



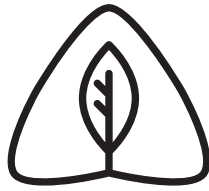
FROM THE *inside* OUT  
JOURNAL

*Thirty Devotions for  
Becoming More Like Jesus*



*A Renovaré resource for spiritual renewal*





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# Contents

- 5    **SESSION ONE**  
What is Spiritual Formation?
  
- 17    **SESSION TWO**  
What is My Picture of God?
  
- 29    **SESSION THREE**  
What is My Picture of Myself?
  
- 41    **SESSION FOUR**  
What is My Picture of the Gospel?
  
- 53    **SESSION FIVE**  
How Do People Change?
  
- 65    **SESSION SIX**  
How Do I Follow Jesus?





SESSION ONE

# What is Spiritual Formation?

# 1.1 The Human “Spirit”

***For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*** MATTHEW 12:34, NKJV

*There is a hidden dimension to every human life . . . The heart, soul, mind, feelings and intentions lie in this area, and these make up the true character of the person: who that person is and what they can be counted on to do.* DALLAS WILLARD



YOU ARE A SPIRITUAL BEING. You have an intangible center that shapes how you see the world and yourself, directs your choices, and guides your actions. This is the human spirit, sometimes called the “will” or the “heart.” It is what makes you *you*. And it is why humans are the only creatures on earth made in the image of God.

Your ability to choose, your capacity to connect with God and others, and your desires all flow from your spirit. Richard Foster said that the human spirit “is the radical source of our life; the stream of actions and influences and contributions we make to our shared, visible world and its history.”

In other words, how your spirit is formed affects everything in your life.



## 1.2 What is Spiritual Formation?

*A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.* MATTHEW 12:35

*We all become a certain kind of person, gain a specific character, and that is the outcome of a process of “spiritual formation.” It is a process that happens to everyone. The most despicable as well as the most admirable of persons have had a spiritual formation. Their spirits or hearts have been formed.* DALLAS WILLARD



WHO YOU ARE ON THE INSIDE IS GRADUALLY SHAPED—FOR BETTER OR WORSE—BY WHO YOU SPEND TIME WITH, WHAT YOU DO, AND WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU. Some things that have a huge impact on your spiritual formation are outside of your control—how and where you were raised, for example. Other things—like what you watch and read, and how you spend your time and money—are largely up to you. All of these influences mold your deepest desires and perspectives, which in turn impact your outward actions.

Once something harmful forms within us—like anger, pride, or insecurity—its ill effects spill out in our words and behaviors, especially in stressful situations. Simply *trying* to be different won't work. So are we doomed to live at the mercy of our malformation? No. Thankfully, there is a clear record of people through the ages who have been transformed by the grace of God.

There are practical ways to cooperate with God's grace, which we'll explore later in more detail. For now, remember that what and who you allow to shape you is a vital part of your ongoing spiritual formation.



## 1.3 Spiritual Formation in Jesus

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* EZEKIEL 36:26

*I came that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd.*

JOHN 10:10-11

*Give Christ his place.* THOMAS Á KEMPIS



A TRULY GOOD, FULL EXISTENCE STARTS WITH MAKING JESUS CHRIST THE PRIMARY SHAPING INFLUENCE ON THE INNER LIFE. Why Jesus? The disciple Peter said it well: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). No one can match Jesus’ wisdom about life’s most important questions. And he lived what he taught—he was patient, compassionate, self-giving, and completely in sync with God’s law of love. Jesus is the perfect picture of a well-formed human spirit.

But more than just a past good example, Jesus is a present reality. He is alive, and his Spirit is available to you as an ever-present teacher and guide. He has divine power—far greater than any other source—to shape you from the inside out. You can’t escape every negative influence, but you can place your spirit in the care of One who outshines the rest. Giving Christ this place of influence is crucial if we want to become people who inhabit our unique place and time with the quality of life that he had, flowing from the kind of well-formed center he had.



