoidance** of discipline altogether and second, **imprisonment** by the disciplines.⁸³ We are a largely undisciplined and comfort-seeking culture. Even the word “discipline” brings up negative feelings of punishment. On the other hand, there is a strong temptation to pervert the disciplines into attempts to win God's favor or to impress others (Matt 6:1-18). The disciplines can turn toward an ugly legalism which leads to self-admiration and obsession. The disciplines are designed to set you free. The classic disciplines mine the depths of the heart, opening it wider to be filled with the reality of a relationship with the Creator. These are not ways to earn favor with God; they are habits which cultivate holiness but they work indirectly. Dallas Willard writes, “A discipline is an activity within our power that enables us to accomplish what we cannot do by direct effort.”⁸⁴

Trying vs. Training

We do not run a marathon by going out and “trying” to run a marathon one day. This

⁸³ Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, IL, IVP, 2016), 120.

⁸⁴ Dallas Willard. *The Great Omission* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014), 150.

will lead to certain failure. It's not about "trying," it's about "training." Dallas Willard writes, "Love, we hear, is patient and kind (1 Cor 13:4). Then we mistakenly try to *be* loving by *acting* patiently and kindly – and quickly fail... Merely trying to act lovingly will lead to despair and to the defeat of love. It will make us angry and hopeless."⁸⁵

We are unlikely to change a habit merely by eliminating the old habit; we must have a new habit to substitute for it. New habits must be formed to inhabit the soil after the weeds have been cleared. These habits are what we call the *Spiritual Disciplines*.

Trees need to be fed. They need nutrients, water, and sunlight, or they will die without these critical sources of life. Your soul also needs to be nourished to flourish. This is where the spiritual disciplines come into play. Paul said to Timothy:

"Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily training

is just slightly beneficial, but godliness is beneficial for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the life to come" (1 Tim 4:7-8, NASB).

There are generally two categories of spiritual disciplines: **Disciplines of Engagement** and **Disciplines of Abstinence**. Engagement implies something you are doing more of; abstinence means you are withholding something from yourself. A general rule of thumb when it comes to the spiritual disciplines is if you are struggling with a sin of *omission*, you would employ a spiritual discipline of *engagement*. On the other hand, if you are struggling with a sin of *commission* you would utilize a discipline of *abstinence*. For example, if you are struggling with gluttony, you might practice fasting.

Here is a list (not meant to be comprehensive):

⁸⁵ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 24.

Disciplines of Abstinence	Disciplines of Engagement
<p>Fasting: Going without food (or something else like media) for a period of intensive prayer — the fast may be complete or partial. (2 Sam 12:16, 21-23; Ps 69:10; Matt 6:16-18; Luke 5:33-35)</p> <p>Solitude: Refraining from interacting with other people in order to be alone with God and be found by him. (Ps 62:5; 1 Kgs 19:11-13; Matt 14:23; Mk 6:31)</p> <p>Silence: Not speaking in order to quiet our minds and whole self and attend to God's presence. (Luke 5:15-16)</p> <p>Poverty/Simplicity: The intentional decision to own or do with less for the purpose of pursuing contentment in God alone (Eccl 5:10; Matt 10:9-10; Phil 4:10-13)</p> <p>Chastity: The intentional turning away from or temporary giving up of sexual intimacy, even from one's husband or wife, to dedicate one's self to God and learn not to be governed by this powerful aspect of life (1 Cor 7:1-5, Matt 19:11-12; 2 Tim 2:22)</p> <p>Sacrifice: The intentional giving up of something of value we have for the good of the kingdom or in order to help a more needy person. (2 Sam 24:24; Ps 4:5; Mk 14:1-11)</p> <p>Secrecy: Not making our good deeds or qualities known, to let God or others receive attention as we find our sufficiency in God alone (Ps 51:6; Matt 6:3; Rom 2:16)</p>	<p>Bible-reading: Spending time with the Holy Spirit-inspired words of Scripture as our guide, wisdom, and strength for all of life. (Ps 119)</p> <p>Prayer: Communicating with God about all we experience, making requests and intercessions for one another. (Ezra 10:1; Neh 2:4; Job 42:10; Prov 15:29; Matt 6:1-6, 1 Thess 5:17; 1 Tim 2:8; Js 5:13-18)</p> <p>Confession: Sharing with contrition one's sins in thought, word, deed or motive with God and / or a trusted brother or sister in Christ for the purpose of growth. (Lev 5:5; Js 5:16, Ps 32:5; Prov 28:13; 1 Jn 1:9)</p> <p>Worship: Praising God's greatness, goodness, and beauty through words and often music, in private or with others (Ex 8:1; Ps 96:9; Matt 14:33; Rom 12:1-2, Eph 5:19)</p> <p>Giving: Generously sharing one's material resources for the good of others in need. (Matt 6:19-21; 2 Cor 8:1-9; Phil 4:19)</p> <p>Service: Humbly working for God or others, overflowing with His love and compassion, especially those in need (Mk 10:43-45)</p> <p>Fellowship: Engaging kindred spirits and fellow disciples of Jesus in soul-filled conversation, includes small groups or other mentoring relationships (Acts 2:42; Eph 4:15-16; Heb 10:23-25)</p> <p>Submission: Not asserting ourselves in order to come under the authority, wisdom, and power of Jesus Christ as our Lord and King. (Matt 6:19-33, Eph 5:21)</p>

Discussion:

What spiritual discipline has been especially helpful to you? (see chart)

Here is a deeper look at four of the spiritual disciplines:

Bible-Reading

As we discussed in Rule #1, the most important spiritual discipline in spiritual formation is Bible-reading for the purpose of life application. Become an expert in the Bible. Make it your daily bread. There are several methods for Bible-reading as a spiritual discipline. One ancient monastic practice is called “**Lectio Divina**.” (Latin for “divine reading”) This is a slow and prayerful reading of any passage of scripture involving four phases. (1) Reading (2) Meditation (3) Prayer and (4) Contemplation. First, you begin by reading and taking it in as putting food in your mouth. Then secondly, you chew your food in meditation, pondering its deeper meaning, turning it over and over in your mind. Third, you taste your food, responding prayerfully with feelings and affections. This is where you confess your sin or struggle and ask God for what you need. Finally, you digest your food, this a final step in resting quietly in God’s loving arms. No words are necessary, you are simply being in God’s presence. This is the goal of Lectio Divina.

Another method is called “inductive bible study.” There are three major stages in inductive Bible study.

Stage # 1: Observation: This stage is about answering the question, “*What does the text say?*” After reading a passage, make observations. Look for key words and themes. Notice transitional words (therefore,

but, if/then). Look up unfamiliar concepts in a Bible dictionary. Ask questions about the text (Who? What? When? Where? Why?) Make as many observations as you can.

Stage # 2: Interpretation: This stage is about answering the question, “*What does the text mean?*” Once you have made your observations, read trustworthy commentaries or a study Bible for further insight. Read the passage in other translations for better understanding. Identify the context and what it meant to the original readers. Draw timeless principles and put into words what it means today.

Stage # 3: Application: This stage is about answering the question, “*How does it work?*” Bible study is not just a mental exercise. The Bible is written for transformational purposes. Friends, the blessing of the Bible really comes into your life when you start living it out. If I tell my kids to go clean their rooms, they know I am not telling them to study or even memorize my words – I am telling them to obey. The Hebrew word “**shema**” is often translated to “listen,” or “hear,” in the scriptures, but it actually means “hear *and* obey.”

It’s not enough to read it, we must also read it in line with its clear intent, which is to make disciples of Jesus. James says it this way, “**Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.**” (Js 1:23-25, NIV)

Now think about this – what is the value of a mirror? The value of a mirror is that it tells you the truth! For better or for worse, it

shows you where you need to change and grow. You must read the Word until the Word begins to provoke you, convict you, and call you to a higher standard of living. Read the Bible imagining you are being addressed by God Himself in the text, and commit to obey.

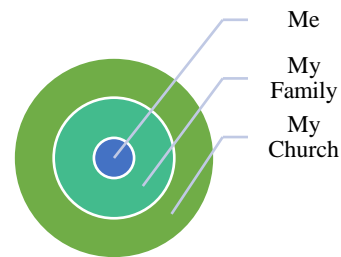
Prayer

One of the primary means of grace is prayer. This was the practice of the early church (Acts 2:42, 3:1, 4:24, 6:4). What is prayer? Prayer is simply communicating with God. This involves talking as well as listening. Prayer is not just something we do, it is Someone we are “with.” Prayer is relational. It is like talking to a friend. Like any relationship, it will grow in depth with cultivation.

Prayer is integral to all the spiritual disciplines. Though it is central, we often struggle in our prayer life. The apostle Paul mentions “**wrestling** in prayer” (Col 4:12). Isn’t that an interesting choice of words? I think that’s him acknowledging that it doesn’t come easy for us. Prayer is *difficult*. I know it can feel like just sitting there and talking, but if you have attempted this in any intentional way, you are aware of how real prayer can be difficult. That’s why God says *wrestle* with Me, *labor* with Me, *work* with Me. When we read the gospels, it’s apparent that the Lord Jesus maintained fellowship with His Father in prayer constantly (Matt 14:23, Mk 1:35, Lk 5:16). His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray in that same fashion. May we also say with them, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Add to your prayer life the “prayer of relinquishment.” Richard Foster likens this kind of spiritual surrender to falling back into the arms of Jesus—like a

person falling backwards into a swimming pool, saying not my will but yours be done (Luke 22:42).⁸⁶

Consider creative ways to expand your prayer life. Attempt different postures. Pray out loud. Take prayer walks. Pray with your hands raised. Pray through the psalms or the Lord’s prayer. Find a prayer garden or a prayer labyrinth to aid in your concentration. Journal your prayers. Use concentric circles to pray through the relationships in your life.



There is one more ancient prayer exercise called “**The Daily Examen**” that you may want to consider, this method will be further explained in the spiritual formation exercise at the end of this chapter.

Confession

Confession to God and to other believers is commanded in the Bible. We are commanded to practice self-examination, especially before we come to the Lord’s table (1 Cor 11:27-32). What is confession to God? The word *confess* literally means “to say the same thing;” it is to agree with God and to acknowledge your sins before Him in prayer. Be specific. Be contrite. The late Baptist pastor F.B. Meyer provides helpful guidance here:

“You have lost the light of God’s face, not because He has arbitrarily withdrawn it, but

⁸⁶ Richard Foster. *The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1998). 37.

because your iniquities have come between you and your God; and your sins, like a cloud before the sun, have hid His face from you.

Do not spend time by looking at them as a whole. Deal with them one by one.

The Boer is a formidable foe to the British soldier because he is trained from boyhood to take a definite aim and bring down his mark, whilst our soldiers fire in volleys. In dealing with sin, we should imitate him in the definiteness and accuracy of his aim. Ask God to search you and show you what wicked way is in you. Marshal all your life before Him, as Joshua marshalled Israel, sift it through, tribe by tribe, family by family, household by household, man by man, until at last you find the Achan who has robbed you of the blessed smile of God. Do not say: "Lord, I am a great sinner, I have done what I ought not, I have not done what I ought;" but say, "Lord, I have sinned in this, and this, and that, and the other."

Call up each rebel sin, by its right name, to receive sentence of death. Your heart is choked with sins; empty it out, as you would empty a box, by handing out first the articles that lie on the surface. When you have removed them, you will see more underneath; hand them out also. When these are removed, you will probably see some more. Never rest till all are gone.

*Confession is just this process of telling God the unvarnished story—the sad, sad story—of each accursed sin; how it began, how you sinfully permitted it to grow, and how you have loved and followed it to your bitter cost.*⁸⁷

After confession, receive His merciful word of pardon. (1 Jn 1:9). Consider Peter's behavior after he denied the Lord. When he saw him on the shore, he dove into the water and swam to Jesus. (Jn 21:7ff.) Why? He knew Jesus would know what to do with what he had done. Honest confession and receiving grace is how we live in the light and break the cycle of sin. We need to confess our sin to God.

Additionally, confession of sin to other believers is another critical aspect of this spiritual discipline, this means courageously disclosing our struggles with a trusted brother or sister in Christ. It is the practice of allowing others to hear about our deepest failures and weaknesses. James says, **"Confess your sins to one another" (Js 5:16)**. We must bring our sin into the light. Certain molds and mildews grow best in the dark. We must find an atmosphere of grace, be honest, and let the sun shine on our darkest secrets.

Choose a friend who knows you. Spend time exploring how you can mutually support one another in this way. Share areas of darkness that need to be confessed. When finished, read 1 John 1:9 to one another and extend God's grace and acceptance. Pray for one another for strength and victory in those areas.

Fasting

Fasting is the discipline of abstaining from food for a specified period of time. While there can be physical benefits to fasting, this is primarily practiced as a spiritual discipline for spiritual reasons. Christians throughout church history have practiced the discipline

⁸⁷ F.B. Meyer. *Light on Life's Duties*. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895), 23.

of *fasting*, though less than 5% of Christians today actually practice this.

There are many biblical examples of fasting. Moses went on an absolute fast and was able to go without food or water because of the supernatural sustaining power of the glory of God. (Ex 34:28) Elijah the prophet fasted as well (1 Kgs 19:8). The Lord Jesus Himself fasted for 40 days in the wilderness (Matt 4:1ff.).

There are several biblical reasons for fasting. Fasting can be a sign of grief or mourning (2 Sam 1:12; Neh 1:4; Jonah 3:5). Fasting is a sign of repentance and seeking forgiveness for sin (1 Sam 7:5-6, Neh 9:1). Fasting can be an aid in prayer (2 Sam 12:16-23, Esther 4:3). Fasting is an act of public worship (Lev 16:31, Acts 27:9).

When one makes oneself hungry by fasting, the plight of those who suffer hunger involuntarily becomes more personalized, prompting us to share with generosity. The Bible warns us that our flesh has appetites that are insatiable and can even become idolatrous: **“Their god is their belly” (Phil 3:19)**. Gluttony cannot be satisfied. This is partly because engaging in the practice of overindulgence results in deadened feelings. Fasting can teach us a lot about ourselves. Fasting reminds us that we long for Christ to return. Dr. Kent Berghuis writes,

“Any Christian fasting must be centered on Christ. An understanding of our place in redemptive history should prompt Christians to remember Christ, imitate him, and anticipate his presence and blessing. The bridegroom has been taken away, and in these days we will fast. In our fasting we are reminded of the body’s basic goodness and

the enjoyment that life in Christ can bring. We are reminded that Christ moves through his Spirit in and through us to others, and we see our bodies as part of a larger body that is his church. In Christian fasting we follow our Lord, who instructed us not to live ‘on bread alone’ (Matt 4:4; Luke 4:4).”⁸⁸

Food magnifies God in two ways: by being eaten with gratitude, and by being forfeited out of hunger for God Himself. When we eat, we celebrate the symbol of the Bread of Life, the Lord Jesus, the Giver of all good gifts. When we fast we say, “I love Christ above the symbol.”

There are different lengths to attempt fasting. We recommend starting small and missing one meal – start with lunch. Then, after strength is built up, attempt a 24-hour fast; begin after dinner until dinner the next day. After this, practice a 36-hour fast; begin after dinner one night without eating the next day, breaking the fast the following day. Supplement your fasting with juice and water. Use broth if necessary. After some experience, attempt a 3-day fast, and then a 7-day fast. Combined with prayer, you will find this to be an excellent way to draw near to God. In addition to food, especially if you cannot abstain for a medical reason, consider other kinds of fasting, such as fasting from television, technology, or shopping.

Discussion:

What new discipline(s) would you like to explore? (Choose three)
Share one with the group.

⁸⁸ Kent Berghuis. *Christian Fasting: A Theological Approach* (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2013), 189.

There are lots of other disciplines to explore. Continue to experiment and learn as you grow. Charles Ryrie states, “This is the road of spiritual life – a dedicated life that is disciplined, dependent, and developing.”⁸⁹

For a good resource, read Richard Foster, “The Celebration of Discipline.” You can

find video teaching and other spiritual formation tools from a ministry called *Renovare*. Visit www.renovare.org for more information. Continue to grow in the area of spiritual discipline.

Practice the Spiritual Disciplines (or you will wither and burn out).

⁸⁹ Charles Ryrie. *The Balanced Christian Life*. 25th Anniversary Edition. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 200.



Scripture Memory Verse

“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily training is *just* slightly beneficial, but godliness is beneficial for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come.”

(1 Tim 4:7-8, NASB)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. Say more about other spiritual disciplines you would like to engage.

Recommended Resources

Brother Lawrence. *Practicing the Presence of God*. Reprint. (Connecticut: Martino Fine Books, 2016).

Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

Dallas Willard. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San

Jerry Bridges. *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006).

Paul Miller, *A Praying Life* (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2017).

Richard Foster. *The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1998).

Spiritual Formation Exercise: “The Daily Examen”

The spiritual formation exercise below is called the *Daily Examen*, an ancient technique of prayerful reflection developed by Ignatius of Loyola in his “Spiritual Exercises.” This 500-year-old form of prayer is a habit practiced by many Jesuits and other Christians to this day.⁹⁰

This prayer is designed in order to detect God’s immanent presence and discern His direction for you. This prayer is helpful for you to meditate on how God is not “up there,” detached from your day-to-day concerns. God desires to be personally involved in the events of your day. It usually takes 15-20 minutes and is divided into five sections:

Step One: Pray for Light.

Find a quiet place to sit and settle yourself. Place your feet flat on the floor. Pause and take a few deep breaths. Pray that you may become more aware of God’s presence. Seek to look at your life through God’s eyes, not merely your own.

Step Two: Give Thanks.

Begin with gratitude to God for His blessings. Each day we live is a gift from God.

⁹⁰ For more information, see Jim Manney. *A Simple, Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola’s Examen* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011).

Step Three: Review the Day.

Carefully think back over the past 24 hours, being guided by the Holy Spirit. What stands out to you? Is there one event in particular? Is there anything bothering you about this event? Are you experiencing worry, anxiety, sadness, fear etc.? Focus on emotions. Has this issue distracted you from anything such as something or someone you thought you had no time for?

Step Four: Face what's wrong.

Face your own shortcomings and face up to what's wrong both in your life and in you.

Step Five: Look toward the day to come.

What can you do to take care of this issue? Ask where you need God in the day to come.

Close with this prayer (feel free to adapt the words and make it your own):

“Heavenly Father, you know my life and the problems and the stress that I face. Help me to keep my eyes, not on my problems, but upon your grace. Holy Spirit, help me regain my spiritual perspective and balance and let me realize my potential when my life is on track and empowered by you. In Jesus name, Amen.”

“Rule 7” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 7: Fight with Spiritual Weapons (or You Will Wage the Wrong War).

This past year, the California wildfires reached national news, with large swaths of forest burning endlessly and thousands evacuating from their homes. Though each summer California is ravaged by wildfire, this past year's were historic, a battle against time and climate. Likewise, the Christian life is a raging spiritual war.

In the Old Testament, the children of Israel had to wage war against their physical enemies. We in the church age must wage war against our spiritual enemies.⁹¹

Let's explore the battles of old in order to prepare for our new battles. The most dominant metaphor for salvation in the Old Testament Scriptures is that of the Exodus. God's children had been enslaved in Egypt. They lived in a godless system under the dictatorship of the tyrant Pharaoh. At the proper time, God sent a redeemer, Moses, to intervene and bring them to new life and into a covenant relationship with Himself. They were baptized into Moses (1 Cor 10:2)

and given the task of conquering the promised land, a land of goodness flowing with milk and honey, as a gift of God. While the land was a gift from God, Dallas Willard notes, "it still had to be conquered by careful, persistent, and intelligent human action, over a long period of time."⁹² You will recall this did not happen instantly – it happened incrementally. Moses said, "The Lord your God will clear away these nations before you *little by little*" (Deut 7:22 ESV, emphasis added). Likewise, victory in the spiritual life takes patience and time, but over your life, real change will be recognizable ... and *stunning*. God wants us to wage war.⁹³ Believers are under constant threat of attack with fiery arrows coming from all sides. There are three primary arsonists: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

- **The World:** The shared value system of beliefs, behaviors, and products which stands for everything that opposes the will of God (Js 4:4,

⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 10:11 allows for many "types" and illustrations to be found in the Old Testament, this being one.

⁹² Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 42.

⁹³ For a helpful sermon on this topic, see John MacArthur, "Hacking Agag to Pieces," (1 Sam 15) using this story as an apt metaphor for the spiritual life. <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-128/hacking-agag-to-pieces> Accessed June 22, 2021.

1 Jn 2:16). “Babylon” (Rev 17-18), The “Vanity Fair” of this world.⁹⁴

- **The Flesh:** The selfish nature inside fallen humanity which opposes God in arrogance and pride, and is contrary to the Spirit and His fruit. This is particularly emphasized in Paul’s letters and not to be confused with the physical human body. (Gal 5:19-23)
- **The Devil:** The ruler of evil spirits and enemy of God and His people. He is called by many names: the adversary, the devil, a roaring lion (1 Pet 5:8), Satan (Rev 12:9), the god of this age (2 Cor 4:4), and Beelzebub (Matt 12:24). He is a master counterfeiter who sows wheat among the tares (Matt 13:24-30). He is a deceiver, a liar, and the father of lies (Jn 8:44), and perhaps the scariest title of all, he is disguised as an angel of light. (2 Cor 11:14)

We tend to think of the devil as horrifyingly ugly and scary, but the glimpses we receive about him in the Scriptures are quite different. Ezekiel 28 describes Lucifer before his prideful rebellion as a creature of perfection, wisdom and beauty. There is a reason we are drawn to his temptations. This is a spiritual war.

Remember Smokey the Bear’s advice: only *YOU* (with the help of the Lord) can prevent spiritual fires. Remember, you have an enemy who wants to burn your tree to the ground. Charles Ryrie notes, “Satan’s plan and purpose have been, are, and always will

be to seek to establish a rival rule to God’s kingdom. He is promoting a system of which he is the head and which stands in opposition to God and His rule in the universe.”⁹⁵ He will shoot fiery arrows at you and you must know how to extinguish them, or the consequences will be catastrophic.

In our popular culture, the devil is nothing more than a spooky Halloween costume. The Scriptures present another picture altogether. There is a spiritual realm with powerful forces of wickedness and evil. Read through the four gospels and you will see demonic activity everywhere.

There are two dangers or extremes when it comes to studying the spiritual realm. On the one hand, we must avoid a kind of fanaticism which **overestimates** the power of the enemy and sees the devil under every bush. On the other hand, we must avoid a mentality that **underestimates** the power of the enemy with the kind of modernist rationalism which says if we can’t see it with our eyes, it isn’t real. Both are extreme. In the film, “*The Usual Suspects*,” it was said “the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince people he doesn’t exist.” But he does exist. We have an enemy. He is the archenemy of God and the Christian, and he desires to thwart God’s purpose for your life and “sift you like wheat.” (Luke 22:31)

Discussion:

How would you articulate the differences between fighting against the world, the flesh and the devil? What do you see as errors in spiritual warfare?

⁹⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Reprint. Originally published in 1678. (Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, 2014).

⁹⁵ Charles Ryrie. *The Balanced Christian Life*. 25th Anniversary Edition. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 130-131.

Step #1: Identify the enemy.

For all the skirmishes we get involved in as believers, I've come to understand that we make it harder on ourselves because we're often fighting the wrong enemy with the wrong weapons. We are trained to create corporate strategies and employ tactics for better change management, but we spend precious little time considering the reality of spiritual warfare. Or, we end up fighting the world in a culture war and we demonize those who think differently, as if they are our primary opposition. However, when the Bible talks about the world, the language that is used is not one of defeat... *but of liberation*. People in the world are *fellow image bearers* of God. And so, in a sense, our battle is not with them, but with the spiritual forces that influence them and enslave them.⁹⁶ Unbelievers are not the enemy, they are the mission field. Our real war is to rage against their captor, the devil.

Most people have very little idea that there is this power against them. There's a scene in *The Lord of the Rings* where Aragorn is speaking to Theoden, who is resistant toward military engagement with the evil enemy Sauron. Theoden says, "I will not risk open war," to which Aragorn replies: "Open war is upon you, whether you risk it or not."

How do we fight this war? The apostle Paul gives us a battle plan to handle the attacks of the evil one:

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes"
(Eph 6:10-11, NIV).

We must take a stand against the enemy's "**schemes**." That word is "methodos," and it refers to the devil's methods, tricks, wiles, or tactics. The idea is that the enemy has a "strategy." This is a deliberate, willful war. His timing is calculated, and he assaults us in a very clever way. The purpose, or objective, of the devil is to draw you away from God, thwart God's plan for you, harm you in spirit or body, destroy the unity of the church, bring confusion, and ultimately to bring you to sin against God. He comes to "kill, steal and destroy" (Jn 10:10). Do not be ignorant of his schemes.

There are two primary "schemes" of the devil we need to be aware of: **temptation** and **accusation**. First, he tempts you to doubt the goodness of God and he tempts you to sin, breaking the law of God. Then, when you give in to those temptations, he turns around to accuse and condemn you. We must learn to counter both of these strategies.

Temptation

Temptation is the enticement to do something sinful, in violation of God's law. (Js 1:14-15) Concerning *temptation*, we find a prototype for us in the life of the Lord Jesus (in Matt 4:1-11). Russell Moore says it this way: "Here the scriptures identify for us the universal strategies of temptation... You will be tempted exactly as Jesus was, because Jesus was being tempted exactly as we are. You will be tempted with consumption, security, and status. You will be tempted to provide for yourself, to protect yourself and to exalt yourself. And at the core of these three is a common impulse, to

⁹⁶ For more on this subject, see Thaddeus Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2020).

cast off the fatherhood of God.”⁹⁷Let’s take a deeper look. Notice the first temptation of Jesus:

“After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread’” (Matt 4:2-3, NIV).

Notice the first thing the enemy does is call into question the Word of God. In the previous chapter (Matt 3), describing Jesus’ baptism, the Father had said: “This is my son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17, NIV). Immediately the enemy came, and over the course of all three of these temptations, the devil questioned *every single thing* that was said at that baptism. First he said, “*IF* you are the son.” This calls into question His identity. The same thing will happen to you. All temptation begins with that same question: “Who are you?”

Satan wants you to believe an illusion about yourself. The enemy doesn’t care if it’s grandiosity (thinking more highly of yourself than you ought) or self-loathing (thinking more lowly of yourself than you ought). Either one will suffice, as long as your identity is not grounded in the love of your Heavenly Father. That is Satan’s goal. Do not fall for it. What are the three temptations at work here in this passage? Let’s explore them.

1. The Temptation for SELF GRATIFICATION

Notice that Jesus was hungry, so the enemy comes to tempt Him with self-gratification. This temptation is all about consumption. It’s not just about the consumption of food –

it can apply to so many areas. It’s the consumption of everything, and in our modern American culture, there are endless marketing companies trying to stoke your appetites every day. Let me clarify, not every appetite is evil. We all have appetites and have desires—desires that are good; desires that are created by God—but these all have a right time, a right place and a right purpose. For example, you desire food, and food is good. But then Satan takes that which is good and he tempts you – towards undisciplined overeating and lack of exercise. You desire sleep, and sleep is good, but he tempts you toward excessive apathy and laziness. You desire sex, and in the right context of marriage, sex is good, but he tempts you toward lust, pornography, or adultery. The enemy tempts you to fulfill your God-given desires apart from God’s given provisions. When we leave God out of our lives, there is a spiritual hunger that tries to fill that void. Self-gratification tries to satisfy that hunger with earthly means. It will not work, and Jesus knows this:

“Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (Matt 4:4, NIV)

Jesus does not trust His appetite as His most reliable guide, He trusts His Father. Notice His use of the Scriptures here. Whatever your struggle is, you too will need the sword of the Spirit to fight against the enemy, more on this below. First, look at temptation number two: **“Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: “He will**

⁹⁷ Russell Moore. *Tempted and Tried*. (Minneapolis MN: Crossway, 2011), 20-21.

command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” (Matt 4:5-6, NIV)

Did you notice that the devil knows the Bible? He is a deceiver and will twist even the Word of God for His own evil ends. What is the nature of this temptation? It’s ...

2. The Temptation of SELF-PROTECTION

This temptation is probably the most difficult to understand. We understand the desire to eat, but what is so enticing about jumping off the tower? The key to understand this is this was no ordinary tower. This was the temple, the place that was a visible demonstration of God’s presence and God’s protection among His people. This temptation is about *presumption*. It’s about manipulating God’s promises and twisting them around so we can eliminate any uncertainty and be guaranteed protection. We don’t like living by faith. We want to live a life where we can perfectly predict the future and eliminate any risk. We want a guarantee from God. Instead of trusting Him, we want to be “like God” and even use God’s promises so that we can be the ones in control. We crave self-protection. Instead of walking by faith, we want security without any risk. Look at Jesus’ response:

“Jesus answered him, ‘It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Matt 4:7, NIV)

Again, Jesus uses Scripture. The context of this quotation was when the children of God were in the wilderness. They were upset with God about not giving them more water. The people wanted a sign from God that He was with them. Let me say that differently,

the people didn’t just want a sign that God was with them, they wanted *another sign* from God that He was with them. He had already given them many signs. He gave them the 10 plagues; he gave them the parting of the Red Sea; He had already provided water from the rock; and yet they still are wavering. It’s a classic case of, “God, what have You done for me lately?”

“Your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work” (Ps 95:7-9, NIV).

Here’s the problem with their demand: it’s absurd. They had already seen so many signs, did they really think one more sign was going to satisfy them? No, the problem was they lacked faith, they wanted a *guarantee*. They didn’t want any risk. They didn’t want to give up control. But a life of faith, trust and daily dependence just doesn’t work that way. We must believe God is our Father who already knows everything we need. The third temptation is as follows:

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’” (Matt 4:8-9, NIV) What’s exactly at play here?

3. The Temptation for SELF-EXALTATION

Have you ever wondered why powerful people are so inclined to go off the rails? Why is it that powerful people can become so unethical and immoral? Why is there such a draw toward scandal? Why is there a pull toward greed and such extravagant consumerism? Why is it that power generally doesn’t make people *better*? What is it about us? The answer is our pride.

You may recall the king Nebuchadnezzar from the book of Daniel, the great ruler of Babylon. He was also one of the most prideful people in the Bible, even to the point of demanding *worship*. (Dan 3:1-6) He had a dream about himself, portrayed as a tree. He asked Daniel to interpret this dream for him saying, “I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed” (Dan 4:10-12, NIV). Then an ominous voice called out from heaven saying, “Cut it down.” (Dan 4:14, NIV). This story reminds us that God is indeed opposed to the proud. The psalmist said it this way, “I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a native green tree. Yet he passed away, and behold, he was no more; Indeed I sought him, but he could not be found” (Ps 37:35-36 NKJV).

Nebuchadnezzar is an extreme example, but we all want to be exalted. We all want to be “like God” (Gen 3:5). In sin, we are all consumed with self-interest. We want significance apart from difficulty or servanthood. In *self-gratification*, we are tempted to find satisfaction apart from Godly resources. In *self-protection*, we want security without any risk. In *self-exaltation*, we want significance without any suffering.

However, Jesus, the Son of God, has brought a different kind of kingdom:

“Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.” (Matt 4:10-11, NIV)

Jesus came to introduce a brand new definition of greatness. Our Captain did not come to exalt Himself – He came to humble Himself. He did not come to exploit others – He came to take away the sins of the world. He did not come to “lord over.” He came to “get up under” the burden of all humankind. The Lord leads the way and shows us how to fight these temptations and defeat the schemes of the devil. First, we satisfy our appetites with God alone. Second, we fulfill our need for protection by placing our trust in God alone. Third, we find our greatest sense of significance by humbling ourselves and living not for ourselves, but for others and for the glory of God alone. If there is something positive about temptation, it is that temptation teaches us to be humble. What do your temptations teach you about yourself?

Discussion:

Rank the three temptations in order of strength for you (1, 2 or 3) Which of the three temptations most entices you? How? How do you fight it?

Remember the promise of God, **“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it”** (1 Cor 10:13, NIV).

Accusation

After temptation, the second scheme of the devil is **accusation**. In spiritual warfare, this refers to Satan’s strategy for the believer to bring condemnation. As in a court of law, he

comes with a prosecutorial voice having no love, but only with a word of judgment. (Rev 12:10) This tactic is designed to tear down, not to build up, to lay heavy burdens upon and crush his victims, deliberately overlooking God's remedy of grace. The name "Satan" means "the Accuser." He is like a prosecuting attorney in the court of law. After we take his bait and fall into temptation, he immediately comes with messages of condemnation: "You're no good," "You're a failure," "You're rotten." While there is a partial truth here because our sin is not pleasing to God, the good news is that our only hope, Jesus Christ, already came as our substitute and fulfilled the law perfectly on our behalf. He said, **"I always do those things which please my father" (John 8:29, NIV)**. He lived the life you should have lived, and died the death you deserved; and in so doing, He crushed the enemy underneath His feet.

As such, Jesus serves today as our **advocate**, in his work of intercession. John writes, **"My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 Jn 2:1, NIV)**. An advocate is a defense attorney, one who pleads on our behalf, who makes a case in the court of Law. And His case is *watertight*. Jesus' case is not merely a plea for mercy or second chances. No, His case is a plea for *justice*. (1 Jn 1:9) Because Jesus paid for your sins already on the cross, it would be unjust of the father to ask his children to pay for those sins as well. There has been a prisoner exchange. Like in the case of Barabbas, the innocent is sentenced and the guilty can go free. (Matt 27:15-26) The believers' sins have already been paid for, therefore our

advocate says, "Let them go." Court is adjourned. Friends, in the only court that really matters, the only opinion that matters says, "Your sins have already been paid for and you've been declared right again before God the Father." What sounds too good to be true is actually the most comforting news you will ever hear. God has cast your sins into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:19) In the new covenant, God declares,

"For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more."
(Heb 8:12 NIV)

The hymn writer says it like this:

*Well may the accuser roar,
of sins that I have done;
I know them all and thousands more,
my God he knoweth none.*"⁹⁸

I heard a story about a father and son back in the pioneer days who were trying to outrun a fast-moving prairie fire. The fire was about to consume their wagon when the father turned the horse around and went to a spot that had already been burned. He told his son to jump out of their wagon and stay put. His son said, "But the fire is all around us!" The father explained: "This spot has already been burned. The fire can't get us here." This is the victory over sin that Jesus gives us. He has already been "burned" at the cross so that we don't have to be.

Satan has no right to accuse you anymore. **"There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1)**. We defeat our enemy through the blood of the Lamb and with the word of our testimony, bearing witness to the good news of the **Gospel**. **"The accuser of our brothers has been thrown down" (Rev 12:10, NIV)**.

⁹⁸ "His be the Victor's Name." Hymn written by Samuel Gandy, 1838. Public Domain.

Remember, the devil walks about as a roaring lion making much noise, but his teeth were removed at Calvary.

*When Satan Tempts Me to Despair,
And Tells Me of The Guilt Within
Upward I Look and See Him There,
Who Made An End To All My Sin.*⁹⁹

Step #2: Stand firm

Secondly, having identified our enemy and his two major schemes (temptation and accusation), let us return back to Ephesians chapter 6 to continue learning about our spiritual battle plan. As you read, notice the word “*stand*” is a key term in this passage:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to *stand* your ground, and after you have done everything, to *stand*.” (Eph 6:10-13, NIV)

The word “stand” is repeated 3 times in this passage. It’s a military word for holding a position. However, notice also we are not to stand in our own strength. Paul begins by saying, “Be strong in the Lord.” This command reminds us that we cannot take on the devil in our own power.

As a word of caution, we must remember that even the archangel Michael did not dare

take on the devil alone, but did so in the name of the Lord (Jude 9). No believer should ever feel they are wise enough or powerful enough to engage this enemy apart from dependence on the Lord. So how do we stand? By putting on the full **armor of God**. Notice the armor belongs to God. This is not you standing in your own strength. This is you receiving supernatural protective armor from Jesus Himself. You must say as David did, “The battle belongs to the Lord” (1 Sam 17:47).

Step #3: Suit up for battle

Third, having identified our enemy and being made ready to stand firm, next, Paul teaches us about the **armor of God** in Ephesians chapter 6 in a spiritual call to arms. This is imagery taken from the soldiers in the Roman army. They were responsible to wage war on behalf of the empire. Paul describes different pieces of the spiritual armor one by one. Take a moment to digest each piece of armor, some pieces are defensive and some pieces are offensive.

“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Eph 6:14-18, NIV).

⁹⁹ Words from the hymn “Before the Throne of God Above” written by Charitie Lees Bancroft in 1863. Public Domain.

THE ARMOR OF GOD



The “Belt of Truth”

The military belt connected everything else together. The “truth” here refers to the truth of the Gospel. Satan is called “the father of lies” (Jn 8:44) and we must gird ourselves with truth. Kevin DeYoung notes, “That’s essentially what spiritual warfare is: believing the truth from God instead of the lies from the devil.”¹⁰⁰

The “Breastplate of Righteousness”

This piece was the heart-protector. Spiritually, since we have been given the righteousness of Christ, nothing can penetrate this piece of armor. Our hearts

belong to God and He offers us His divine protection. (1 Jn 3:20)

The “Boots of the Gospel of Peace”

Ready feet were an important part of being a good soldier. Everywhere the soldiers went they would carry the *Pax Romana*, the Peace of Rome. This was a peace through strength. We must remember the message we are always ready to carry is that we can have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 5:1)

The “Shield of Faith”

There were two types of shields in Roman times; there was the hand shield and the shield being referred to here. This shield was

¹⁰⁰ Kevin DeYoung. *The Hole in our Holiness*. (Minneapolis: Crossway, 2014), 87.

2 ½ feet wide by about 4 feet high and was very large. (The word here is the same Greek word for “door.”) Typically, this was two layers of wood glued together, covered with hide, and bound with iron. The soldier would look up, and though he would see hundreds of arrows coming at him, he would be protected by this mighty shield. Sometimes soldiers fought behind a solid wall of shields. We have a record of a battle warrior who had 220 darts sticking to his shield. Why do we need this shield? To protect us against the flaming darts of the enemy. Arrows were often dipped in pitch and propelled toward a person with deadly speed. Your enemy loves to throw arrows at you; arrows of doubt, fear, bitterness, accusation, or any sinful temptation. In those moments, our shield of faith, our faith in God is the most powerful advantage we have. We have to have an active dependence on God. **“No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn” (Isa 54:17, NKJV).**

The “Helmet of Salvation”

All the other armor was laid out to be put on, but the helmet was personally handed to the soldier by his armor-bearer. Notice it says “take” or really “receive or accept” the helmet. The imagery here is that we receive our salvation as a gift from God. In those days, the helmet protected the cranium and skull. One hit with a sword or mace might be the end of you. This is why we need a helmet – even today, when biking, it’s an essential piece of armor. In Christ, we now have mental confidence and a sound surety of the mind.

Satan will attack your thinking, but we must take “every thought captive” (2 Cor 10:5). The helmet of salvation will deliver you from wrong thinking about God.

The “Sword of the Spirit”

This was a short, two-edged, cut and thrust sword wielded by the soldier. No man would go into battle without his sword – it was his first line of offense. A soldier would go through intense swordsman training to learn how to use it. One cannot just “swordfight” by flailing the blade around and hoping it sticks – there was a strategy involved. One had to be a learned swordsman to defeat the enemy. The same is true when using the sword “of the Spirit,” the Word of God, the Spirit inspired Scriptures. The word used here for “word” denotes the “spoken word,” which we give with our own lips. Remember in His temptation, even Jesus defended Himself against the devil with Scripture (Matt 4:1-11). We, too, need a good steady artillery of Scriptures to be meditating on at all times. I hope you are so in love with the Word of God that you bring it everywhere. It is the most powerful weapon you have.

One of the key concepts in the Christian life is called “**mortification**.” This word means “to kill or to put to death,” referring to the flesh or the sin nature. If we do not mortify the flesh, this will weaken or darken our souls and stunt the process of spiritual formation.¹⁰¹ The apostle Paul writes, **“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom 8:12–13 ESV).** One of the ways we put to

¹⁰¹ The classic text on this topic is written by John Owen. *Mortification of Sin, The: Puritan Paperbacks*. Edinburgh: Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016. Paperback.

death the deeds of the flesh by means of the Spirit is by using the sword of the Spirit.