## 1.4 Invited to be Christ's Disciple

*Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?” “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.”* JOHN 1:38-39

*Believing in Jesus and discipleship to Jesus are part of the same action.* RICHARD FOSTER



DECIDING YOU WANT JESUS TO SHAPE YOU IS AN IMPORTANT FIRST STEP.

The vital next step is becoming an intentional student. This is where growth and transformation happen.

In the first century, a person wishing to learn from a wise teacher would become the teacher's live-in apprentice, or *disciple*. Disciples stayed with their rabbi day in and day out—listening, observing, and imitating. The goal wasn't merely to gain skills or information, but to *become like* the master teacher.

Being a disciple of Jesus doesn't mean you have everything under control or know a lot. It means you decide that the most important thing in your life is to learn how to do what Jesus said to do.<sup>1</sup> A disciple invites Jesus into the rhythms of daily life and says to Jesus, *This is all yours. What needs to be revised? I'd like to live my life how you'd live it. I'd like to live it with you.*

You should know that Jesus has no desire to micromanage you. Like any great teacher, he helps his students grow in increasing freedom. Jesus says, “Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. . . . I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:29-30, MSG).

<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, “Rethinking Evangelism,” accessed September 8, 2023, [dwillard.org/articles/rethinking-evangelism](https://dwillard.org/articles/rethinking-evangelism).



## 1.5 Invited to be Christ's Friend

***Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.*** REVELATION 3:20, NRSVUE

*We don't just drift into friendship with Jesus. Being his friend, like being anyone's friend, is a very definite and specific choice we make.* TREVOR HUDSON



TRUST, CLOSENESS, ENJOYMENT—THE ELEMENTS OF TRUE FRIENDSHIP—PROVIDE THE NURTURING BACKDROP FOR YOUR SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN JESUS.

During Jesus' earthly life, a close-knit group of men and women became his dearest companions. At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples tenderly, "I no longer call you servants . . . I have called you *friends*" (John 15:15). As their companionship with Jesus and with one another deepened, a capacity to love both God and other people was growing in their hearts. They were being inwardly renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Jesus wants friendship with each of us. With you. He desires your company. You might think, *That sounds good, but how does it work?* Trevor Hudson says, "Friendship with Jesus, like our other friendships, begins and grows in very ordinary ways. It is not other-worldly . . . it involves interacting with Jesus . . . listening to his voice, sharing our hearts with him, inviting him into everything we do. As we walk with him in this way, Jesus comes to be with us in his risen presence and shares himself with us."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Trevor Hudson, *Friendship with God*, (Vereeniging, South Africa: Christian Art Distributors, 2015), eBook.

<sup>3</sup> Hudson, *Friendship*.







SESSION TWO

# What is My Picture of God?

## 2.1 Why is My Picture of God So Important?

*Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?* EXODUS 15:11, NRSVUE

*When distortions creep into our picture of God, their negative effects reverberate throughout our lives.* TREVOR HUDSON



WHAT COMES INTO YOUR MIND WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT GOD IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT YOU.<sup>1</sup> That’s because your “picture of God” deeply shapes your inner life and outward actions.

For example, if you hold a picture of a vindictive God, you will either be terribly fearful or you will feel justified in holding grudges and seeking revenge. But if you see God as quick to forgive, you are more likely to seek his company and to show mercy to those who offend you. If you think God is distant and indifferent, your relationship with him can’t help but be vague and impersonal. But if you see God as near and involved—a Father who not only loves you but *likes* you and wants good for you—well, it can change how you relate to God on a day-to-day basis. And the quality of that relationship determines the direction of your life.

Whatever your *unformed* or *malformed* pictures of God might be, they can be redrawn.<sup>2</sup> Spiritual formation in Jesus brings a true picture of God into focus.

<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Special thanks to Trevor Hudson for his influence on this content.