“Praying in the Spirit”

This is the most necessary element to resisting the devil, but it is often the most neglected. Satan *hates* people who pray. He’ll keep you busy so you won’t pray. We are too busy to talk to the all-knowing God, who knows our every circumstance. We even see Jesus using this piece of armor in Gethsemane. How much more should we be praying without ceasing? (1 Thess 5:17) Friends, be prayed up every day!

Discussion:

Which piece of the armor stuck out to you? What piece do you need to learn more about and embrace? How does each piece of the armor relate to the gospel?

Finally, notice how much each piece of the armor is connected back directly to the

gospel. In some ways, this armor is akin to putting on Christ. Our helmet refers directly to our salvation in Christ. Our breastplate is the imputed righteousness of Christ. We believe this gospel as our shield of faith. We embrace the “truth” of the gospel around our waist. Our feet are to be ready to share this gospel message. The resources of the gospel are the resources of heaven and they are at your fingertips – and yet many don’t take advantage of them. The Christian life is a war. Be on guard. Stand firm. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Js 4:7, ESV). Know that greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world (1 John 4:4). Trust Him and use the means He has provided to defeat the enemy of your soul, all for His glory. One day, God will crush your enemy (Satan) underneath your feet. (Rom 16:20)

Fight with Spiritual Weapons (or you will wage the wrong war).



Scripture Memory Verse

“May God arise, may his enemies be scattered.”

(Ps 68:1, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. How is it a temptation to fight the “wrong war”? Why would this play right into Satan’s hands?
3. How do temptation and accusation work together and how can we be more prepared?

Recommended Resources

C.S. Lewis. *Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001).

Russell Moore. *Tempted and Tried* (Minneapolis MN: Crossway, 2011).

Thomas Brooks. *Precious Remedies against Satan’s Devices* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997).

Spiritual Formation Exercise

Write yourself a “*Screwtape* letter.” C.S. Lewis wrote a book called, “The Screwtape Letters,” a fictional account of a senior demon (Screwtape) chronicling his attempt to draw a human being into temptation.) through his apprentice (Wormwood). Include where you are most susceptible to sin and what consequences there may be for you and your loved ones. Include the perceived payoff (what benefit will you receive from this sin). Include any rationalizations you may use as well.

Dear Wormwood,

Sincerely,

Screwtape

For further consideration: When finished, read your letter with an accountability partner you trust. Then, write out scripture verses that contain truth or promises from God that counter each point in your letter as you learn to fight with spiritual weapons.

Jesus Christ the Apple Tree

**The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green;
The trees of nature fruitless be,
Compared with Christ the Apple Tree.**

**His beauty doth all things excel,
By faith I know but ne'er can tell
The glory which I now can see,
In Jesus Christ the Appletree.**

**For happiness I long have sought,
And pleasure dearly I have bought;
I missed of all but now I see
'Tis found in Christ the Appletree.**

**I'm weary with my former toil -
Here I will sit and rest awhile,
Under the shadow I will be,
Of Jesus Christ the Appletree.**

**With great delight I'll make my stay,
There's none shall fright my soul away;
Among the sons of men I see
There's none like Christ the Appletree.**

**I'll sit and eat this fruit divine,
It cheers my heart like spirit'al wine;
And now this fruit is sweet to me,
That grows on Christ the Appletree.**

**This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
It keeps my dying faith alive;
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the Appletree.**

A poem found in London's *Spiritual Magazine* in August, 1761, credited to
Rev. Richard Hutchins, a Calvinist Baptist clergyman in Long Buckby,
Northamptonshire.



PHASE 4: Maturing

Expressing Love in Community

“Rule 8” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 8: Discover your Spiritual Gift *(and Find your Purpose.)*

Once, J. R. R. Tolkien was frustrated, feeling as though his work was stagnating and purposeless. He expressed these emotions in the short story “Leaf by Niggle.”

The story’s main character is an artist who has been commissioned to paint a mural on the side of city hall. He spends his entire life trying to create that which he dreamed – a large fruit-bearing tree that would serve as a great inspiration to others. In the end, he is too fixated on perfection, and is only able to complete a single, perfect leaf, as he strives “to catch its shape, and its sheen, and the glistening of dewdrops on its edges.” After that, he dies. On a train going to heaven, Niggle sees a familiar image off in the distance and asks the conductor to stop the train. As he steps off the train and approaches this object in awe, he realizes that it is a tree, *his* tree, but complete and more beautiful than he could have ever imagined. It was then that Niggle realized that his little leaf was part of something much greater than himself – it was part of the work of a greater artist. Our lives and our work, though they may seem

insignificant to us at times, are an essential part of what God is doing in this world.

How many of you have asked, “What is God’s will for my life?” We all long to make a difference. We long for a sense of *purpose*. Dallas Willard writes, “Through the presence of his kingdom, Jesus answers the deepest needs of human personality for righteousness, provision and purpose.”¹⁰² What is your purpose? This chapter is a very practical answer to that important question.

Friends, the Bible says you are God’s *workmanship*, created in Christ Jesus to do the good works that He prepared in advance for you to do (Eph 2:10). The word “workmanship” is the Greek word “poema,” from which we derive our English word “poem.” This means you are one of God’s original masterpieces. No one else on the planet can do this good work that you were uniquely equipped to do. The Latin root of the word *vocation* is *vocare*, meaning “to call.” What is your calling? The answer is embedded in the reality that you have been the recipient of a unique spiritual gift.

¹⁰² Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 16.

What is a Spiritual Gift?

*A Spiritual Gift is a supernatural ability given by the Holy Spirit to believers that empower them to serve the body of Christ with effectiveness.*¹⁰³ Notice the *source*, the gifts are given by the Holy Spirit. Notice the *purpose*, the gifts are given to *serve* the body of Christ.

Allow me to share with you something that was a revelation to me as a young Christian. I believe this will be revolutionary to your spiritual life. Here it is: “You are a minister of the church.” You may have never thought of yourself as a *minister*, but you are. Look at Paul’s words:

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph 4:11-13, ESV)

It is the body of Christ who is equipped for the “ministry.” One example of a gifting is “pastor-teacher,” which is often found in people who are in leadership in ministry. The pastor’s job is to teach, train, and equip the body to make use of their own gifting to make a difference. Contrary to modern conceptions, the church has never been about “one person” doing all the ministry – that’s more like a cult of personality. The church is a body, and *every part* of the body has a specific function and role to maintain total health. Sadly, this isn’t always the way it works. For many congregations, it is the

faithful (often weary) few who do the work of the church while others watch.

Cruise Ship vs. Battleship

You may have heard the metaphor that a lot of people come to church with a “**cruise ship**” mentality. A cruise is a paid vacation, and people come expecting to enjoy themselves. They are consumers, looking for what the experience can offer *them*. They’re on the ship to relax, while the small crew works overtime to keep the majority of the passengers happy. This is fine for a vacation, but when we always relate to church like a consumer and ask self-focused questions, it becomes a major problem. Instead of asking what they can put into church, some people only ask: “What’s in it for me?” “Are my needs being met?” “Do I like the music?” When the experience is no longer ideal, they’re on the first lifeboat out. This is toxic to the body. This is not God’s design.

A better image to think about when it comes to the church is that of a **battleship**. On a battleship, each person has a job, a role, a function, a responsibility, and a *purpose*. There’s also a clear, often noble mission that everybody gets to be a part of. On a battleship, each person is encouraged to strive for their best and contribute in significant ways. Ideally, everyone’s strengths are being used to the fullest – the strategist is planning for the future, the captain is steering through dark waters, the engineer is keeping all systems running. This is the way the church should operate when it is operating in a healthy way. It’s essential that everyone knows their gifting

¹⁰³ *Stephen Ministries* defines the gifts this way: “Unique endowments from the Holy Spirit generously shared with Christians in community for the purpose of the building up of the body of Christ in practical ways.” Definition taken from *Stephen Ministries Spiritual Gifts Curriculum*, “Discovering God’s Plan for your Life.”

and is ready and able to use it. *All hands on deck.*

Discussion:

Where have you seen the church operating like a cruise ship? A battleship? What did each feel like?

One of the most powerful benefits of the use of spiritual gifts is it creates a solution for “**burnout**.” Burnout can be defined as “the progressive loss of energy, purpose and idealism leading to stagnation, frustration and apathy ... in an ever downward spiral.”¹⁰⁴ Any given task can be a burden

for one person and a great blessing for another. When you are using your spiritual gift, you will feel energized. You will be excited about what you are doing.

There are four primary passages in the Bible that list over a dozen different spiritual gifts: Romans 12:6-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12 (there are 2 different lists there: 1 Cor 12:8-11; 12:28). Since these lists are all different, some theologians do not believe these lists are designed to be comprehensive, but there are at least this many gifts of the Spirit. Here is a chart for the breakdown:

1 Cor 12:8-11	1 Cor 12:28	Rom 12:6-8	Eph 4:11	1 Pet 4:10-11
Word of Wisdom Word of Knowledge Faith Gifts of Healings Working of Miracles Prophecy Distinguishing of Spirits Kinds of Tongues Interpretation of Tongues	Apostles Prophets Teachers Worker of Miracles Helps Administration Kinds Of Tongues	Prophecy Service Teaching Exhortation Giving Leadership Mercy	Apostles Prophets Evangelists Pastors Teachers	Speaking Service

We learn a few key principles about the spiritual gifts from the passages listed above.

First, we learn that **every single person** who has received Jesus as Savior has been given at least one gift (1 Cor 12:7), and some may have more than one. Furthermore, we are commanded to use these gifts (1 Peter 4:10). This is not “optional.” Christianity is not a

spectator sport. In 1 Timothy 4:14, Paul warns Timothy, “Do not neglect the gift that is in you.” Again in 2 Timothy 1:6, Paul says to Timothy: “I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you.” Though these gifts can be developed through use, these gifts are *not the same* as natural talents, personality, or temperaments.

¹⁰⁴ Ada P. Kahn and Jan Fawcett, *The Encyclopedia of Mental Health*. (New York: Facts on File), 1993.

Second, we learn that **the Holy Spirit** is the one who determines who receives which gifts are given (1 Cor 12:11). This is important as the gifts are not for self-glorification. The gifts are not for competition or gaining attention over another person. To use the gifts this way is to abuse them. As a word of caution, spiritual gifting can lead to pride (1 Cor 8:1-2; Rom 12:3). All of the glory belongs to the giver who is **God** Himself.

Third, we learn that each gift is equally **valuable** (1 Cor 12:21-26) as they are all given for what is needed in the church. Just as we enjoy the great beauty found in all the different varieties of trees that grow from the earth, we should rejoice in the diversity of God's design in the gifts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it this way: "Each member of the community is given his particular place, but this is no longer the place in which he can most successfully assert himself, but the place where he can best perform his service."¹⁰⁵ All parts of the body

are necessary, and without the diversity of the gifts, some of the needs of the community will go unmet. We are to use our gifts to serve others as they are for the benefit of the body (Rom 12:4-8; Eph 4:12). The gifts are not for personal enrichment, entertainment or display – the gifts are for blessing others. They are given for the common good.

Are all the Gifts for Today?

Some Christians believe all the gifts are for today, whereas others believe that some of the gifts were foundational and therefore temporary. (Heb 2:3-4, Eph 2:19-20, 1 Cor 13:8-10; 2 Cor 12:12). Some of the more sensational gifts are referred to as the "sign gifts" or the "charismatic gifts" (the gifts of healings, miracles, tongues, and certain kinds of prophecy). There are different views on the use of these gifts today. Below is a *spectrum* which helps explain the different positions:

¹⁰⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 93-94.

Hard Cessationism	Soft Cessationism	Continuationism	Charismatic / Classic Pentecostal
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View that miraculous sign gifts ceased with the death of the last apostle and the completion of the New Testament. Therefore, God does not speak directly to people today, etc.	View that the miraculous sign gifts could still be given today, especially in areas where the gospel is breaking new ground; believers need to be “open but cautious,” careful about outright acceptance of people’s claims of possession of these gifts.	View of the perpetuity or continuing validity of the gifts. Miraculous sign gifts are still being given and God still speaks directly in various ways today. “Third Wave” movement. ¹⁰⁶ Distinct from Word of Faith movement.	View that all the gifts are for today; and that baptism of the Spirit is accompanied by the gift of speaking in tongues. Associated with Word of Faith movement and prosperity theology. ¹⁰⁷
<i>Adherents: Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, Charles Ryrie, John MacArthur, Richard Gaffin (WTS)</i>	<i>Adherents: Robert Saucy, Millard Erickson, Dan Wallace</i>	<i>Adherents: Wayne Grudem, Jack Deere, Jack Hayford, John Piper, J.P. Moreland, Sam Storms, Craig Keener, C.J. Mahaney; Gordon Fee, D. A. Carson</i>	<i>Adherents: Kenneth Hagen, Oral Roberts, Kenneth Copeland, Pat Robertson, Creflo Dollar, Jesse Duplantis, Benny Hinn, Fred Price.</i>

Fully exploring these views is beyond the scope of this workbook, but let us make just a few comments. For some, there is an extreme fear about the use of these gifts; for

others, there is an obsession. For example, some have maintained that in order to be a mature or valid Christian, one must speak in tongues.¹⁰⁸ We believe this would be akin to

¹⁰⁶ The “Third Wave” movement was a charismatic movement in the 1960s involving C. Peter Wager and John Wimber (Vineyard Fellowship). They teach that the new birth and Spirit baptism occur at the same time but give great place to the miraculous gifts. See Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

¹⁰⁷ The Word of Faith movement is not a denomination with a formal organization or hierarchy. Instead, it is a movement that is heavily influenced by a number of high-profile pastors and teachers. At the heart of the Word of Faith movement is the belief that a Christian’s words of faith can create what they believe Scripture promises as a guarantee, namely, prosperity, health and wealth. It has been criticized for its many theological errors of presumptuousness, idolatry and greed, and is lacking in a robust scriptural understanding of suffering. For a fuller treatment of this issue, we recommend viewing the documentary “*American Gospel*.”

¹⁰⁸ Representatives of this position include The Assemblies of God, The Church of God in Christ, and Aimee Semple McPherson’s (1890-1944) International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. The historic beginning of the modern

saying in order to be a mature Christian, one must have the gift of teaching or the gift of leadership. The mere possession of any of the gifts does not necessarily guarantee spiritual maturity. The Corinthians had many of the supernatural spiritual gifts operating, yet they were spoken of as “carnal” (1 Cor 3:1). The gifts of the Spirit are not the same as the fruit of the Spirit. Overemphasizing one or a few of the gifts is problematic.

On the other hand, expressing disdain or contempt for those who see things differently does unnecessary damage to the body of Christ through division.

For the purposes of this study, we allow freedom to disagree about this issue. This debate is a legitimate gray area where good Christians can amicably and graciously come to different conclusions.

How do you Discover your Gift?

Discovering your spiritual gift requires you to be willing to allow God to use you. You must be willing to try new things. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you look at the following list of gifts: *Where do you serve with effortless strength? Where do you have unusual impact (beyond what you feel you should)? What do you love to do with passion? What skills and abilities have you developed? Who do you really admire? What stories and characters in the Bible resonate with you most powerfully? What tasks when you get to do them make you rejoice?*

These desires are clues to God’s supernatural gifting. When you discover the place where your spiritual gifting intersects with this world’s deepest needs, you have found God’s will for your life. Here is a sketch of the spiritual gifts along with their definitions:

tongues movement is traced to Bethel Bible School of Topeka, Kansas, founded in 1900 by Charles Parham. Representatives of this position include The Assemblies of God, The Church of God in Christ, and Aimee Semple McPherson’s (1890-1944) International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

Sketching the Spiritual Gifts

In the column alongside each gift, circle the word “**always**,” “**sometimes**” or “**never**” based on how each spiritual gift resonates with you.

Always = This spiritual gift strongly resonates within me.
Sometimes = This spiritual gift may sometimes resonate within me.
Never = This spiritual gift does not resonate within me at all.

Spiritual Gift	Scripture Passages	Definition of the Gift	Rate Yourself
<i>Administration</i>	1 Cor 12:28	<p>The spiritual gift of supporting, undergirding and organizing God’s people toward a task or goal.</p> <p><i>Are you someone who is a thoughtful, conscientious leader, gifted towards building consensus and mobilizing others?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
<i>Apostleship</i>	1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11	<p>The spiritual gift of macro-level leadership over a number of churches. (Note: some see this gift as unique to the original twelve disciples and having ceased today, as they laid the foundation of the church in the first century. For example: the Apostle Paul.)</p> <p><i>Do you enjoy overseeing large and complicated organizational systems, able to implement a master plan?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
<i>Discerning of Spirits / Discernment</i>	1 Cor 12:10; 1 Jn 4:1	<p>The spiritual gift of recognizing deception and doctrinal error, and exposing false teaching, antagonists, and worldly thinking to protect the body of Christ.</p> <p><i>Are you someone who does not tolerate duplicity or hypocrisy, who has an ear for the truth and stands for justice?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>

Spiritual Gift	Scripture Passages	Definition of the Gift	Rate Yourself
<i>Encouragement / Exhortation</i>	Rom 12:8; Acts 11:23	<p>The spiritual gift of building up other people through affirmation and / or challenge; calling others to obedience to God's truth. Urges believers to confident action.</p> <p><i>Are you someone who uplifts people consistently, who breathes life into the body and loves to love others?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
<i>Evangelism</i>	Eph 4:11	<p>The spiritual gift of presenting the gospel naturally with passion (often travelling to different geographical areas to spread the message of Christ), uniquely effective at sharing the good news with the lost.</p> <p><i>Are you a missions-minded person, with global awareness and a skill for adapting to reach different people?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
<i>Faith</i>	1 Cor 12:9; Mk 9:23	<p>The spiritual gift of trust with abandon (distinct from saving faith), exercised in persistent prayer and intercession; deep conviction that God keeps His promises.</p> <p><i>Have others told you that you exhibit a deep, childlike faith? Do others rely on your strength in difficult times?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
<i>Giving</i>	Rom 12:8; Luke 21:1-4	<p>The spiritual gift of joyfully, generously and sacrificially sharing of one's material resources with others to meet needs, never with strings attached or for personal recognition. (Can also involve giving of time, abilities, or skills)</p> <p><i>Are you joyfully generous?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>

Spiritual Gift	Scripture Passages	Definition of the Gift	Rate Yourself
Healing	1 Cor 12:9; 28	<p>The spiritual gift of bringing supernatural, out of the ordinary healing to others; operating with extraordinary power from God working in them. For example: the healing work of the apostles in Acts.</p> <p><i>Do you feel a conviction and anointing to pray without doubt in some instances for God's healing power? Have you seen God heal directly through your laying on of hands and prayers of intercession?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
Interpretation of Tongues	1 Cor 12:10; 30	<p>The spiritual gift of understanding and explaining the sayings of those with the gift of tongues, for the purposes of strengthening and encouraging the body of Christ.</p> <p><i>Has God given you the ability to supernaturally understand other tongues and proclaim these prophetic words?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
Leadership	Rom 12:8; Matt 23:37b	<p>The spiritual gift of directing, motivating and overseeing others harmoniously in a variety of spiritual settings, setting goals and keeping projects moving forward, making decisions based on God's word.</p> <p><i>Are you often a leader or decision-maker? Do you enjoy marshalling groups towards a common goal?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
Mercy	Rom 12:8; Jn 8:11b	<p>The spiritual gift of cheerfully showing sympathy, kindness and sensitivity to those who are suffering and in need. Not given based on worthiness. Drawn to the lonely, forgotten and hopeless.</p> <p><i>Have you often been described as sensitive or empathetic? Do you care for and act on behalf of the lowliest in society?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>

Spiritual Gift	Scripture Passages	Definition of the Gift	Rate Yourself
<i>Miracles</i>	1 Cor 12:10; 28	<p>The spiritual gift of bringing out of the ordinary manifestations of God's power which transcend the laws of nature for the purpose of authenticating the message of the gospel and glorifying God as authoritative.</p> <p><i>Have you seen God work directly through your prayers to bring about supernatural wonders?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
<i>Pastor</i>	Eph 4:11	<p>A spiritual gift of shepherding, guiding, nourishing and feeding a flock, one who exercises godly care and protection over the spiritual lives of a local fellowship of believers.</p> <p><i>Are you gifted to lead, feed, and protect God's flock? Are you burdened for the spiritual care of other believers?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
<i>Prophecy</i>	Rom 12:6, 1 Cor 12:10, 28, Eph 4:11	<p>The spiritual gift of speaking on behalf of God; involves exhortation, refutation and conviction of the believer to live in accordance with the will of God. There are two kinds of prophecy (1) Fore-telling: Involves a revelatory prediction (2) Forth-telling, involves speaking a timely message from God causing repentance and edification.</p> <p><i>Do you have a unique ability to speak a timely word directly from God to others in a manner in which they can receive it with compunction and / or gratitude?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>
<i>Serving / Helps</i>	Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:5	<p>The spiritual gift of being available, helping and humbly coming alongside others to provide relief, support or aid, especially during a crisis.</p> <p><i>Are you happiest "behind the scenes," putting others first, doing the necessary and often thankless work?</i></p>	<p>Always</p> <p>Sometimes</p> <p>Never</p>

Spiritual Gift	Scripture Passages	Definition of the Gift:	Rate Yourself
Teaching	Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11	The spiritual gift of explaining, instructing and encouraging those in the body of Christ with the word of God in a variety of settings (sermons, Sunday school, etc.) <i>Do you love to help other people understand and apply the Bible and embrace sound doctrine?</i>	Always Sometimes Never
Tongues	1 Cor 12:10; 28; 30	The spiritual gift of communicating verbally with God without intelligible words. Some believe this is discernable languages (Acts 2:11), others believe this gift has ceased altogether. Note: During corporate worship, one should only speak in tongues when an interpreter is present (1 Cor 14:27-28; 39-40) <i>Do you possess the supernatural ability to speak in other tongues?</i>	Always Sometimes Never
Word of Knowledge	1 Cor 12:8; Phil 3:8a	The spiritual gift of having unique insight and understanding of not just facts, but relational knowledge of God along with the ability to communicate that; taking others by the hand to meet the Lord. <i>Does God often give you insight to share with others for the purpose of their spiritual edification?</i>	Always Sometimes Never
Word of Wisdom	1 Cor 12:8; Js 3:13	Similar to the word of knowledge, this is the spiritual gift of having unique insight, understanding and good judgment along with the ability to communicate that verbally, emphasizing the practical application. <i>Has God gifted you with unique wisdom to share with others for the purpose of their spiritual edification?</i>	Always Sometimes Never

Discussion:

What are your spiritual gift(s)? Describe a time when you were able to use them.

You may wonder whether your specific gifts are temporary or permanent. The consensus in this area is that your gifts are *yours for your life time*. Certainly a person can stop using their gift, but that person still has it, and it is a permanent part of God's design for their life and ministry.

Let us make one more important point about the gifts and spiritual formation. Exercising your spiritual gift(s) will help develop **spiritual maturity** in you and in the body

(Eph 4:13), they are edifying both for ourselves and for others. As such, we will know our gifts are operating when others feel edified and the church is growing spiritually. This is why one of the primary concerns we have for members of the church is not just their attendance, but their ministry engagement. Are you engaged in meaningful ministry utilizing your gifts right now?

Friends, God has gifted you with a unique sense of purpose and gifting. Keep "drawing your leaf." God is creating something through you that is breath-taking. What you are doing now matters for all of eternity.

Discover your Spiritual Gift (and find your purpose).



Scripture Memory Verse

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

(Eph 2:10, ESV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. What is an area of spiritual gifts you would like to learn more about?
3. How can the issue of gifts be difficult in terms of church unity and how can we counteract that and get ahead of that problem and seek to maintain “the unity in the bond of peace.” (Eph 4:3)

Recommended Resources

Sam Storms. *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts*. (Bloomington Minnesota: Bethany House, 2013).

Tom Schreiner. *Spiritual Gifts: What They are and Why They Matter*. (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2018).

Spiritual Gifts Survey. (Free online tool) <https://gifts.churchgrowth.org/spiritual-gifts-survey/>

Spiritual Formation Exercise

What are your top one or two spiritual gift(s)?

My Primary Spiritual Gift is: _____

My Secondary Spiritual Gift is: _____

Think of three times have you had the opportunity to use your gift in the past?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Decide you are going to use your gifts. Brainstorm at least three opportunities to put your gift to use:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Offer the Prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola:

“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. All I have and call my own you have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.”

“Rule 9” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 9 – Learn to Love (or the Rest Won't Matter).

The General Sherman, a giant sequoia tree located in California, is 275 feet tall, making it the world's largest tree. The majestic tree has withstood 2,500 years of intense environmental pressures, high winds and forest fires, and even getting struck by lightning! Through it all, the sequoia tree endured, standing firm and actually growing *stronger* through its trials. What is its secret? How did it get this way?

Experts say the secret is not how big the sequoia trees are, but what lies below the surface. Beneath the ground, each tree reaches out and interlocks its roots with the other sequoia trees around it. In this way, no single tree faces a disaster alone – it is reinforced by the strength of the other trees. They stand tall because they stand *together*.

The secret of the sequoia tree is also the secret of a healthy spiritual life. As we grow in the faith, we realize the vital importance of community in the Christian maturation process. There are no Lone Ranger Christians in the Old or New Testaments. Robert Putnam notes, “Our national myths often exaggerate the role of the individual

heroes and understate the importance of collective effort.”¹⁰⁹

Why do so many Christians get spiritually “stuck?” There are many Christians who know the Word of God and are diligent in prayer, and yet there's some area of their lives that's just not showing much (or any) progress. There are still major, unaddressed character flaws. It could be outbursts of anger, a problem viewing inappropriate materials, or a reliance on substances. Why is that?

There are certain parts of our lives that are never going to change or grow without being in a very specific environment; that environment is *living in authentic, loving community*. Author Robert Mulholland defines spiritual formation as “*a process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others*.”¹¹⁰

The key mark of Christian discipleship given by the Lord Jesus is **love** (1 Cor 13:1-13, John 13:35, 1 Tim 1:5). Love is the fulfilment of the Law (Rom 13:9). When Jesus was asked, “What is the most

¹⁰⁹ Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone Books by Simon and Schuster, 2001), 24.

¹¹⁰ Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*. (Downers Grove, IL, IVP, 2016) 16.

important commandment?” Jesus replied, “**“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:37-40, NIV).**

Circle that word “important” above. God says these are the two things that really matter most in life: your love for God and your love for people. Jesus says if you get these two things right, you’ve got it. If you don’t get them, you’ve kind of missed the whole point of life.

Discussion:

Why is love so important to God and vital for spiritual maturity?

What is Love?

The Bible uses different words for love. There’s **Eros** love, which is romantic love, or infatuation. This kind of love fades. There’s **Phileo** love, which is friendship love. This often comes naturally and easily. There’s **Storge** love, which is familial love. This love is very strong, with ties of blood and deep loyalty. Then there’s **Agape** love.

Agape love is totally different – it’s purposeful, intentional, and self-sacrificial. Unlike the other three, it’s not natural, and it’s definitely not easy. It means doing what is best for someone else, even when you don’t feel like it. It’s unconditional. It is not determined by the one being loved, but rather by the one choosing to love. Tim Keller writes about this kind of love in his excellent book on marriage, but it applies

more broadly: “When over the years someone has seen you at your worst, and knows you with all your strengths and flaws, yet commits him- or herself to you wholly, it is a consummate experience. *To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear.* But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.”¹¹¹ That’s agape love.

Let me tell you about somebody who had a hard time with this kind of love. Her name was **Ethel Waters**. She was born in 1895 into an extremely difficult childhood. Ethel was the product of her mother being raped by a man in their neighborhood. After her birth, her mother sent Ethel to live with her grandmother and her two aunts in Philadelphia, where she was abused. She was conceived in violence and raised in violence. Though she was exceptionally bright, she eventually dropped out of school to work as a maid and a waitress in local hotels. She became disillusioned by life, hurt by those who were supposed to love her the most. One day, she attended a Billy Graham crusade at Madison Square Garden where she found a new love from God and a new meaning in life. There she dedicated her talents for the glory of God. Ethel became the first African American woman to appear on radio in 1922. She was the first African American to introduce over 50 hits, the first African American singer to appear on television in 1939, and the first African American woman to star in a Broadway play. Ethel would eventually team up with

¹¹¹ Tim Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage*. (U.K.: Penguin Random House, 2011), 62.

the Billy Graham Crusade and tour extensively with them until her death in 1977. Probably her most famous song is called, “His Eye is on the Sparrow:”

*I sing because I'm happy,
I sing because I'm free,
For His eye is on the sparrow,
and I know He watches me.*

Jesus says, *this* is the kind of God we have: A Heavenly Father. A Father who will actually come after us, seeking us in Jesus, to include us in Heaven’s family and to bring us to our true home. He wants that love for each of you. This is the kind of love you were made to receive and to give. Receiving His love heals us and enables us to love others radically. Even in the midst of great tragedy, Christians can shine. Agape love is a *choice*.

Today we’ve bought into a myth that love is uncontrollable. That love just kind of “happens” to you. This is not agape. Agape love is an *action*, not an emotion. This is why it is a command. In fact, it’s the most important command. In every season we should be asking ourselves this question: What does love call us to do?

You are made in the image of God, and God is Love (1 Jn 4:8). Deep down, you were made to be loving, too. As a child, you see the world as good and beautiful and deserving of the boundless love you were born with. However, after you were hurt a few times in life, you began to see that once beautiful world, and others, as threatening. You now come into relationships with walls up, maintaining fear for your own self-protection. Though many of us have been

twisted against our nature, fear and love can't coexist – when you walk in fear you cannot walk in love. (1 Jn 4:19) And, you aren't acting in accordance with how you were made. By not loving, you are betraying the very essence of who you are.

On the children’s television show, “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood,” Fred Rogers shared this helpful piece of wisdom, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” Dear Christian brother or sister, may people look for the helpers ... and find *you*.

Authentic Community

What exactly is an *authentic* community? What does it look like? One picture is found in Romans 12:9-13 where Paul strings together a group of exhortations in the form of a list,

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” (Rom 12:9-13, NIV)

First, Paul says “Love must be sincere.”¹¹² We are really good at pretending. We are much better at “claiming” we love someone than we are at sincerely loving them. Some of us are very skilled in appearing to be moved with compassion when we hear of someone’s needs, but we really feel nothing

¹¹² Our English word “sincere” comes from the Latin words *sine cera*, which means “without wax”. The phrase comes from a practice where people would hide the cracks in cheap pottery with wax in order to pass the pottery off as being worth more than it actually was. Quality products were often stamped with the words *sine cera* to show it had not been doctored.

inside, and so do nothing – or help out of pride or obligation. We learn how to speak kindly, and appear to take an interest, but really we couldn't care less. We smile. We tell someone we will pray for them, but then we don't. Paul says to let your love be from the real you – no need for meaningless platitudes, phony pleasantries, or pretending. Why is this important? Transformation happens when the real you shows up, not a projection of yourself.

There are thirteen different commands in these four verses. At first glance it appears as if Paul is throwing out random exhortations as he jumps quickly from one idea to another. But upon closer examination, we see how it all fits together under the theme of living in authentic community. Pastor Chip Ingram summarizes this section of Scripture in this four-fold way: *"Authentic community happens when the real you, meets real needs, for the right reason, in the right way."*¹¹³

I know a friend – I'll call him "Andy," who struggled with an addiction to viewing inappropriate material for years. Then one day he found a group that he could attend to deal with this. At first he said: *"I was terrified to go to a group. But I went, and the real me showed up for the first time in my life. I met other guys who struggled too, and I knew for the first time I wasn't alone and then I got hope. The shame was broken and I also saw other guys have victory in this area and in a non-judgmental context they shared about how and I began to break the power of that addiction in this life through the power of Jesus Christ, and in the context of community."*

What happened? The real person showed up with real struggles and met guys who would meet real needs in the right way. That's living in authentic community. Sincerity, honesty, transparency, generosity, and grace. These are some of the seeds that need to be sown to reap the harvest of authentic community.

Discussion:

What kind of an impact would truly living in authentic community have on your life? On your church? On our world?

Tough Love

Sometimes love must be tough. Remember the fairy tale *Rapunzel*? The main character was locked in a tower with no mirrors by an evil witch. The sad result was that she had no idea what she looked like. This describes the condition of many Christians. However, God has given us other people to serve as mirrors. As sinners saved by grace, we all have character issues and blind spots that we have no idea are even there – but others can see them quite clearly. The problem is that if everyone is locked in their own private tower, then no one can see their true reflection.

Contrary to popular etiquette, withholding constructive criticism is *not* a loving thing to do. Imagine, for example, you had a big blob of cream cheese on your face. Wouldn't you want someone to tell you? Don't you want to know what you look like? What if your friend did not want to offend you, so he withheld his feedback about the cream cheese and allowed you to walk around looking foolish? What kind of friend

¹¹³ For a further treatment of spiritual formation in Romans 12, see Chip Ingram. *True Spirituality: Becoming a Romans 12 Christian* (Brentwood, TN: Howard Books, 2013).

would he be? In a sense, the Bible teaches that we are all walking around with cream cheese on our faces. We all walk around with the cream cheese of impatience, anger, selfishness, etc. We all have opportunities to grow. We want God to show us our weaknesses, but often we are not willing to hear about them from another person. We may even ask God to show us exactly how and where we have cream cheese on our faces. We pray, "Search me, O God...See if there is any offensive way in me" (Ps 139:23-24). What if, right after we pray that prayer, God answers us by sending someone into our lives to provide some critical feedback? What if we miss the fact that God is trying to show us, but He's using other people to do so? How differently could we respond to them if we realized that they are the answer to our prayers?

Giving and receiving feedback with others is a neglected spiritual growth resource that God has given us. We believe that giving and receiving feedback could actually be considered a spiritual discipline. It is just as important as prayer and Bible study and the

other disciplines to our Christian maturity, yet in most books covering the disciplines, it does not even make the list. Just stop and think about how a consistent neglect of this practice can stunt the maturity process in someone's life. Stop and think about the ripple effect of this on an entire congregation. Now consider the effect on the church as a whole. What would be the effect of every Christian in the whole world being locked in their own private tower?

Discussion:

Why is giving and receiving feedback (tough love) so difficult to live out?

The Scriptures are written with the assumption that we are all broken. This means that we all, without exception, have areas in which we need to grow. What complicates this problem further is that we all have blind spots about those exact same areas, and our information is limited. Consider the following categories of information called the "Johari window."

The Johari Window Model

		Known to Self	Not Known to Self
Known to Others	Known to Others	<i>Areas of Awareness</i>	<i>Blind Spots</i>
	Not Known to Others	<i>Hidden areas or façades</i>	<i>Unknown or yet to be revealed by God</i>

There are lots of different categories of data that can be helpful in spiritual formation. “**What we know,**” “**What we know we don’t know,**” and then there is “**What we don’t even know that we don’t know.**” Without this information, we have little hope for change. The only way to increase our awareness is through feedback and disclosure. To carry out that process, we have to be willing to both share what is going on with us and be willing to hear the perspectives of others. Because other people offer what we don’t know about ourselves, they are essential; this makes spiritual formation a “group project.” Can you imagine a professional athlete telling his or her coach during practice, “Don’t tell me what I need to do, just sit back and watch me!” This is missing the gift that others are – they can offer different perspectives or different mirror angles.

Do Not Judge?

Nearly 2,000 years ago in one of His most well-known sermons, Jesus said these famous words: “**Do not judge, or you too will be judged**” (Matt 7:1, NIV). Almost everyone is familiar with this verse, even non-Christians. But what exactly did He mean? Sadly, many people use this one verse in an attempt to silence all their critics, even the ones who mean well. That interpretation of this verse is basically: “If you follow Jesus, then you don’t ever have the right to tell me I’m wrong.” Therefore, feedback is not welcome, not even in church circles. As a result, people are not invited into their lives to give and to receive critique. This interpretation is tragic on so

many levels. This is exactly what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “Cheap Grace”:

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹¹⁴

But Jesus’ command, “Do not judge,” does not preclude someone from ever making any negative assessments about you. After all, later in the same sermon Jesus says: “Watch out for false prophets” and “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt 7:15–16). He also calls us to discern people who are “dogs” and “pigs.” (Matt 7:1-6). How can we do any of this unless we have the ability to make some kind of a “judgment call”? We can’t. Therefore, there must be certain kinds of judging that are wrong and certain kinds of judging that are not only appropriate, but *necessary*. Jesus’ command that we not judge others does *not* mean there should be no mechanism for addressing sin. If it did, this would contradict so many other scriptural passages. Consider His instructions about church discipline (Matt 18:15-18), the warning passages in the book of Hebrews (Heb 2:1-4, 6:1-6), and a short survey of Paul’s letters will show they are replete with correction. Paul offered stern words of rebuke spoken against church members living lives of unconfessed sin saying, “Expel the wicked person from among you” (1 Cor 5:1-13).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is condemning *hypocritical* judging (judging

¹¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, Revised (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 35-36.

with a “plank in the eye”), or in other words, judging someone else when I am practicing the same sin. Here are examples of judgments that are sinful in the Bible:

- Harsh, unforgiving judgment is wrong (Js 4:11-12).
- Self-righteous judgment is wrong (Rom 2:1).
- Judging before the facts are presented is wrong (Prov 18:13).
- Judging in a disputable gray area is wrong (Rom 14:1-10).
- Judging by mere appearance is wrong (1 Sam 16:7).
- Judging of those outside the church. Notice Paul makes a distinction between judging sin inside the church vs. judging sin outside the church. **“What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.”** (1 Cor 5:12-13)

All of these kinds of judging are sinful and discouraged. Should we live a life of unchecked sin? Paul would say, “May it never be” (Rom 6:1-2). Not only is living in unrepentant sin displeasing to God, it's not good for our communities or for us.

Therefore, when we resist accepting negative feedback, we are refusing to look at possible blind spots and not courageously facing the areas in our lives where we still need to grow. Let us not cheapen God's grace, but treat it as costly. This is Bonhoeffer's alternative, “costly grace”:

“Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”¹¹⁵

Let me encourage you to invite others to get to know you and to speak into your life. Like the sequoia trees, we need each other to grow, to share our burdens, to speak the truth to us. Disclose your deepest struggles. Decide to be known. Decide you're not going to live in isolation anymore. Seek out an accountability partner and a small group. Meet with them weekly. Invest in the resource that is other people. They are a gift from God to you to help you grow. Do you have an authentic community like that, of people who really know you? What is a step you can take toward community in your life?

This is what it means to live a life of **love**. If we don't get this right, it doesn't matter what else we do. Without love we are just resounding gongs or clanging cymbals. (1 Cor 13:1-3) Paul says elsewhere, **“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love”** (Gal 5:6 NIV). The *only* thing that counts? “Wait,” we say, “Paul, have you seen how thick the Bible is?” Yes, but love summarizes the whole point. Jesus said it is our *love for one another* that is the way others will recognize us as His disciples. (John 13:34-35)

Learn to love (or the rest won't matter).

¹¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, Revised (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 35-36.



Scripture Memory Verse

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

(Jn 13:34-35, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. How is “judging” a confusing topic for some believers?
3. What is the relationship between our call to love others and our own sin?
4. What specifically does Jesus mean to love “as I have loved you”? How would the original 12 disciples have heard that?

Recommended Resources

Chip Ingram. *True Spirituality: Becoming a Romans 12 Christian* (Brentwood, TN: Howard Books, 2013).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, Revised (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

Spiritual Formation Exercise

Journaling Exercise:

1. Think of a person in your life who is difficult to love. Write down **three** 'real', honest things that rub you the wrong way or that you've wanted to say to that person but hold back:
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
2. Consider what **obstacles** keep you walking in fear and prevent you from walking in love with this person:
3. Consider how can you see this person/the relationship with a Godly perspective. What **advice** would you offer yourself about giving and receiving constructive criticism with this person? (Talk to yourself from a third party perspective).
4. Write a two sentence prayer: the first sentence as a prayer for God to soften your heart, to change your perspective, to forgive your sins/thoughts as they relate to this person, to mold you in the Potter's hands and the second sentence as a prayer for that other person in light of agape love (praying to both be changed and praying sincerely for the other person is a great way to break down barriers and bitterness).
 - _____
 - _____

“Rule 10” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 10: Choose to Forgive ***(or Bitterness Will Eat You Alive.)***

A “root fire” is a wildfire caused by the burning of tree roots. It is often triggered by off-trail camping and can pose a dangerous threat to humans and animals. Because a root fire burns underground, its smoke may appear as just smoldering above the surface and can even be indistinguishable. The Scriptures speak of a similar threat to our spiritual formation. There is a “bitter root” that can occur in the life of the believer that can greatly impact our relationship with God, others and our own spiritual maturity. It is the bitter root of unforgiveness (Heb 12:15, Eph 4:31-32).