## 2.2 God is Greater and Better Than We Imagine

*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.* 1 JOHN 1:5, KJV

*Not all the minds of all the centuries shall suffice to search out the unsearchable riches of God.* CHARLES SPURGEON



THERE IS ONLY GOODNESS IN GOD. NOTHING FALSE, NOTHING UNFAIR, NOTHING TRICKY OR MALICIOUS. In the Psalms, King David proclaims that God’s greatness is “unsearchable” (Psalm 145:3, NRSVA)—beyond comprehension, beyond our best hopes. This is a good reminder not to underestimate God. But even David and the other psalmists had their moments. Like us, they sometimes wondered, “Has his promise failed . . . ? Has God forgotten to be merciful?” (Psalm 77:8b–9a).

Sometimes darkness or dullness creeps into our picture of God. What can reorient us to God’s brilliance?

The psalmist models the way to move from distortion back to truth. He pours out his feelings, and then he turns to other evidence: “I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles. . . . What god is as great as our God?” (Psalm 77:11, 13b).

Closing the gap between a tarnished picture of God and a clear view of his wonderful character starts with honesty. Bring to God your doubts and then remind your soul how great and good he is.



## 2.3 God's Character is Revealed in Jesus

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*

*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.* COLOSSIANS 1:15, 19

*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.* JESUS (JOHN 14:9)



SOMETIMES WE HOLD CONFLICTING PICTURES OF JESUS AND GOD:

Jesus is welcoming; God is standoffish. Jesus is forgiving; God is vengeful.

But the truth is that Jesus is God in the flesh. “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19, NRSVUE). Did you catch that? Whatever is true of Jesus is also true of God the Father.

As we observe Jesus in Scripture—his words, his care for people, the things that brought him to tears, and his self-giving death—we see God's heart.

Is there harmony between your picture of God and your picture of Jesus?



## 2.4 God is Closer Than We Can Imagine

*And [Jacob] dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven. . . . And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, . . . Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. . . .” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!”* GENESIS 28:12-16, NRSVA

*God is not far from each one of us. For, “In him we live and move and have our being.”* PAUL, IN ATHENS AT THE AREOPAGUS, OR MARS HILL (ACTS 17:27-28, NRSVA)



GOD IS CLOSE. CLOSER THAN BREATH.

Sometimes God makes that nearness palpable—vivid dreams, a burning bush, a pillar of cloud. God’s arrival in human history as Jesus of Nazareth was a unique form of nearness. His physical form could be heard, seen, embraced, befriended. This kind of proximity in the flesh might seem like the ultimate closeness. But before his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus told his friends, “It is to your advantage that I go away” (John 16:7, NRSVA).

How could that be to their advantage?

Because the earthly body of Jesus could only be in one place at one time. By sending us the Holy Spirit, he is personally and fully present with all his followers all the time—not just walking beside, but dwelling within. That means you are never on your own.



## 2.5 God is Three-in-One

*I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.* JOHN 14:25-26, NRSVA

*For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity; the Trinity is our maker and protector, the Trinity is our dear friend forever, our everlasting joy and bliss, through our Lord Jesus Christ.* JULIAN OF NORWICH



JESUS TALKS ABOUT GOD IN THREE WAYS—FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT.

God is one, and the One is a community. For all eternity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have existed in a circle of deep affection, fellowship, and mutual delight. At Creation, God spoke: “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The *threeness* is on display in this conversation between Father, Son, and Spirit, deciding together to create humans—and to share with humankind God’s relational attributes.

All through history, God repeats this desire to include us—you and me and every human being—in the Triune community of love. Speaking to the Father about his faithful friends, Jesus said, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. *May they also be in us . . .*” (John 17:20–21).

Trinitarian reality boggles the mind, but it adds depth and beauty to our picture of God that moves us into awe and worship.