Let’s begin with a true story that many of us are familiar with: Corrie Ten Boom lived in Holland during World War II. She and her sister Betsy were Christians. During the war, they would hide Jewish people in their home from the Nazis. They did this until they themselves were found out by the Nazis, and the two sisters were sent to a concentration camp to work themselves to death. Tragically, Corrie’s sister Betsy did pass in one of those camps, but Corrie survived. After the war, she continued ministering and preaching God’s Word all over the world. This is when something incredible happened.

One time when she was preaching, a man came up to her after her sermon. He was a German soldier, whom she recognized as he approached. He had been stationed in the same camp in which she was imprisoned. Corrie was flooded with all kinds of emotion. This soldier walked up to her and said something like this: “Since the war, I became a Christian, and I have realized the horrible things that I did to people and I want to say to you I’m sorry... And I need to ask you for your forgiveness.”

Here she was faced with someone who was partially responsible for her sister’s death and her own suffering. Corrie said: “I stood there wondering what I was going to say to him for what seemed like an eternity...” Have you ever been really wronged in your life? I think we all have. We can all remember offenses against us that may still make our pulse beat a little faster.

Before we look at this subject, I want you to answer this question in your mind: Of all the people in my life who have hurt me the most, who comes to my mind today?

(Insert Name Here)

This may be painful to recall, and we don't mean to pull off a scab, but we do want to share with you some of the most radical words in the whole Bible that will be crucial not just for the other person, but for your own healing.

Discussion:
Why is forgiveness so difficult?

One of the hardest commandments a Christian will ever have to follow is the command of forgiveness. **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Eph 4:32, NIV)**

Forgiveness is not a simple issue, right? What if they're not even sorry? What if there's no remorse? What if it's a pattern of wrong behavior? Let's begin by discussing what biblical forgiveness is NOT.

1. Forgiving others is not justifying their actions.

When you forgive, you don't have to say things like, “Well, they were under a lot of stress,” or “Well, I certainly don't think they meant it that way.” That's actually not forgiving them, it's excusing them. Those two attitudes are very different.

2. Forgiving others is not just the passage of time.

The passage of time doesn't make things better all by itself. I know people that are holding onto stuff that happened 20 or 30 years ago, and yet time has done nothing to erase those offenses. Sometimes healing

does take time, and it is a process, but it's not the *time* that does the healing, it's what you *do* during that time that brings the healing.

3. Forgiving others is not denying that you are hurt.

Do not say, “It didn't hurt,” “It didn't affect me,” or “I'm not upset.” We love to live in denial, and we love to claim strength when we're feeling weak, but it's not the same as forgiveness.

4. Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.

Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean the relationship is restored. Forgiveness takes one, but reconciliation takes two. We will discuss this more in depth below. With this in mind, let's look at what forgiveness is and why it's essential as Christ followers. We will look at a parable called the parable of the unmerciful servant.¹¹⁶

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.’

¹¹⁶ These words echo Jesus' teachings from Matthew 5:43-48 and Luke 6:28.

At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matt 18:21-35, NIV)

The passage begins with a big and revealing question from the mouth of Peter. The context here is important because right before our passage today, Jesus has said that if anyone has sinned against you, He wants you to go after them to seek reconciliation, not once, not twice, but three times – and keep going. At that point, Peter can’t take it anymore, so he pulls Jesus aside and asks, “Can we talk? How many times should I let this go?” In other words, “Jesus, aren’t there some limits here? Can we be realistic? How about 7 times, would that be good?”

Why did Peter suggest 7 times? Some say he took Matthew 18, where there is a rhetorical pattern of “three times.” and then doubled it, added one, and declared: “How about that Jesus?” trying to impress Him. But Jesus says, “You’re way off...try seventy-times-seven.” This is not literal. This phrase seventy-seven or seventy-times-seven is a numerical symbol which meant “times without number.” It was limitless. Interestingly, the first time those two numbers are used together in the Bible was all the way back in Genesis and, not coincidentally, the passage also has to do with vengeance:

“Lamech said to his wives, “Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.”” (Gen 4:23-24, NIV)

What Lamech is saying is, “If you wrong me, I will get my revenge. Don’t mess with me! My vengeance knows no limits!” When somebody injured Lamech, he didn’t go talk to them about it or seek reconciliation. He certainly didn’t try and forgive them. Lamech said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” He doesn’t just get mad, he gets *even*.

Now with that in mind, do you see what Jesus is saying here to Peter? Lamech said, “It’s total revenge,” but Jesus said, “It’s total restoration.” Lamech used seventy-times-seven to mean never ending payment, but Jesus uses seventy-times-seven to mean total freedom. Lamech said, “I get what I want,” but Jesus said, “You give what I want.” Lamech’s words to his wives were: “Ada and Zilha listen to me, wives of Lamech hear my words ...” But Jesus’ words to us

His bride is this: “Church, people of God, listen to Me, wife of the only perfect husband, hear my words. I’ve been killed because you wound each other. My father has avenged your wrong on me, not just seven times, but in a seventy-times-seven punishment on the cross. Now your debt is cancelled. And so now I want you to treat others the way I have treated you ...not with revenge, but with forgiveness.”

Jesus knows us. He knows that if we have somebody in our debt, it gives us power. Then we’ve got the upper position in the relationship. We feel superior. We feel entitled. When we hold a grudge against someone, it gives us a sense of “God-ness.”

This is what’s so revealing about Peter’s question. He sounds just like Lamech. Peter does not trust that God protects his people, or that God can bring about justice, because Peter still wants to pick up the sword on Peter’s behalf. In other words, Peter wants to be king. When we won’t give forgiveness, we’re ascending the throne. This is why Jesus tells him a parable about a bigger king.

We now come to that parable, which speaks about the forgiveness of millions of dollars of debt. (Matt 18:21-35) There’s not a consolidation loan place that would touch this guy’s situation. He’s doomed. The amount here is astronomical. It would be

absolutely impossible to pay it back. What does this parable mean?

In this parable, the king is God, you and I are this servant who owes this much money, and the debt we owe is because of our sin. We are in way over our heads. Many people in our day don’t think their sin is “that bad,” *but sin is not what **you** think it is, sin is what **God** says it is.* God says our sin is like a huge debt and the debt we owe is very significant. In the parable, the man is about to be sold into a kind of indentured servanthood so he begs for more time and the master cancels the debt. The word “**cancelled**” is the Greek word “Aphiemi,” and it means “a cutting off.” The word is strong as it means it is paid, the agreement or contract is over, and you get a clean slate. That’s the biblical doctrine of forgiveness. Amazing, right? Now, to be specific and technical, debts don’t magically disappear. Someone has to incur the cost. In the parable, the master absorbed the loss. That’s exactly what our God has done for us.

Puritan author John Flavel wrote a piece describing this transaction called “The Father’s Bargain.”¹¹⁷ It’s a conversation between the Father and the Son that takes place in eternity past, where you can imagine the Father talking to the Son about what they were planning to do:

¹¹⁷ John Flavel. “*The Father’s Bargain.*” This exchange opens the Covenant of Redemption betwixt the Father and the Redeemer. Volume 1, Sermon 3. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Publications, 1997).

The Father speaks: “My Son, here is a company of poor, miserable souls that have utterly undone themselves and now lay open to my justice.”

The Son responds: “O my Father. Such is my love... and pity for them, rather than they shall perish eternally I will be responsible for them as their guarantee. Bring in all (their) bills, that I may see what they owe you. Bring them all in, that there be no after-reckonings with them...I would rather choose to suffer the wrath that is theirs than they should suffer it. Upon me, my Father, upon me be all their debt.”

The Father responds: “But my Son, if you undertake for them, you must reckon to pay the last ...Son, if I spare them... I will not spare you.”

The Son responds: “Let it be so. Charge it all upon me.”

The apostle Paul writes, **“He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.” (Col 2:13-14, NIV)**

One of the reasons it is so hard for us to forgive another is because we have forgotten how much we have been forgiven by God. John Stott says it this way, “Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling.”¹¹⁸ Hymn writer Isaac Watts wrote:

*When I survey the wondrous cross,
on which the prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.*¹¹⁹

Let’s return to the parable. No sooner than the king cancels the servant’s debt – imagine him skipping gleefully from the courtroom – he grips another fellow servant by the collar and starts to choke him. He owed him a

hundred coins, about four-months wages. Four month’s wages are not insignificant. When others wrong you, it’s not insignificant either. The point is that in proportion to what you’ve already been forgiven by God, it is still very small. When we hear this parable, we are shocked and appalled – here is someone who needed much mercy and compassion, yet turned around and extended none to someone who needed far less. We think: “Who does he think he is?” But yet, Jesus says this is what we’re like when we hold grudges toward those who have injured us.

The king hears of this hypocrisy, is similarly enraged, and calls the servant wicked, throwing him in debtor’s prison. The word **“wicked”** tells us that our unforgiveness is not just a minor problem. It is wicked. If you *know* the King’s mercy, you should *show* the King’s mercy. Here is the main point of the parable: *When our enormous debt to God has been cancelled by Jesus, we have no legitimate excuse to be heartlessly unforgiving to anyone.*

¹¹⁸ John Stott. *Christian Counter Culture* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1978), 149.

¹¹⁹ Hymn written by Isaac Watts in 1707. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” Public Domain.

The end of the parable cited above is very clear about the consequences of unforgiveness. In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he could pay back all he owed. In the first century they had professional torturers who would physically rip criminals apart in agony. But what is this jail Jesus is talking about in which we will be tortured? Is He just trying to scare us into forgiving others? Jesus finishes with, *this is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart*. There is a prison awaiting us where we will be tortured when we choose not to forgive – and it is called *bitterness*.

There is a great lie perpetuated in our culture which says we have no control over bitterness. We think, “Of course I am bitter; look at what they did to me.” Even looking at the passage above, we may misinterpret God’s punishment in verse 34 by thinking that He makes us bitter.

The truth is that we do have control over bitterness. We have the antidote – it is forgiveness. It is not the offense that causes bitterness, it is not God that gives us bitterness, it is a sentence we impose on ourselves when we choose not to forgive. Bitterness is a prison we’re locked in with the key in our own pocket. Forgiveness sets you free. There’s a phrase: “Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die.” Lewis Smedes wrote in *Christianity Today* years ago, “Forgiving someone is like setting the prisoner free, only to discover the prisoner was you.”¹²⁰ One of the most famous stories of forgiveness in the Bible is the story of

Joseph. He shows mercy where none is deserved and in this way provides an example for all of us. Interestingly, Joseph is called a “**tree**” (Gen 49:22), the ultimate image of spiritual maturity and vitality we’ve been utilizing throughout this study.

The Four Promises of Forgiveness

What does forgiveness mean? *Peacemaker Ministries* does an excellent job explaining this. Forgiveness involves making four promises.¹²¹

1. I will not dwell on this incident.
2. I will not bring this incident up and use it against you.
3. I will not talk to others about this incident.
4. I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

The Seven A’s of Confession

Another helpful tool from *Peacemaker Ministries* is their explanation for a sincere and heartfelt **confession**. Often, people say things like: “I’m sorry if I hurt you,” or “Maybe I was wrong,” or “That’s water under the bridge.” These statements trivialize what should be a more thoughtful and intentional conversation. Consider these seven components of a confession:¹²²

1. Address everyone involved
2. Avoid if, but, and maybe
3. Admit specifically
4. Acknowledge the hurt
5. Accept the consequences
6. Alter your behavior
7. Ask for forgiveness

An eighth A could be added to this list: “Allow time.” Allow the person some time

¹²⁰ Lewis Smedes. *Christianity Today*. “Forgiveness—The Power to Change the Past.” January 7, 1983.

¹²¹ Ken Sande. *The PeaceMaker* (Brooklyn, NY: Baker Books, 2004)

¹²² Ibid.

to process their emotions and come to a moment of reconciliation. During this time, pray for that person and wait patiently.

Boundaries

Now, let me say a brief word about **boundaries**. A “boundary” is a psychological term which refers to a kind of interpersonal property line which fences off areas of our lives for the purposes of protection or clarifying responsibility. Boundaries help to define us, they remind us where we end and another person begins. Boundaries are necessary to understand who and what we are responsible to control in life.¹²³ Not every single relationship in your life can or should be restored immediately. There are cases where you need to grant forgiveness on your side, but then it takes time for trust to be restored and for full reconciliation to take place on the other side. The relationship may never be restored, and in some cases it should not be restored, particularly if the person is **toxic**. One of the more thought-provoking studies in the life of Christ is a study on how often he “walked away.” Although I knew Jesus didn’t embrace everyone, I didn’t realize how often this occurred. The concept of walking away from toxicity as Jesus did brought me greater understanding to some of the interactions Jesus had with people. Gary Thomas in his book “When to Walk Away” identifies 41 instances in all four gospels representing more than two dozen distinct times when Jesus demonstrated walking away or letting someone else walk away.¹²⁴ Just as an experienced hiker wants to know what poison oak or poison ivy look like in

order to avoid touching them, God’s people need to know what toxic people look like so they can avoid being spiritually assaulted by them. Gary Thomas further explains what it means for a person to be **toxic**: “Three common elements of toxic opposition: murderous spirit (murderous relationships turn people against people), a controlling nature (rebellion, gossip, slander, sowing division) and a heart that loves hate (negative, poisonous effect on others).”¹²⁵ In these cases, forgiveness can be granted, but boundaries should remain in place before trust is earned.

Discussion:

What is the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?

The apostle Paul says, on your end, make sure you’ve done what’s possible for you to make peace. (Rom 12:18) A wise mentor of mine once said, “Reconciliation is a two-way street, but make sure you’ve cleaned your side of the street.” Paul goes on to say, **“Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom 12:19, NIV).**

Do not retaliate. Why not? First of all, you will make it worse. When we go tit for tat, evil for evil, we throw gas instead of water on the flames of our enmity. The second, larger reason is because it usurps God’s role as judge. When we take our own revenge, we stand between God and His beloved.

¹²³ For more on this topic, see Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries Updated and Expanded Edition: When to say Yes, How to say No to take control of your life*. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2017).

¹²⁴ Gary Thomas. *When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

¹²⁵ Gary Thomas. *Ibid*.

Now I know some of you are saying, “I would never take revenge! I’m a gentle person.” But what I’ve discovered is as Christians we sometimes do this in more passive aggressive ways. We despise them in our hearts. We gossip about them. We use prayer request time to slander them. We use our position, leverage other relationships and make triangles. This, friends, is vengeful.

Not taking vengeance requires trust in God. We often think, “If I’m not looking out for my own welfare, who is?” Chuck Swindoll says it this way – “It’s a Faith question. Do we really believe God is in control and that he will preserve us through danger – including enemy attacks? How we answer that question will determine whether cursing or blessing falls from our lips.”¹²⁶ Consider the model our Lord Jesus provided for us, **“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.” (1 Pet 2:23, ESV).**

There is an insightful note in the ESV study Bible here which says, “Every wrong deed in the universe will be either covered by the blood of Christ or repaid justly by God at the final judgment.”¹²⁷

When we don’t take revenge, we are saying to God, “I am putting this into your hands. I release it to you. I believe you are fair, you are just, and one day the scales will be absolutely perfectly balanced, I can release that hurt, that wound, that pain to you, because you know all.”

And then we breathe out and we let it go.

One more point. When it says “I will repay,” I take that to mean God saying to you, the victim, “I will also repay you for your pain.” That’s our God. Trust Him.

Act with Radical and Bold Love

This journey of spiritual formation is not just hard; it is *impossible* without the power of the Holy Spirit. Look at these challenging words from the apostle Paul:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom 12:14-18, NIV)

In this context, Paul is talking about people who may have been persecuting these brothers and sisters, and how to relate to them – what to do with people who socially ostracized them perhaps because they were followers of Christ. In our application, we know these are not our friends. This is the boss who treated you terribly, the father or mother or friend who betrayed you, your spouse who left you.

Paul says to *bless them*. The word “*bless*” in v. 14 means you desire well for them. You desire their salvation. You desire that God add His favor upon them. Not only that, but Paul says, I want you to *identify* with them. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

¹²⁶ Charles Swindoll, *Insight on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 298.

¹²⁷ *ESV Study Bible*: English Standard Version. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Bibles, 2007), 2409.

Yes, even *that person*, the person you wrote at the beginning of the chapter – when they lose their job, suffer from a disease, or get in an accident, Paul asks that – by the power of the Holy Spirit – we weep with them. One time, W.C. Fields was reading the Bible and a friend asked him what he was doing. He answered, “Looking for loopholes.” In this text, there are no loopholes. It feels counterintuitive – even bizarre – when you choose to do this. But it’s the path of discipleship. It’s the path toward the possibility of *peace*.

Paul says “be careful” (meaning “take thought”), “As far as it is possible; as far as it depends upon you – live at peace with everyone.” Forgiveness takes one. Reconciliation takes two. I know true reconciliation takes two willing parties, but Paul says make sure on your end, you’ve done everything possible to make sure the problem is not with you, make sure you’ve done the work of forgiving them. God Himself is described as “ready to forgive.” (Neh 9:17)

Notice Paul also says “don’t be conceited” – did you see that? What’s that about? I think it’s because you cannot truly forgive someone or love your enemy if you feel morally superior to them. This takes humility. If you’re ever going to be able to bless your enemies, you have to do so in humility. You’re saying, “I am a sinner too, and there but by the grace of God I could fall into that trap too.” Remember the context of Romans 12, we can do all of these things “in view of God’s mercy.” Like them, we know we needed mercy, too. This is the power of the Gospel. This is the path toward real freedom for them *and even for you*. I’m reminded of the words of Martin Luther

King, Jr. who said: “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.”

“On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:20-21, NIV).

This picture of “heaping burning coals on the head” was an ancient Egyptian ritual. If someone had done something wrong, they would take a fire with coals and a towel and walk around the village as a sign of contrition. It symbolized burning such thoughts out of their mind. This kind of contrition may come about if you act in radical and bold love. This is not a complicated concept, it’s simple, but it’s also one of the most difficult tasks we will ever undertake in our lives. However, when you can love another in this way, you just might see some amazing supernatural results; you can overcome evil with good.

One time in the Old Testament, David was running from King Saul, who was trying to kill him. When by misfortune they ended up in the same cave, David could have sought revenge, but only tears a little piece of his garment off.¹²⁸ Later, David approaches Saul from a safe distance on the other side of a ravine. He goes to the edge and calls, “Saul, what have I done? Why are you seeking me? This is your robe, I could have killed you! If I have done anything – let God be judge between us.” King Saul begins to weep, having a sudden flash of realization. Because we often know true evil in our hearts, when we commit evil, we repress it, living in denial. In cases of true evil, there

¹²⁸ The story of David and Saul can be found in 1 Samuel 24:8-13; 16-19.

may even be some demonic activity involved. Yet there's a moment of grace where Saul says, "David, you are more righteous than I." That's the power of the people of God when they trust Him to bring about perfect justice. Friends, can you imagine if this was us? What would happen if we actually showed bold love to our enemies? If we blessed them? What if we really believed that good will overcome evil? You know who else has this kind of love for His enemies? **"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8, NIV).** You're never more like Him than when you choose to forgive and pursue your enemies.

Let us finish that story of Corrie Ten Boom. She wrote these words about the moment she stood in front of the soldier: *"And I stood still there with the coldness clutching*

my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion. I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will. And the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Help," I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand, I can do that much...you, Lord, supply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder and raced down my arm, sprang into my hands, and then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. "I forgive you brother, with all of my heart." For a long time, we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love as I did then."¹²⁹

Choose to Forgive (or bitterness will eat you alive).

¹²⁹ Corrie Ten Boom. *The Hiding Place* (U.K.: Bantam Books, 1974).