SESSION THREE

# What is My Picture of Myself?

## 3.1 How You See Yourself Matters

*What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?* PSALM 8:4

*I know well, from personal experience, the deadening effects of not knowing who and whose we are. . . . When we see ourselves wrongly, we often end up in the muddy pit of worthlessness with its attendant despair.* TREVOR HUDSON



THE WORLD IS FULL OF CLAIMS ABOUT WHAT MAKES YOU VALUABLE AND WHAT MAKES YOU YOU. Henri Nouwen identifies three sources from which people often draw their sense of identity and self-worth:

- *Accomplishments* (you are what you do)
- *Ownership* (you are what you possess: stuff, health, appearance)
- *Reputation* (you are what others say about you)<sup>1</sup>

But none of these is fundamentally you.

*Proving* your worth through what you do, what you have, or by managing what others think of you is exhausting. And fragile. Trophies fade, health fails, stuff breaks, opinions change.

What's needed is a self-identity given by a source greater than the self, a self-worth untethered from performance or others' opinions, a "self-portrait" drawn by the Maker. And that's exactly what Jesus offers.

<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *You Are the Beloved: 365 Daily Readings and Meditations for Spiritual Living: A Devotional* (New York: Random House, 2022).



## 3.2 You are Made in the Image of God

*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* GENESIS 1:27

*When God looked upon the human countenance, God was exceedingly pleased. For had not God created humanity according to the divine image and likeness?* HILDEGARD OF BINGEN



YOU COME FROM GOD. His breath (the same Hebrew word as “spirit”) enlivens your body, your mind, your heart, and your personality. No one who has ever existed has been born against God’s desire or without the Creator’s imprint. Every person with whom you’ve ever interacted ultimately comes from the same *good* Source. And all of us share the same overarching calling—to reflect the goodness of our Maker and enjoy him forever.

Humans are the only creatures God calls into partnership with himself to care for the rest of creation. If you remember that you are created in God’s own image, you might treat yourself more gently. And if you think of others as fellow image-bearers, you might find yourself offering a little more grace.



## 3.3 You are Beloved

*Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.* ISAIAH 54:10

*Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the “Beloved.” Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.*

HENRI NOUWEN



YOUR EXISTENCE BRINGS GOD GREAT JOY. He created you in love, and he delights in your company. Prophets, angels, the writers of Scripture, and even the sights and sounds of nature declare that God loves you with an everlasting love. God the Son came in flesh, saying, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (John 15:9). The Lord’s love for you is rock solid. Why would you ever doubt it?

Experiences that mock, dehumanize, or abuse communicate a different message—that we aren’t lovable. When life gets terribly hard or painful, do you wonder if God has withdrawn his love? Though God’s love for us is unshakable, our ability to sense his nearness and affection can be slowly cracked—or violently shattered. Even Jesus expressed this human sensation from the cross (see Mark 15:34).

But nothing that happens to you, and no voice besides God’s own, has the final word on who you are. Carefully putting the pieces of your belovedness back together requires returning to the fundamental truth of your identity—tuning out the other voices and choosing to trust the sacred voice that calls you “Beloved.”



## 3.4 You are Bent

***The desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*** ROMANS 7:18B–19, NRSVUE

*Scripture describes man as so curved in upon himself that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself.* MARTIN LUTHER



THE TRUTH ABOUT YOU AND ME IS THAT WE ARE GOD’S BELOVED IMAGE-BEARERS. But to some degree, we are *bent*—inclined toward selfishness.

The love and focus and energy we’re meant to share with God and others gradually turns inward—elevating our own opinions, focusing on and magnifying our own wants and needs, clawing and manipulating to get our own way. The bend in our nature pulls us away from the One who calls us beloved. We lose sight of the truth. We live beneath our humanity.

It is good to love and care for yourself, but making yourself the center and “god” of your life is ultimately destructive. Consider the Prodigal Son from Jesus’ parable (Luke 15:11–32). Set on seeking his own pleasure, he demands his inheritance and leaves his family. He chases happiness far from home, where he indulges himself nearly to death. Though his own best interests are his main concern, a deepening selfward focus makes him lose sight of what is actually good for his body, mind, and spirit. He doesn’t see that his choices are ruining his life until he’s living with a herd of pigs and longing to eat the slop from their trough.