Scripture Memory Verse

**“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other,
just as in Christ God forgave you.”**

(Eph 4:32, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. How does the picture of forgiveness as a “cancelled debt” take away the emotions and depersonalize the conflict? Why is this helpful?
3. How and why does our forgiveness become a compelling apologetic for our faith?

Recommended Resources

Dan Allender. *Bold Love*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992).

Gary Thomas. *When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries Updated and Expanded Edition: When to say Yes, How to say No to take control of your life*. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2017).

Ken Sande, *The PeaceMaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Conflict*. (Ada, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004)

Spiritual Formation Exercise

Write a letter to God expressing your desire to pursue forgiveness using the following prompts:

Dear Lord,

I desire to forgive: (write their name) _____

for (write out each way this person has offended, hurt, wronged or traumatized you below)

I confess I have sinned by using this **excuse** for not forgiving ...

Thank you, Lord, for enabling me to forgive because of Jesus Christ. Lord, I choose to forgive this person for all the pain that they have caused me, and whatever feelings will not yet allow for, the blood of Jesus will surely cover. I trust you, and entrust them into your sovereign hands of justice and mercy.

Amen.

When finished, choose someone to whom you can read this out loud. Afterward, prayerfully decide to release this issue to God and destroy or even (safely) burn the letter.

Optional: *As an alternative exercise the letter could be not about not forgiving someone else but maybe it's about you confessing and asking for forgiveness. Keep in mind the "7 As" of confession listed in the chapter.*



PHASE 5: Multiplying

Extending

His Mission

“Rule 11” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 11: Be Salt and Light (and Make an Impact).

In 2013, health technology company Theranos, headed by its genius founder Elizabeth Holmes, was “the next big thing.” Theranos created a miracle machine that could run dozens of tests using only a single drop of blood. It was sleek and ridiculously fast, designed by Apple product engineers, and was set to be installed all around the country, from Walgreens to prestigious research hospitals. Expected to revolutionize the healthcare industry, the company raised over \$945 million in capital and was valued at over \$10 billion. Holmes was its proud founder and CEO, a young, beautiful Stanford dropout, broadcast around the world as a brilliant entrepreneur.

There was only one problem: *there was no machine*. What Theranos pitched simply couldn’t be done. Suddenly, Holmes’s black turtlenecks and suspiciously deep voice became clear: she was dressing up as Steve Jobs, but she had no revolutionary Macintosh. Theranos deceived thousands of patients and doctors, pharmaceutical companies, and investors, and as of this writing (2021), her criminal trial is ongoing.

Holmes’s success speaks to the incredible power of what marketing strategists call “building your brand.”

Christians struggle with the opposite problem: we have an incredible “product,” but we’ve got a bit of a branding issue. Gandhi famously said, “I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” The word “Christian” seems to evoke many negative reactions in our culture. If Christians were removed from the scene, would our non-believing neighbors miss us? If not, does this bother you?

Author Anne Rice said, “For those who care, and I understand if you don’t: Today I quit being a Christian. I’m out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being ‘Christian’ or to being part of Christianity. It’s simply impossible for me to ‘belong’ to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I’ve tried. I’ve failed. I’m an outsider. My conscience will allow

nothing else.”¹³⁰ You may not realize it, but you are always a witness for the Lord. This is not really voluntary. What you have to choose is whether you will be a good witness for Jesus, or a bad one, because people will always be watching you. Jesus said in Acts 1:8, “...you will be my witnesses,” He did not say you “should” be, or you can “choose” to be. He said you “will” be. Your only choice is what type of witness you will be. Pastor Scott Sauls writes, “In the eyes of a watching world, our lives are often perceived as being more lackluster than compelling, more contentious than kind, more self-centered than servant-like, more fickle than faithful, more materialistic than generous, more proud than humble.”¹³¹ This reputation is a massive obstacle, and we ought to be fighting it tirelessly.

This was not the reputation Christians developed in the early days of the church. The church historian Pontianus recounts how Christians ensured that “good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.” Our witness was so strong that even the pagan Emperor Julian spoke of how “the Galileans” would care for even non-Christian sick people.¹³² While everyone else ran away from the proverbial lepers, the Christians ran toward them. The watching world was stunned by the one thing Jesus said would be His mark – our love for one another (John 13:35).

Discussion:

If you asked friends or neighbors, what do you think they would say is the reputation of most Christians today?

Jesus spoke of His followers using two metaphors: Salt and Light.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matt 5:13-16, NIV).

Salt

In Jesus’ time, salt was very valuable. In fact, part of the Roman soldier’s pay was given to him in salt. It was called his “*salarium*.” That’s where we get our word “salary” from. Why did they find salt so valuable? There were two primary uses: the first is still its use today, as crucial seasoning that is the backbone of most every dish. When used in the right amount, it merely draws out the flavor of whatever it seasons. It’s what makes food so *good*. Salt

¹³⁰ Citation taken from her Facebook page. July 28, 2010.

¹³¹ Scott Sauls, *Irresistible Faith*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019). xx

¹³² For more examples, see Rodney Stark. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1997).

certainly doesn't struggle with a branding problem. Take the marketing slogan for Lay's potato chips: "*Bet you can't eat just one.*"

It's the appetizing quality of salt which led Paul to say, **"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone"** (Col 4:6, NIV). Your speech should be seasoned in such a way that it creates a thirst to hear more about Jesus. We ought to speak in such a way about Christ that people want to know *more* about Him after we talk to them, not wish we wouldn't "talk about that religious stuff." At times I see believers speak in a condescending way toward unbelievers, but an attitude of superiority is not only distasteful, it's *disobedient*. We have to remember that we are saved by grace and are responsible to be "merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 1:22). We're no better than those whom we're sharing with. As C.S. Lewis said, we are "beggars telling other beggars where to find bread."

The second important quality of salt is that salt *preserves*. Back in the first century, if they didn't rub salt into their foods, particularly their meats, they would decay and rot. We don't need salt to do that anymore, thanks to that wonderful invention called a refrigerator.

As followers of Jesus, we are salt. Without us, things in the culture will decay, rot, and fall apart. On a macro level, the followers of Jesus are called to preserve the truth in our culture and influence it for good. On a micro

level, we are called to have a preservative impact on those around us individually.

In today's context, there is not only indifference towards the Gospel — there's open hostility. As our culture gets more and more cold towards Christianity, it feels "draftier" to let people know what we believe, especially given our "reputation problem." It's more intimidating, but before you lose heart, let me just remind you of when and where Christianity began and spread 2,000 years ago. The pagan Roman empire was in power. The culture was very hostile toward believers, and being a Christian might even cost you your life. Yet it was in this very context that Christianity began and grew very rapidly. How did that happen? Larry Hurtado wrote a book called, "Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?"¹³³ In it, he described two key reasons.

First, Christianity spread through **individual conversations**. There were no Billy Graham crusades, no big events, no big celebrity speakers; no one was visiting church trunk-or-treats in the community. It all happened through individual conversation, which took courage and boldness to share. This is difficult especially if we are afraid. But Becky Pippert writes in her book, "Out of the Salt Shaker," the reason why we're so afraid is our confidence is in the wrong place.¹³⁴ In other words, we don't believe God is going to come through for us in those moments, and we will be hanging out there alone. We must believe, as the first Christians did, that God will be "with us." (Matt 28:18-20) In the age of social media, an honest, in-person conversation with

¹³³ Larry Hurtado. *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette Univ Pr, 2016).

¹³⁴ For a more thorough treatment. Becky Pippert. *Out of the Salt Shaker* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 1999).

someone will more often than not have more impact than a televangelist sermon.

The second manner in which the good news was spread was through **the apparent goodness in the Christians**. They showed virtue, humility, consistency, and love. There was something about the lives of the Christians that was compelling. The apostle Paul said of the church at Rome, “Your obedience is known to all” (Rom 16:19, ESV). Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones said, “the glory of the gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it.”

The only way for salt to lose its saltiness is through dilution or contamination. In the first century, salt could be mixed together with dirt, sand, and other minerals, but it was only good to be thrown out into the streets to fill in the pot holes to be trampled by men.

How can we be salt? Becky Pippert says our model here is Jesus Christ in His incarnation, which was both “radically identified” and “radically different.”¹³⁵

Consider how being salt influences you in many areas, such as in the *workplace*. As a believer, you ought to outwork them all. The Scriptures teach us that hard work is good (Col 3:23, 1 Thess 4:11-12, Eccl 9:10). Doing a good job for an unworthy employer is doing service to God (1 Pet 2:19). Brother Lawrence taught that we can do even small tasks, like the dishes, for the glory of God.¹³⁶ A prime example of this is when President John F. Kennedy visited the NASA space center, he asked the custodian,

“What are you doing?” and the janitor replied, “I’m helping to put a man on the moon.”¹³⁷ Working hard can be glorifying to God. The grace of God is not an excuse for laziness or being slack in our discipline. There is no job that cannot be done with a great sense of purpose and dignity.

Consider how being salt influences your *generosity*. We are told that pure religion is about looking after those who are the most vulnerable (Js 1:27). *How will you utilize your treasure for the glory of God? Do you find joy in giving?* Generosity is an incredible opportunity not only to serve God, but to improve our “branding problem.” Being salt would mean being radically generous. Nikolas Kristoff, a skeptic who worked for the New York Times, made some outstanding observations about Christians while reporting on poverty, disease, and oppression: “*Evangelicals are disproportionately likely to donate 10 percent of their incomes to charities, mostly church-related. More important, go to the front lines, at home or abroad, in the battles against hunger, malaria, prison rape, obstetric fistula, human trafficking or genocide, and some of the bravest people you meet are evangelical Christians (or conservative Catholics, similar in many ways) who truly live their faith. I’m not particularly religious myself, but I stand in awe of those I’ve seen risking their lives in this way — and it sickens me to see that faith mocked at New York cocktail parties.*”¹³⁸

We are salt. As followers of Jesus we need to take up this mantle and live out our faith

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Brother Lawrence. *Practicing the Presence of God*. Reprint. (Connecticut: Martino Fine Books, 2016).

¹³⁷ Scott Sauls, *Irresistible Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019), 152.

¹³⁸ Nicholas Kristof, “Evangelicals Without Blowhards.” New York Times. July 30, 2011.

publicly. That doesn't mean we want to be "holier than thou," judgmental, or isolated — it just means we want our flavor to be evident to all. Spiritual formation means we want to be salt, set apart as a preserving influential force to those God has placed around us.

Light

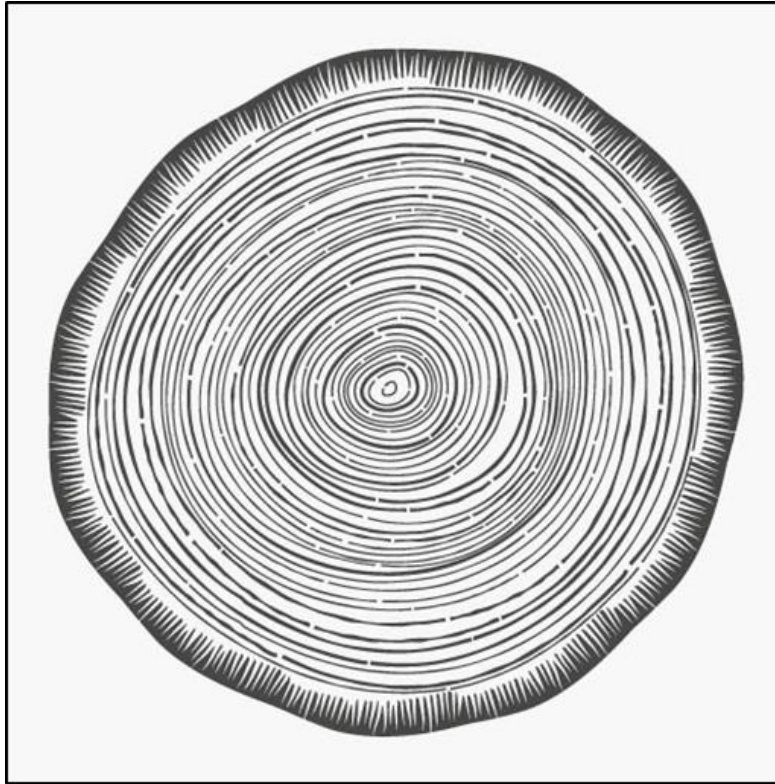
If salt induces an appetite and preserves, what does **light** do? Answer: *Light shows the way*. Can a lit candle choose not to emanate a soft glow? Spiritually-formed followers of Christ can't help but contribute positively everywhere they live, work, and play. This world can be a dark place. Jesus commands us to bring the light; he said, "I am the light of the world" (Jn 8:12), and we as His followers are to be reflectors of that glorious flame.

In Jesus' day, they would build cities on top of hills. Most construction was made out of stone which would reflect the moonlight. When night fell and people had their oil lamps burning, you could see the light from a city from miles and miles away. They did this on purpose. The translation of Matthew 5 is not as clear as I wish it was, because the idea here is that the city has been "placed" or "set" on a hill. This means Jesus has strategically *placed* you where you are. You may feel like you're the only Christian in your school, workplace, or neighborhood —

you are not where you are by accident! Why? You are called to be a light. The apostle Paul writes about his desire for you, **"that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life"** (Phil 2:15-16, NIV).

You don't light a candle and then cover it up under a bowl, do you? That would defeat the purpose, wouldn't it? I imagine myself to be a glass globe on a light pole. The Holy Spirit is the light within that I should allow to shine outward on others. However, I sometime prevent this light shining outward by my sin, which causes the inside of my glass globe to become dirty with the soot of my sin. I need to be a really good repentor (1 Jn 1:9) in order to keep the inside of my globe clean so Jesus can shine out.

You don't shine just any kind of light: each one of us has our own, unique glow. One of the things that makes your light important is the **difficulties** you've been through. As you look at a tree on the inside and count the rings, you can often tell which years were more difficult than others, you can see evidence of adversity; such as a freeze, a dry season, or a forest fire. These years call for endurance and build resilience.



You've got wounds and have had terrible experiences. God used those disappointments to grow you in that when they came you saw what you loved. You learned what you really believed and where you really found satisfaction. Whatever that was, when that was taken away from you, you learned that God is a greater treasure and God is a greater source of life. Your roots now sink down to His everlasting streams of water. As a result, there are some hands that only you can hold, some bedsides that only you can sit at, some issues only you can understand. You are unique. You can reach people that no one else can. To those particular darknesses that only your heart knows, you must boldly bring your light. Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others, that they might see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven" (Matt 5:16 NIV). Notice the word "see" and

the words "good deeds." What he's saying is this – I want you to live your life in such a way that when people see how you live, they don't say, "Oh he's such a nice guy" or "Oh she's such a sweet lady." No, it's living in such a way that they say "Wait a minute – who lives like that? They are the kindest, most generous people I know. They keep bringing us food, they keep giving me second chances, they take children into their home, their lives are just extraordinary ... who does that and why?" Jesus says, "I want you to live this way so that your light outshines everybody else and people say, "What is up with you?" and then, when it's appropriate, you connect the dots for them so that they give credit not to you, but to your Father in heaven. Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how

right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.”¹³⁹

Discussion:

Where have you had the opportunity to be “salt” and light”? If time permits, do the exercise at the end of this chapter and spend a moment praying for these opportunities.

Here’s the sad thing, some people never get this sense of calling. My daughter Alex and I like to discuss different strategies of how to compile an argument from her time on the debate team. One of the crucial tenets of making a logical argument is that the opposite of a thing is the absence of it: meaning that the opposite of “love” is not “hate,” it’s “no love” (it could very well be indifference); the opposite of “cold” is not “hot,” it’s “not cold” (it could very well be lukewarm). This means that the opposite of “light” is not “dark,” it’s “no light.” Some Christians are “no-light” Christians. They go to church, tithe, sing hymns, read the scriptures, and are just happy knowing

they’ll go to Heaven when they die. Not so with the early church. Those first century Christians were **salt**: their absence was sorely felt, they preserved ideals of virtue and dignity in even the worst of times. They were **light**: they could not help but radiate the love of Christ. They would rescue abandoned children, they would give generously, and they would care for the sick. When the plague broke out and everybody left town, the Christians *stayed*. They were not afraid to live for Christ, and when the culture turned against them, they weren’t afraid to die for Christ. They lived their lives in such a way that the pagan community around them connected the dots, and as a result, they turned their culture “upside down.” (Acts 17:6, NKJV)

The reason you are a Christian today is because someone was salt and light for you. God strategically placed someone next to you, didn’t He? Now they may not have known that, they didn’t think of themselves in that way, but that’s exactly what they were. Friends, God wants to do the same thing through you for others.

Be Salt and Light (and make an impact).

¹³⁹ Madeline L’Engle. *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*. (Albany Press, CA: North Point Press, 1995), 122.



Scripture Memory Verse

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

(Matt 5:13-16, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. How does being “salt” or “light” resonate with you in your specific life context today?

Recommended Resources

Becky Pippert. *Still Salt* (Epsom, Surrey, England: The Good Book Company, 2020).

Larry Hurtado. *Why On Earth Did Anyone Become A Christian In The First 3 Centuries?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette Univ Pr, 2016).

Scott Sauls, *Irresistible Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019).

Spiritual Formation Exercise

This exercise is designed to get you thinking about who has God strategically placed around you. Sit down and write out the names in your network of influence. List those you know in four different categories: family, friends, neighborhood, and work/school/other. After this, begin to categorize people who may be spiritually curious and brainstorm ideas about who you can reach out to and how you may do so. Spend some time in prayer and ask God, “Lord, if You would be willing to use me in some way by what I say or what I do to impact them for You, I’m in.”

FAMILY	FRIENDS
NEIGHBORHOOD	WORK / SCHOOL / OTHER

“Rule 12” My Sermon Notes



Rule # 12: Share the Gospel ***(it's This World's Only Hope.)***

A famous quote holds that “to plant a tree is to believe in tomorrow.” Though trees are rooted in one place, they have an incredible ability to grow into a large forest far beyond themselves, to invest in places they will never see. I am always amazed at the creativity of our Lord in how He achieves His purposes for creation: maple trees produce winged seeds known as “helicopters,” “whirlers,” “twisters,” or “whirligigs” that can travel great distances. Oftentimes, trees produce a seed contained in the pit of a delicious fruit that is not for the tree itself, but whatever creature eats of it and drops the seed elsewhere. Trees are experts at spreading out, multiplying, and giving of themselves. God made trees to reproduce themselves. The apostle Paul is excited about the spread of the gospel seed in the first century when he writes this:

“In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace” (Col 1:6, NIV).

We have been given a mission. After Jesus was raised from the dead, He gathered His disciples and said these words right before His ascension:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20, NIV).

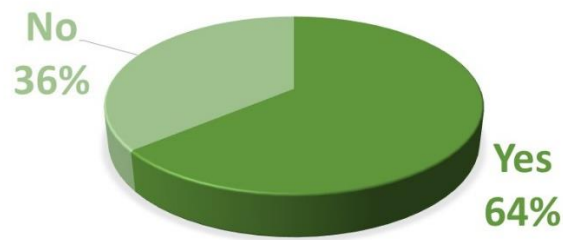
This is the beginning of the revolution. We are to teach all nations to obey Christ. Dallas Willard states that the Great Commission is about Jesus’ desire to “establish beachheads of his person, word, and power in the midst of a failing and futile humanity.”¹⁴⁰

However, according to a recent study by the Barna Group, a growing number of Christians *don’t* see sharing the Good News as their personal responsibility. Compared to 25 years ago when 89% of Christians said it was their responsibility, that percentage has dropped to 64%, to about two-thirds of us.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002) 15.

¹⁴¹ For further research, visit <https://www.barna.com/research/sharing-faith-increasingly-optional-christians/>.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY TO EVANGELIZE?



That is about a 25-point drop. Are you part of the 64% who still think this is your responsibility? Or are you part of the 36% who do not? If you're part of the 36%, you're missing out on tremendous joy and purpose.

Discussion:

Be honest. What gets in the way for you when it comes to evangelism?

It's a good enough reason that Christ, the captain of our souls, the author of our faith, our Creator and Redeemer commanded us to go, but it is also a great privilege to lead someone back home to God.