## 3.5 Your Invitation to be Unbent

*Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.* HEBREWS 12:12–13, ESV

*To be a Christian is to be on a journey—from the pigpen of self-rule to the outstretched arms of a loving Father.* DALLAS WILLARD

*Sin is inevitable, but all shall be well.* JULIAN OF NORWICH, RECALLING THE WORDS JESUS SPOKE TO HER



WHAT GOD WANTS FOR YOU IS FREEDOM FROM THE BENT DESIRES AND TWISTED IDEAS THAT DRIVE YOU AWAY FROM HIM AND INTO SELF-INFLICTED TROUBLES. God is like the Father in the Prodigal Son story, longing for your return. God welcomes you “as you are,” but he has plans to restore you to the fullness of your humanity. He wants to *unbend* you—not because you are unlovable as you are, but because he sees the brokenness and pain caused by your curved-in, self-focused, and self-directed ways. He wants you to have “the life that is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:19)!

The unbending process can be slow and uncomfortable, but God provides all that is needed to unfurl you into the flourishing person he created you to be.

<sup>2</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love Recorded by Julian of Norwich, anchoress at Norwich*, trans. Grace Warrack, (London, England: 1901; Project Gutenberg EBook, September 2, 2016), LXI, [gutenberg.org/files/52958](http://gutenberg.org/files/52958).







SESSION FOUR

# What is My Picture of the Gospel?

## 4.1 The Gospel is More than Forgiveness

*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.* JOHN 10:10, ESV

*There is an ocean of grace and love and power lying all around us, an ocean to which all earthly light is but a drop, and it is ready to transfigure us.* LILIAS TROTTER



YOU PROBABLY KNOW THAT THE NEW TESTAMENT WORD *GOSPEL* MEANS “GOOD NEWS.” If you ask people what the good news of Jesus is all about, they might explain it as forgiveness of sins or going to heaven when you die. Or they might say it pertains to supernatural power to break free from oppression and bring justice on earth. These answers aren’t wrong—Jesus offers forgiveness now and life beyond the grave in his glorious presence. And his Spirit empowers people to be God’s partners for justice and peace; he assures us that his victory will ultimately right all wrongs.

But any one of these gospel pictures *by itself* is incomplete—they are pieces of a larger whole.

The gospel Jesus announced was a completely new order of life—a life *with* God, starting now, growing in love and goodness and power, as God renovates us from the inside out. If you find your concept of the gospel a little hazy or narrow, the next few devotions will help round out your picture of the good news.



## 4.2 The Good News of the Kingdom

*Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”* MARK 1:14–15, NRSVA

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King!* ISAAC WATTS

*Thy kingdom come—not mine. Thy will be done—not mine.* DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD



“THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR.” This is the gospel that Jesus repeated everywhere he went. God’s kingdom includes all that falls under his authority and is faithful to his purpose. Everything in heaven already conforms to God’s perfect will. But on earth, his kingdom is wherever he is received as King. We can choose the reign of God (where his way is done) or we can choose another kingdom (where our own way or some other way is done).

Look at the life of Jesus. He is proof that life under God’s authority and faithful to his purpose truly is the good life—a life of “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). Our self-rule, on the other hand, is not. And yet our own kingdoms are so hard to leave behind!

Thankfully, the good news of Jesus isn’t an impossible ideal. The gospel of the kingdom comes with power to change. Whatever rules over us *can* be overcome as we follow Jesus. He is “the way,” or the path, that leads us into the good life (John 10:6). He makes it possible for all who accept him to turn into this kingdom.

<sup>1</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Ballentine, 1983), 142.



## 4.3 The With-God Life

***Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. . . . I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.*** JOHN 15:4-5, THE MESSAGE

*The blessings He bestows are all connected with His “Come to ME,” and are only to be enjoyed in close fellowship with Himself.* ANDREW MURRAY



THE BEST PART OF THE KINGDOM-GOSPEL JESUS ANNOUNCES IS THAT IT BRINGS US HOME TO GOD—BACK INTO THE LOVING COMMUNION WE WERE CREATED TO ENJOY. Most people picture this reunion as an after-death reality.