Do you remember the 1980's campaign to put pictures of missing children on the back of milk cartons? Usually there were two pictures, some identifying information, and a hotline number. The caption beneath would read: "Have you seen us?" When the campaign first began it was hard to look away from the photos. Over time, though, we'd stop even noticing the pictures and throw the carton away. We'd forget about them because they weren't kids we knew, and because we saw those photos every day until they became another meaningless fixture of lunchtime. In the case of the "missing children" of our world, God is their Father who cannot forget, and we can't

afford to grow numb to their plight. Many around us are spiritually lost and are held captive by the enemy. They need to be brought back home. Ours is the privilege of going out into the forest with a lantern to bring the weary, lost traveler to be reunited with his God.

My guess is that most folks reading this fall in the 64%, but though there's a "readiness," there's some hesitations with regards to the "willingness." The hesitations fall into two big categories: fear, and not knowing how to do it successfully.

When you speak to unbelievers about Christ, you can run into all kinds of problems. Some people don't seem interested in spiritual things, and every time you step toward the subject, they step away. With others, not more than five minutes into the conversation they say, *"Now wait a minute, my neighbor is a Christian, and the only time they live like it is for 2 hours on Sunday mornings. So if that's Christianity, I don't want any part of it."* Still other times it becomes very obvious that whoever you are sharing with is just trying to make a fool out of you. So just as they try to make a fool out of you, you try to make a fool out of them by trying to prove to them that your mind is quicker than theirs and your tongue is even sharper. As they try to ask you questions you can't answer, you try to ask them

questions they can't answer. Pretty soon you realize you have really not had a discussion about Christ – you've had a full-fledged argument that requires some apologies. With experiences like that, it's only a matter of time when, out of desperation and disgust, you throw your hands up in the air and say, "How in the world am I supposed to share my faith and reach the lost?" Let's start with a definition:

What is Evangelism?

Sometimes the word "evangelism" brings up some confusing connotations, or brings to mind a practice best left to the professionals on television with the big hair and a white suit. Other people envision a canned approach, a memorized speech that you impose on some poor victim until it feels like you beat the person over the head with the Bible. Some people envision megaphones in the street or vague billboards on the interstate. As none of these seem like the right fit, most Christians try the "I'll just be friendly and hope they catch on" approach. Unfortunately, that's vague and unclear and doesn't work well either. There's nothing wrong with being friendly – it just falls short of evangelism. That's not the way the apostle Paul or the early church showed us how to do it. Author Mack Stiles states that Evangelism is "teaching the gospel with the aim to persuade."¹⁴²

The best teachers have two essential qualities: being **knowledgeable** and being **relational**.

Be Knowledgeable

One of the things we need to know is our own context. We live in central New Jersey,

and spirituality here is fairly complex. Pew Research did a religious landscape study in New Jersey.¹⁴³ This study showed that only 13% of our population would be considered an evangelical protestant (that's pretty low if you compare that to some states in the Bible belt which are close to 45-50%). The other major sections are mainline or Catholic. The next highest is 6% Jewish and then 3% Muslim and 3% Hindu. The "nones" make up 18%. As is the case across the country, we have a growing number of what's called "nones" and "dones." A "**none**" is somebody who has always been either atheistic or agnostic and doesn't acknowledge any kind of deity or supernatural existence. A "**done**" is somebody who used to go to church, or maybe was forced to go, but because of hurt or unbelief is "done" with all that. There's a growing indifference toward religion in our state. Perhaps one of the reasons is that there are almost 300,000 (293,992) millionaire households in New Jersey, which is the largest percentage per capita than any other state. There's "no need" for spirituality when cash is king, and our state is a playground for the wealthy — they can work in a Manhattan corner office, live in a sprawling country estate, ski in the mountains, swim in the ocean at their beach house, or golf at their local country clubs. We know that this lifestyle has its own kind of poverty, and that there are some things that money cannot buy; that's where we can step in and offer a lot of hope. At the same time, New Jersey is also home to some of the most under-resourced, poverty-filled, and dangerous cities in the country, where it's difficult to hold on to faith when life has

¹⁴² Mack Stiles. *Evangelism*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

¹⁴³ Statistics taken from <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/>.

dealt you a wretched hand. We can bring light and life there, too.

Discussion:

Where would you like to become more knowledgeable in evangelism?

Be Relational

When it comes to evangelism, rather than looking to secular marketing techniques or television evangelists, it's best to consider the ultimate example found in Jesus Christ. Consider His interactions with the woman at the well:

“He (Jesus) left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria” (Jn 4:3-4, NIV).

At that time, Jews didn't go *through* Samaria, they went *around* Samaria – on purpose. There was much animosity between these two groups of people. The Jews viewed the Samaritan people as unclean, even though they were descendants of Abraham, because they had intermarried with Gentiles and as a result were racially and religiously mixed. Meanwhile, the Samaritans opposed the repatriation of their lands to the Jewish people who had returned to the Northern Kingdom after years to rebuild Jerusalem. What's so interesting about this story is that Jesus, a Jew, goes right *through* Samaria – on purpose.

This leads us to draw out a principle: *You need to go out of your way to make social contact with people outside your faith.* It's so important for you as a Christian to intentionally maintain social contact with unbelievers. Often we go to church or Bible study and mostly hang out with Christian friends. These groups of like-minded

believers are a gift, but if we're not careful, we can inadvertently isolate ourselves from unbelievers altogether. This is a good lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic: social distancing with only those close to us, and limiting interaction with those outside our circle, works wonderfully as a quarantine measure. Staying only among our “circle” of believers will quite effectively quarantine the spread of the Gospel.

Some of us come from church backgrounds where we were told that it's better to keep a safe distance away from non-Christians altogether. That's not necessary, or right, or conducive to good friendships and opportunities to share the Word. The story continues:

“So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, ‘Will you give me a drink?’” (Jn 4:5-7, NIV)

Notice how Jesus engages in a normal conversation about water. This is an important principle for us to apply as well if we want to reach out: *You must ask questions. You must value them as another person, who is worth getting to know.* Jesus was a great asker of questions. What do you talk about? Let me suggest 3 areas. Ask about: 1) their job, 2) their family, and 3) their background. Begin by listening, not talking. **The flow of the conversation must be natural, not forced.** This may take time. Don't rush. Be sensitive to the Spirit's leading.

One of my favorite movies is the theologically astute film, *Shrek*. There's a scene in that movie where Shrek, an ogre played by Mike Myers, is talking to Donkey, played by Eddie Murphy. Their conversation is relevant to our topic. (*Note – if reading as a group, choose two individuals for reading this dialogue*).

Shrek: “For your information, there's a lot more to ogres than people think.”

Donkey: “Example?”

Shrek: “Example? OK – ogres are like onions.”

Donkey: “They stink?”

Shrek: “No”

Donkey: “They make you cry?”

Shrek: “No!”

Donkey: “Oh, you leave 'em out in the sun, they get all brown, start sproutin' little white hairs...”

Shrek: “No! Layers. Onions have layers, ogres have layers. Ogres are like onions. They both have layers.”

What's true with ogres and onions is true with people: they have layers, and it takes time to peel back those layers. On the outside layer, there are general interests, inside that there are more specific interests, inside that are their cares, concerns and fears, and then way down inside there are their spiritually-held beliefs. How do you peel back these layers? With time. Take a look at the passage:

“The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?’ (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)” (Jn 4:9, NIV)

Just asking her for a drink may not sound like that big of a deal to you and me, but if you were in their culture, you wouldn't have missed the significance of this. First, it would have been very odd for a man to speak directly to a woman he wasn't related to and it was even stranger that a Jewish man would talk to a Samaritan woman, who he disdained as beneath him. In this moment Jesus is reaching across almost every significant social barrier that was put up: he crosses the racial barrier, the cultural barrier, the gender barrier, and He even crosses the moral barrier because their society said He shouldn't have anything to do with her. Jesus builds a bridge anyway. We must learn to do the same. Gabe Lyons says it this way: “Followers of Christ in a pluralistic society must be willing and able to engage those they disagree with in constructive conversations.”¹⁴⁴

Building a bridge toward others for the purpose of sharing the gospel is called **contextualization**. To put it simply, contextualization is building a bridge between the truth of God and your specific audience. It means adapting the style, the language, and the communication of the gospel message to fit the audience we are trying to reach without compromising on its truth. To go about this successfully, you need to first temporarily adopt the worldview of the person you're trying to reach to understand where they are coming from. This is what the apostle Paul modeled

¹⁴⁴ Gabe Lyons. *The Next Christians: Seven Ways You Can Live the Gospel and Restore the World* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 2012), 170.

every other cistern is broken. Take a look at her response:

“The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.’” (Jn 4:15, NIV).

She is clearly not following Him; she is not thinking about her spiritual thirst at all. So Jesus makes an adjustment and decides to bring up something in her life that gets her thinking about spiritual thirst:

“Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.’” (Jn 4:16-18, NIV).

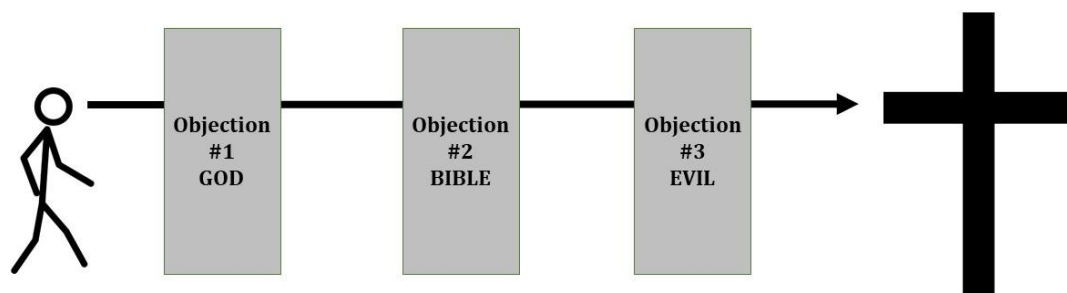
Now Jesus has her undivided attention. Sometimes you hear in evangelism that you should never draw attention to anyone’s sin because that might make them uncomfortable or “make things awkward.” Rather than avoid it, in His divine knowledge, Jesus was able to put His finger directly on the thing she had been using to try to satisfy her spiritual thirst: other men.

This was the reason this woman was an outcast even among her own people. This is why she was gathering heavy pails of water in the horrendous heat of high noon, where no one would trouble her, in order to avoid dealing with this stigma. But Jesus brings it to her attention:

“‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.’” (Jn 4:19-20, NIV).

When you turn the conversation from the secular to the spiritual, sometimes people begin to think of the questions they have and they bring those questions to you. This leads us to another principle about being **knowledgeable**: *You need to be prepared for questions and objections.* For some of us, this can be intimidating, but remember our charge: **“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15, NIV).**

There are things in people’s minds that are standing in the way of seeing the Gospel. They may have objections about God, or the Bible, or the problem of evil.



Be prepared to answer questions and objections with gentleness and respect. Do not get into an argument. There are many good resources in the field of apologetics to become more knowledgeable.¹⁴⁵ Why do people have questions and objections? One reason is they have never had anyone explain it to them, and they genuinely wonder. Even Christians can struggle with these questions. Alternatively, they could be putting up what is commonly known as a “smokescreen.” That might be what’s going on in John 4. After Jesus brought up her living arrangement, she conveniently changes the subject. She may be throwing out an intellectual red herring. Watch how Jesus handles her question:

“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’” (Jn 4:21-24, NIV).

She then responds: **“The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he.’” (Jn 4:25-26, NIV).**

Wouldn’t you have loved to be a fly on the wall here? Jesus says “I am the Messiah the prophets spoke about. I am the One you’ve been waiting for. You can find the answer to all your spiritual thirst right here, not with other men, but with Me. That’s why I came, to offer you living water, and if you drink the water I give you then you will never thirst again.”

This Samaritan woman found a relationship with Jesus that day. She found forgiveness for all her sins, she found someone to remove all her shame, and as she trusted Christ, he forgot about her earthly thirst, dropped her water jar, and went back home to tell everyone what had happened. Jesus gave her something to quench her thirst forever, a restored relationship with God.

Wherever you go in your spiritual conversations, you’ve got to get to Jesus. Get them to deal with the person of Jesus. Jesus is what their soul is really thirsty for.

“The trees of the Lord are well watered,” (Ps 104:16, NIV)

Can you think of someone who is in your life who is spiritually parched? There’s an old prayer of an evangelist that you can pray today:

*“Lay some soul upon my heart,
Love that soul through me;
May I humbly do my part,
To lead that soul to Thee.”*

Share the Gospel (it’s this world’s only hope).

¹⁴⁵ For example, see Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).



Scripture Memory Verse

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

(1 Cor 1:6-7, ESV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. What emotional feelings are associated with evangelism? Why?
3. How did you first hear about the gospel? Have you ever taken the time to thank the person who shared with you? Consider expressing gratitude to them.

Recommended Resources

Darrel Bock. *Cultural Intelligence: Living for God in a Divided, Pluralistic World* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2020)

Mack Stiles. *Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

Mary Schaller and John Crilly. *The Nine Arts of Spiritual Conversations* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016).

Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

Rico Tice. *Honest Evangelism: How to talk about Jesus even when it's tough* (Epsom Surrey, England, The Good Book Co., 2015).

Timothy Keller. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (U.K.: Penguin Books, 2008).

Spiritual Formation Exercise

Step 1: Prayerfully consider one person in your life who is not yet a Christian and write their name here.

Step 2: Place them on this scale. “The Engel Scale” originates with James F Engel, from the book *What’s gone wrong with the harvest?*, published by Zondervan in 1975. The insight into evangelism that is generally drawn from the Engel scale is that all people go on a journey or process on their way to conversion and then on into discipleship. Our job in witnessing is not to bring them all the way up the scale, but rather to move them to the next level.

Circle the number where they are on this scale:

Engel Scale

- 10 No God framework**
- 9 Experience of emptiness**
- 8 Vague awareness of Christianity**
- 7 Interest in Christianity**
- 6 Awareness of the Gospel**
- 5 Positive attitudes to the Gospel**
- 4 Experience of Christian love**
- 3 Aware of personal need**
- 2 Grasp of implications of the Gospel**
- 1 Challenge to respond personally**
- 0 Repentance and faith**
- +1 Evaluation of the decision**
- +2 Learning the basics of the Christian life**
- +3 Functioning member of local Church**
- +4 Continuing growth in character, lifestyle and service**
- +5 Effective sharing of faith and life**

Step 3: Commit to increase your knowledge. What is one area in which you'd like to become more **knowledgeable**? What is a resource (book, video, course) you could engage with about this topic? (Consider the recommendations on the previous page).

My Knowledgeable Goal: _____

Step 4: Commit to pursue them. What is one next step you could take to pursue this person **relationally**?

My Relational Goal: _____

Step 5: Commit to pray.

Pray for this person now for an opportunity to share with them. Journal your prayer in this space below:

My Sermon Notes



Conclusion: Fix your eyes on Jesus *(Lest you be Blinded by Yourself.)*

Let us end our journey together at the very beginning.

Paradise slipped through the fingers of the first man and woman when they ate of one Tree and lost all of the abundance of the garden. In shame, they stripped a fig tree naked to cover their own awful nakedness revealed by the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That day, they could no longer walk amongst the willows in friendship with the almighty God; that day, they were forbidden to eat of the Tree of Life.

Even as they left Eden, the Lord in His goodness promised the woman she would bear a seed – a seed who would one day rise up to crush the head of the serpent – a seed that would grow into a new Tree of Life (Gen 3:15). This seed tumbles down through generations as creation lies in wait for its Messiah.

All the while, the Lord reminds His people of His promise, of the life-giving seed that lies dormant in the line of David. On that great ark, buoyed by timber, Noah receives an olive branch which promises safety and dry ground (Gen 8:11). The Lord appears to Abraham where he pitched his tent under the great oaks of Mamre to tell him that he and

Sarah will bear a son (Gen 18:10). A barefoot Moses beholds the holiness of God in a burning bush and receives the charge to bring his people out of slavery (Exodus 3:2-10). The prophets herald the coming of the seed as Isaiah promises that “a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him” (Isa 11:1-2, NIV).

At last, when Messiah comes, the only physical description we have of him is “like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground” (Isa 53:2, NIV). Jesus Christ comes as the son of David and the true and greater Israel – the fig tree (Hos 9:10), the olive tree (Rom 11:17-21) and the choicest vine (Isa 5:1-2). His perfect life and ministry was the epitome of fruitfulness.

Then, God's good creation becomes an instrument of evil, and the Son is crucified on a Tree of Death. The carpenter from Nazareth, who had spent most of his life working with those same wood and nails, is slain with own craft. Jesus escapes death at the hands of those who would stone him, throw him from a cliff, and stab him, only to be killed by the only method which was

proclaimed to be a curse – hanging from a tree (Deut 21:23).

Three days later, Mary Magdalene stumbles, wracked with grief, to the tomb to find it empty. She sees the risen King and, in her confusion, asks if He is the gardener (John 20:14-16). One imagines Heaven smiling. Yes – the true and better gardener has come to take the place of Adam as keeper of Creation, to give us access once again to the Tree of Life.

The blood He spilled on that tree soaked into the ground and brought forth an abundance of life that which the world has never seen. We are the result of His incredible sacrifice, and we are to be trees planted by streams of water (Psalm 1:3). Gentiles were “grafted in” to the “nourishing root” (Rom. 11:17) and became members of God’s holy family tree.

The story of the Tree is not yet complete – there is an abundance yet to come. Just as it was in the beginning, in Revelation 22 – the very last chapter of the Word – a new Tree of Life is promised in the New Jerusalem, where streams flow from the river of life, there is an end to every curse, and the Lamb sits on the throne, where he proclaims himself “the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Rev 22:16).

Does He drive you to worship?

As we conclude this journey together in pursuing spiritual formation, we must be careful about one final item: again and again, we must remind ourselves of the person and story of Christ, so that we focus on the giver, not the gifts.

Ironically, even in pursuing maturity, we can be hindered by wanting so badly to be “like” Jesus that we are still focused inward, on ourselves. Dallas Willard writes, “The external manifestation of Christlikeness is not the focus of Christian spiritual formation. When outward forms or behaviors are made the main emphasis, the process will be defeated, falling into deadening legalisms.”¹⁴⁶ Therefore, if we are to become like Jesus, and our focus is not about “being like Jesus,” then what is our focus? Here is the answer:

Do not focus on being like Jesus.

Focus on being with Jesus.

Set your mind on things above where Christ is (Col 3:1-2). Discipline yourself to concentrate on what is good, true, and right (Phil 4:8). Kevin DeYoung writes, “We must always remember that in seeking after holiness we are not so much seeking after a thing as we are seeking a person.”¹⁴⁷ Listen to these words from the apostle Paul:

“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18, NIV).

Notice there are two “glories” being referred to here. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright suggests that the first glory refers to the Source of the glory, who is the Lord. This glory comes “from” God. The second glory then refers to the resultant glory which is

¹⁴⁶ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002).

¹⁴⁷ Kevin DeYoung. *The Hole in our Holiness*. (Minneapolis: Crossway, 2014), 123.

thereby possessed by believers.¹⁴⁸ The Holy Spirit is a promise given to the recipients of the new covenant. This supernatural work within the believer causes a transformation (or “circumcision”) of the heart. Paul recognizes this work within those at Corinth and describes its glory as a reflection of the very glory of God.

The reason God is so adamant against the sin of idolatry is not just that idols are false, but that we are as human beings by nature creatures of imitation. We become like that which we worship. The psalmist said it this way:

“Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them.” (Ps 115:4-8, NIV)

Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne (1813–1843) left us with this letter, which contains an oft-quoted maxim:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9) Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief! Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in his beams. Feel his all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in his almighty arms...Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and

excellency of Christ and all that is in Him. Let the Holy Spirit fill every chamber of your heart; and so there will be no room for folly, or the world, or Satan, or the flesh.”¹⁴⁹

For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. When Peter focused his attention on Jesus, he was able to accomplish the supernatural – to walk on water (Matt 14:22-33). As long as he kept his eyes fixed on Jesus, as long as he was walking in faith on His promised word, toward the Savior, he walked on water. As soon as he turned his attention toward the wind and the waves, he began to sink. When you walk by faith, where will you fix your eyes? Here’s what Hebrews 12 says we should do:

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:1-2, NIV).

The biblical recipe for spiritual formation is not “just try harder.” We must go deeper in the human will into what theologians call “the affections.” The root of sin is a disordered love inside of our hearts. We need something we love more than our sin. The only way to break a desire in the soul is to show your soul a new and greater desire. This is what theologians call “the expulsive power of a new affection.”¹⁵⁰

Our new affection is for the person of Jesus Christ. Focus your attention on Him, the most important seed that was ever sown. Jesus said, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24, ESV).** He laid His life down and was cursed for you.

¹⁴⁸ N.T. Wright. *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 188.

¹⁴⁹ *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne* (Edinburgh, 1894), 293.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Chalmers. *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, Reprint. (Louisville: GLH Publishing, 2014).

He gave up His life to be planted in the ground and die for you, being cursed and hung on a tree (Gal 3:13, citing Deut 21:23). He opened the way to the tree of life for you (Rev 22:2).

Focus on Him.

“Look unto Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22, NKJV).

Behold Him.

See all of His virtues and perfections in perfect alignment. He is always gentle, but not soft. He is bold, but not overbearing. He is full of grace and truth. The reason why you fall into temptation is that, just like Paul, you are no longer transfixed by the beauty of Jesus Christ. You don’t see that He’s so much better than whatever it is that’s tempting you. You sacrifice true beauty for a pale imitation. There’s a war going on for your heart, between your flesh and the Spirit of the living God. The Holy Spirit who lives inside of you desires Jesus. The Spirit loves Jesus. The Spirit yearns for Him and adores Him. The Spirit lives to

testify about Jesus (Jn 15:26) and to glorify Jesus (Jn 16:14). Therefore, the Spirit is always saying to you, “Look at Him!” “Isn’t He beautiful?” “Isn’t He lovely?”

Focus on Him. Meditate on Him until your heart focuses on Him more than anything else your heart desires in its flesh. The only way to break the grip of sin on your heart is to show it something more beautiful. Just saying “no” won’t get you there. You must say “yes” to Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of your faith, the Vine, the better gardener, the giver of the Tree of Life. Fixing your eyes on Jesus is the most important key to your spiritual formation journey. I invite you, as the old hymn says:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
look full in His wonderful face,
and the things of earth
will grow strangely dim,
in the light of his glory and grace.*¹⁵¹

Fix Your Eyes on Jesus (Lest you be Blinded by Yourself.)

¹⁵¹ “Turn your eyes upon Jesus.” Written by Helen H. Lemmel written in 1922. Public Domain.



Scripture Memory Verse

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

(Heb 12:1-2, NIV)

For Further Discussion

1. What was your top takeaway from this chapter?
2. Where have you see the principle of imitation at work in the world? How does this specifically relate to spiritual formation?
3. Go back to the spiritual formation assessment at the beginning of this workbook and take the assessment again (use a different colored pen). Share your adjustments with the group.
4. What are your main takeaways from this study on spiritual formation?

Recommended Resources

Dallas Willard and Jan Johnson. *Renovation of the Heart in Daily Practice: Experiments in Spiritual Transformation* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

Dane Ortland, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

Thomas Chalmers. *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* Reprint. (Louisville: GLH Publishing, 2014).

Spiritual Formation Exercise

As a group exercise in bringing closure, discuss with your small group two or three aspects of your group and/or the spiritual formation workbook that have been meaningful to you in your own spiritual life over the course of this study. Discuss appreciation you have for group members and/or the group as a whole and ways in which you will commit to continuing this journey of spiritual formation. Allow each person time to share.

Finish the group time by turning to the table of contents and reading the 12 rules out loud, take turns and go around the room, reading one rule each at a time. close with prayer.



Spiritual Formation Glossary

Accusation: In spiritual warfare, this refers to Satan’s strategy for the believer to bring condemnation. As in a court of law, he comes with a prosecutorial voice having no love, but only with a word of judgment. (Rev 12:10) This tactic is designed to tear down, not to build up, to lay heavy burdens upon and crush his victims, deliberately overlooking God’s remedy of grace.

Activism: In reference to spiritual formation, it is the heresy which places spiritual maturity entirely in the hands of the believer, failing to recognize the passive voice of Scripture, which calls for dependence upon God’s Spirit. (Rom 12:1-2). Activism is born out of our self-righteous pride and will lead only to failure.

Advocate: The legal work of Christ as He intercedes on behalf of believers before the bar of Divine justice. (1 Jn 2:1)

Agape Love: Purposeful, intentional, and self-sacrificial love. This kind of love is not natural or easy, best displayed at the cross. (Rom 5:8)

Antinomianism: Theologically, antinomianism is the belief that there are no moral laws which God expects Christians to obey. The word antinomianism comes from two Greek words, “anti” meaning “against”; and “nomos” meaning “law.” Antinomianism means “against the law.” In an extreme form, it would imply that disobedience to the law actually causes God’s grace to increase and is positive. (See Rom 6:1)

Atonement: The sacrifice for sin made to restore fellowship with God (Lit. “at one”).

Armor of God: The spiritual military equipment the believer needs to wear in order to successfully engage in battle and gain victory over the enemy, the devil.

Boundaries: A psychological term which refers to an interpersonal property line which fences off areas of our lives for the purposes of protection or clarifying responsibility.

Burnout: The progressive loss of energy and purpose leading to lethargy and spiritual or emotional stagnation, sometimes caused by not using one’s primary spiritual gifts.

Celebratory Failure-ism. A defeatist perspective on the Christian life, a way of thinking about disobedience as something worth celebrating because it magnifies God’s grace. (Rom 6:1)

Cessationism: View that the miraculous sign gifts (tongues, miracles, healings, prophecy) ceased with the death of the last apostle and the completion of the New Testament. (See “Hard Cessationism” and “Soft Cessationism” in the chapter on Spiritual Gifts).

Chastity: The intentional turning away from or temporary giving up of sexual intimacy, even from one's husband or wife, to dedicate one's self to God and learn not to be governed by this powerful aspect of life (1 Cor 7:1-5, Matt 19:11-12; 2 Tim 2:22).

Compatibilism: The belief that God's sovereignty and human responsibility are both realities taught in Scripture and finite minds cannot comprehend, so they must be held in tension.

Complex Dichotomy: The doctrinal teaching that humans are made up of two parts: the material and the immaterial; but in this life there is an inseparability about them and a mysterious overlap.

Concatenation: As related to the fruit of the Spirit, this term means "holistic," or "integrated." All aspects of spiritual fruit work together comprehensively. (See chapter on Fruit of the Spirit)

Contextualization. Building a bridge between the truth of God and a specific audience. It means adapting the style, the language, and the communication of the gospel message without compromising on its truth.

Consummation: Our blessed hope is in the coming of Christ who will appear to finish His work of restoration. His work will consummate in Him bringing in His kingdom to reign over all the earth. We live in the sure hope of resurrection. (Rev 21:3-4).

Continuationism: As it relates to spiritual gifts, the view of the continuing validity of all the gifts. (See chapter on Spiritual Gifts)

Confession: The spiritual discipline of admitting our sins and shortcomings to God and others. The Greek word "homo-logeo" means to say the same thing, thus agreeing with God about our sin. (1 Jn 1:9) Sharing with contrition one's sins in thought, word, deed or motive with a trusted brother or sister in Christ for the purpose of growth. (Js 5:16, Prov 28:13)

Consolation: The felt presence of God bringing comfort, peace and joy in the spiritual life, contrasted with desolation.

Conversion: This refers to a spiritual turning point, the moment a person responds with repentance and faith to the invitation of God through the work of Christ and they are given new spiritual life. (See conversion of Saul in Acts 9:1-19)

Coram Deo: Living life with integrity as living before the "face of God."

Crucible: A place or set of circumstances where people or things are subjected to forces that test them and often make them change. (See Rule # 3)

Cruciform: In spiritual formation, this term means that all of life is focused onto and re-shaped by the cross upon which Jesus died for us.

Daily Examen: An ancient technique of prayerful reflection developed by Ignatius of Loyola in his "Spiritual Exercises." (See chapter on Spiritual Disciplines)

Desolation: The felt absence of God in the spiritual life, the "dark night of the soul," the opposite of consolation, used by God as a weaning off the motivation for obedience for the sake of one's own pleasure. (Ps 131:2)

Discipleship: A disciple is a learner (from the Greek word “mathetes”), a follower, a student or a pupil of a teacher or school. Discipleship is the commitment to following the Lord Jesus with every area of our lives.

Election: To “call out” or “choose” (Greek “ekloge” Rom 8:33). The act of God whereby in eternity past He chose those who will be saved.

Expiation: The removal of guilt through atonement.

Eros Love: Romantic love or infatuation. This kind of love fades over time.

Fall: The “fall” refers to the moment in time when sin entered God’s good and perfect world, resulting in brokenness, decay and death for all creation. (Gen 3:23-24; Rom 5:12)

Fasting: Going without food (or something else like media) for a period of intensive prayer — the fast may be complete or partial. (Matt 6:16-18)

Fellowship: Engaging kindred spirits and fellow disciples of Jesus in soul-filled conversation, includes small groups or other mentoring relationships (Acts 2:42)

Flesh: In Paul’s letters, this is a technical term that is used to describe the sin nature. It is the deepest root of self-centeredness and pride which exists in all mankind and leads to all kinds of sins. Its deeds are evident to others and abhorrent to God, and contrary to the Spirit and His fruit. (Gal 5:19-23)

Foreknowledge: To know beforehand, in advance (Rom 8:29, 1 Pet 1:2)

Forgiveness: The cancelling of the debt of sin, can refer to interpersonal relationships or our relationship with God, made possible because of the payment made by Christ on the cross.

Fruit of the Spirit: The nine characteristics developed in the life of the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit by the power of the Gospel. (Gal 5:22-23)

Glorification: The blessed hope of the believer referring to the moment in the future when we will be resurrected and completely and finally free from the presence of sin (Rom 5:9).

Gospel: The “good news” message of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world. (1 Cor 15:1-5).

Idolatry: The worship and trust in anything or anyone other than God as our source of comfort, satisfaction, provision or life, anything more important than God. (see Ex 20:1-3)

Imago Dei: The image of God in humankind. (Gen 1:26-28)

Imperatives: The commands of the Bible wherein God tell us what to do.

Imputation: An accounting term, referring to the doctrine that God reckons the believer’s sin to Christ’s account and Christ’s righteousness to the believer’s account.

Incurvatus in se: A term referring to the self-centeredness of the sin nature. (Lit. “curved in on itself”).

Indicatives: Statements of fact in the Bible which tell us what is true.

Indwelling: The doctrinal teaching that once saved under the new covenant the Holy Spirit takes up permanent residence inside the believer. (Jn 14:16-17; 1 Cor 6:19-20)

Integrity: The state of being which is characterized by good moral principle and character, upright, rooted in the idea of being whole, not compartmentalized.

Justification: To be formally declared righteous, a forensic (legal) term related to the idea of acquittal, or pardon, refers to the divine act whereby God makes humans, who are sinful and therefore worthy of condemnation, acceptable before a God who is holy and righteous by means of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. We are justified by faith alone. (Eph 2:8-9)

Lectio Divina: An ancient method for engaging scripture as a spiritual discipline. (Latin for “divine reading”) This is a slow and prayerful reading of any passage of scripture involving four phases. (1) Reading (2) Meditation (3) Prayer and (4) Contemplation.

Legalism: The attitude that strict obedience to laws or moral codes are a means of gaining divine favor. (Gal 3:24)

Lordship Salvation: The belief that salvation includes faith and repentance whereby the believer commits to give up all known sin and make Christ the “Master” of his/her life.

Johari Window: A framework for understanding self-awareness and understand of others. (See chapter on Love)

Meditation: The spiritual discipline of deep contemplation of God’s Word in a sincere pursuit of knowing what God is saying, in such a restless way that you chew on it day and night until understanding arises. Christian meditation is distinct from the eastern concept of “emptying the mind.” In the Christian worldview meditation is “filling the mind” with the Word of God. (Ps 1:2, Josh 1:8)

Moralism: This refers to obedience through our own will power, when we attempt to use obedience, service, ministry, or just being “good” (or all of these things) to relieve the burden of our spiritual guilt, apart from the power of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel.

Mortification: The putting to death the old, sinful desires by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom 8:13)

Orthodoxy: Correct belief or teaching (Lit. “straight doctrine”) sound doctrine, faithful to the text of Scripture and in accord with historic Christian tradition.

Orthopraxy: Refers to the correct practice or “right action” that corresponds with orthodoxy.

Perseverance of the saints: The doctrinal teaching that once a person is saved by genuine faith in Christ, they cannot lose their salvation and will continue to grow in holiness more and more throughout their lives, they cannot ever be lost. (Phil 1:6; Rom 8:28-39)

Phileo Love: Friendship love, brotherly love which comes naturally and grows over time.

Poverty: The intentional decision to own or do with less for the purpose of pursuing contentment in God alone (Matt 10:9-10; Phil 4:10-13)

Predestination: To determine someone's future in advance by divine decree; (Lit "to decide something beforehand"), refers to God's choosing who will be saved.

Propitiation: The satisfaction of the wrath of God.

Quietism: The error in sanctification which takes no personal responsibility for putting to death the sinful deeds of the flesh, this mindset leads to moral laxity, license, and antinomianism.

Recapitulation: In spiritual formation it refers the reenactment of the gospel, reminding of the self of the original terms of one's acceptance with God in the gospel. The believer must do this every day.

Reconciliation: A movement in a relationship from hostility to harmony (distinct from forgiveness).

Redemption: The payment of a ransom or price, often referred to the purchasing of a slave for the purpose of setting them free.

Regeneration: The doctrinal teaching concerning the initial work of the Holy Spirit in a person being brought from death to life, whereby He awakens or quickens a dead person to life, known also as the new birth, or being "born again." (Jn 3:3) "...the old has gone, the new has come," a "new creation." (2 Cor 5:17)

Repentance: The turning away from sin in godly sorrow, and the changing of your mind (180 degrees) to not pursue sin but to pursue righteousness and the things of God instead. (Js 4:9-10)

Righteousness: A relational term referring to being in good-standing with God, acting in accord with God's moral law; moral perfection.

Rule: An organized spiritual guide, way of life or way of living. (For example, the "rule" of St. Benedict)

Sacrifice: The spiritual discipline of intentional giving up of something of value we have for the good of the kingdom or in order to help a more-needy person. (Mk 14:1-11)

Salvation: The rescuing of people from sin by God to be brought back into a right relationship with Him through Christ.

Sanctification: From the Hebrew and Greek, "to be set apart" from common use, "to be made holy." The nature of sanctification is twofold in that Christians have been made holy through Christ (positional sanctification) and are called to continue to grow into and strive for holiness by cooperating with the indwelling Holy Spirit (progressive sanctification) until they enjoy complete conformity to Christ (Glorification).

Sealing: The doctrinal teaching that true believers are marked by the Holy Spirit as a sign of God's ownership, protection and promise to fully complete His work in their lives in glory. (Eph 1:13-14)

Secrecy: The spiritual discipline of not making our good deeds or qualities known, to let God or others receive attention as we find our sufficiency in God alone (Matt 6:3).

Shema: The Hebrew word often translated to "listen," or "hear," found in the greatest commandment ("Hear O Israel..." (Deut 6:4-9).

Silence: Not speaking in order to quiet our minds and whole self and attend to God's presence. (Luke 5:15-16)

Simul Justus Et Peccador: The doctrine that the Christian is "simultaneously a saint and a sinner," legally declared righteous by faith, yet still the sin nature resides inside of us until this life ends in glorious consummation.

Solitude: Refraining from interacting with other people in order to be alone with God and be found by him. (1 Kgs 19:11-13)

Spirit Baptism: The doctrinal teaching that those with faith in Christ are identified and immersed in the Holy Spirit when they repent and place their trust in Jesus. A one-time, unrepeatable experience. (1 Cor 12:13; Rom 6:1-4)

Spirit-Filling: The doctrinal teaching that as the believer surrenders more and more control of their lives over to the Spirit, they experience more and more victory over their patterns of sin, this is continual and progressive. (Eph 5:18)

Spiritual Disciplines: Activities of the mind and body that bring our souls closer to God and turn our will toward the divine order. (1 Cor 9:27) There are two categories (1) Disciplines of Abstinence – withholding something from ourselves for the purpose of spiritual growth (example, fasting) and (2) Disciplines of Engagement – participating in something, doing more of something for the purpose of spiritual growth (example, prayer).

Spiritual Formation: The process of being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Gift: A supernatural ability given by the Holy Spirit to believers that empowers them to serve the body of Christ with effectiveness. (1 Cor 12; Eph 4; Rom 12)

Storge Love: Familial love. This love is very strong, with ties of blood and deep loyalty.

Story of Redemption: This teaching refers to the grand narrative of scripture whereby we see God acting in human history through His master plan of salvation through Christ in these four phases: (1) Creation, (2) Fall, (3), Redemption, and (4) Consummation.

Submission: Not asserting ourselves in order to come under the authority, wisdom, and power of Jesus Christ as our Lord and King. (Matt 6:19-33, Eph 5:21)

Substitution: The death of Christ "for" the believer, in our place, in our stead. (Mk 10:45)

Surrender: This refers to the act of admitting our utter dependence upon God. It is the relinquishing of control to God.

Temptation: The enticement to do something sinful, in violation of God's law.

Total Depravity: The doctrinal teaching that human nature is corrupt and sinful in every aspect of who we are as a result of the fall. Description of man's inability to please God as his sinful nature is turned selfish and inward. (Gen 6:5; Jer 17:9; Ps 51:5; Eph 2:1-3; Rom 8:7-8)

Union with Christ: The believer's solidarity or association with Christ, by the Holy Spirit and through faith, by virtue of which believers enter into covenant relationship with Him and partake of his saving benefits. (Jn 14:10, Rom 5:12-19)

Vivification: The giving of life, strength, energy and empowerment by the Holy Spirit to pursue godly living. (Jn 6:63)

Worship: Praising God's greatness, goodness, and beauty through words and often music, in private or with others. (Rom 12:1-2, Eph 5:19)



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Praise for “*Cultivating the Christian Life*”

“Want to grow deeper in both the head and the heart? Here’s a tool that will help!”

Dr. Peter Pendell, Pastor in Basking Ridge, New Jersey

“An essential resource for anyone seeking to deepen their relationship with the Lord and develop the spiritual disciplines that are vital to character transformation and the pursuit of holiness. Sound, rudimentary, faithful teaching that will add richness and depth to the spiritual lives of both younger and more seasoned believers alike.”

Allen Ukritnukun, Senior Managing Director, Global Private Equity

“My thoughts on the Cultivating the Christian life workbook are as follows: Like a baby just learning to walk first one must learn how to stand. From there she or he usually walks 3 to 4 feet into the open arms of her or his father who is cheerleading the child all the way saying “You can do it!” Once you’ve learned how to walk in the Spirit of God, He sends you off to run the race that only you can run and this is the reason why he sent you to earth. Stand and walk into your father’s arms every day so that you can go and do His will.”

Rick Splinter, Senior Engineer at Alcon, NJ

“It challenged me to evaluate my strengths and weaknesses. I enjoyed leading the group.”

Sue Turner, Financial and Donor Relations Manager and Small Group Leader, NJ

“Opened my eyes for places of improvement, will be praying to grow in the weaknesses I’ve uncovered.”

MBC Small Group Member

“Renewed my commitment to the Lord and challenged me to live more purposefully, thanks Pastor Dave!”

MBC Small Group Member

Praise for “*Cultivating the Christian Life*” (cont’d)

“I think it’s a wonderful resources for someone at any stage in their faith journey, best to do in community with others”

MBC Small Group Member

“This was an excellent program!”

MBC Small Group Member

“Great program!”

MBC Small Group Member

“Thank you for this awesome study.”

MBC Small Group Member

“This book was incredibly difficult for me, in the sense of having some very convicting messages, I owe a lot to this book to this book and the Pastors, thank you pastor Dave and Alex, I am using it in college all the time.”

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“I enjoyed the book and the lessons which came with it!”

MBC Small Group Member

“Great job Dave, knocked it out of the park!”

MBC Small Group Member

“I felt like it was so much meat, information and challenges that I plan to read through it again.”

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Thank You

for studying *Cultivating the Christian Life* with us
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