It's easy to get hung up on the timing, because we tend to think of the *eternal life* Jesus promised as something down the road. But look at how Jesus defines it: “And this is eternal life, that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3, NRSVA, italics added). In the Bible, “knowing” always implies intimate personal relationship, not just possessing facts about something or someone.

Dallas Willard explains: “The way of Jesus Christ is a way of *first hand interaction*—knowing by acquaintance—direct awareness of him and his kingdom. . . . Such an interaction with God is the most precious thing available to any human being. It simply is eternal life.”<sup>2</sup> The most important feature of eternal life is not its length or its perks, but its Divine Company.

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2009), 143-44.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Foster, “Salvation is for Life,” originally published in *Theology Today*, October 2004, 297-308, [renovare.org/articles/salvation-as-a-life](http://renovare.org/articles/salvation-as-a-life).



## 4.4 The Gospel Changes Everything

*Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me. . . . The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I've been doing.*

*You can count on it.* JOHN 14:11–12, THE MESSAGE

*Our relationship with God is personal but never private.* TREVOR HUDSON



YOUR PERSONAL DECISION TO SAY YES TO JESUS HAS VERY PUBLIC—EVEN COSMIC—IMPLICATIONS. If you think Jesus came only to make a way for you to get to heaven after you die, you could say yes to that idea and then potentially go on living much as you did before—as king of your own kingdom, with little desire for God’s company and little interest in cooperating with him during your earthly life.

But if you understand that Jesus came to bring you into a life with God under God’s rule—starting now—everything will change. For one thing, a loving relationship with the Trinity brings us closer to all God’s children. Time in his presence shifts us from self-concern to concern for others—listening, forgiving, and working in the power of the Holy Spirit to love people as Jesus loves.

Have you typically thought of the gospel of Jesus as an invitation to a private life of faith or as an invitation to partner with Jesus and his followers in the “family business” of God’s kingdom?



## 4.5 Saying Yes

***Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*** MATTHEW 7:21, NRSVUE

*You must constantly enlarge the area of your conversion. Make your conversion take in more and more areas of your life.* E. STANLEY JONES



JESUS SPEAKS OF TWO ESSENTIAL WAYS TO RESPOND TO THE GOOD NEWS: *REPENT* AND *BELIEVE* (MARK 1:15). The word *repent* simply means “to turn.” Change your mind. Change your direction. Saying yes to the gospel offer of Jesus means rethinking your goals and life strategies in light of what the King wants. It means turning from beliefs and opinions that don’t match his. You aren’t really in his kingdom (under his rule) if you’re still running your own show. You literally have to pivot the direction of your energy and effort toward what God wants—go different places, do different things, turn!

*Trust* is a good English word to help us understand Jesus’ invitation to *believe*. Believing in Jesus doesn’t just mean agreeing that he exists or agreeing with his teachings in theory. It means trusting him enough to become his disciple. It means learning to imitate and obey all that he taught, because you trust that his way leads in the direction of life.

We often think of conversion, or saying yes to the gospel, as a one-time decision. But “repent and believe” is both a first step and a commitment renewed every day, every hour, as we turn and re-turn to God’s way.

<sup>4</sup> This is an adaptation of the ancient practice of examen, which has many forms. It is a way of reviewing your closeness and obedience to God, and is meant to be restorative rather than shame-inducing.







SESSION FIVE

# How Do People Change?

## 5.1 Is Change Possible? If So, How?

*Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”*

*“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”* JOHN 3:3-4

*The way to God is the way of all-encompassing inner transformation.* JAN JOHNSON



CHANGE FOR THE SAKE OF CHANGE IS NOT THE GOAL OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION. Loving, worshipful life with the Trinity is the priceless treasure. And yet to experience that life, we *have* to change. Jesus says as much to Nicodemus—“No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3).

Your main barrier to life with God is yourself. Anything that you let control and direct you is your god and your ruler—stomach, temper, addictions, fears. As long as you live under the reign of tyrants like these, you can’t fully enjoy and obey the one true God. Transformation is not a spiritual hoop to jump through; it’s just the fact of the matter that unless we change, we stay in a holding pattern of destructive self-rule and self-focus.

Leaving all of that to enter God’s abundant life takes nothing short of a miracle. You need a new outlook. You need renewed ideas, desires, and choices—a complete rebirth of your spirit. Jesus says that a new spirit is absolutely necessary, and that he has come to offer that new life to the whole world (John 3:16–17). Nicodemus asks what we’re all wondering: *How . . . ?* We can’t literally start from scratch!

Jesus answers, “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:6). Your Creator is also your Re-creator—the one who forms a new spirit within you. But unlike your physical birth, being born again in spirit happens only by your own choosing and your active cooperation.



## 5.2 Change Takes Time

*Be patient, therefore, dear friends, until the coming of the Lord. Note how the farmer waits for the precious harvest of the earth, being patient for it until it receives the early and latter rains.* JAMES 5:7, MOUNCE

*When we say yes to the gospel, we are saying yes to a process, not a quick fix . . . to a relationship, not a program.* CAROLYN ARENDS



“WE DO NOT BECOME NEW PEOPLE OVERNIGHT,” WRITES TREVOR HUDSON.<sup>1</sup> We are deeply invested in our own kingdoms . . . some of us more so than others. So Jesus calls us into a relational process of discipleship that is just as important and as intricate as human development in the womb.

Parts of your inward transformation can happen in flashes, but most of your growth and renewal is gradual. The Bible describes what is happening with several different words—*forming*, *reforming*, and *conforming*. New ideas and desires are coming into existence. The parts of your spirit that have been malformed are being gently reshaped. And your spiritual life is being pressed into the perfect mold of Jesus’ life. All of this takes time.

None of this will happen against your will or without your cooperation. Instead, you are invited to participate in your own slow re-creation by learning to be with Jesus, learning to be like Jesus. The pace of your spiritual formation is uniquely calibrated to your needs. Give yourself grace. And be patient with God’s hidden work in the depths of your spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Trevor Hudson, *Discovering Our Spiritual Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 50.



## 5.3 Change Takes Cooperation

*Come to me . . . and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* MATTHEW 11:28–30

*God will only accomplish His work to the extent that you let Him.* FRANÇOIS FÉNELON



GOD IS THE SOLE AGENT OF SPIRITUAL CHANGE. He empowers it. He directs it. Everything you need for spiritual formation is freely given to you by God.

The balance between God’s role and your role can feel a bit tricky to parse out. Jesus says “I am the way” (John 14:6), but he also says “You—follow me” (Mark 1:17; Luke 18:22). He says “I will give you rest,” and then says “Take my yoke.” Clearly, cooperation is expected. You can’t earn transformation, but it does take your consent and your effort.

Jesus knows you so well that he has a yoke—a set of training activities and ways to interact with him—designed to fit you perfectly. The specific spirit-shaping experiences for your life will be unique, but they will fall into two main categories common to all of us—opportunities to train with Jesus in the *unplanned* circumstances of your daily life (especially the difficult parts), and opportunities to train with Jesus in *planned*, controlled experiments that strengthen your friendship with the triune God and help you drop the habits and perspectives that go against God’s kingdom. These planned “disciplines” are what we’ll talk about next.



## 5.4 Change Takes Discipline

*Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* HEBREWS 12:11, NRSVA

*Grace isn't opposed to effort. Grace is opposed to earning.* DALLAS WILLARD



A RUNNER IS EQUIPPED TO COMPETE IN A MARATHON BY THE DISCIPLINE OF PHYSICAL TRAINING. Strength and goodness in the inner life also come through discipline. “God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace,” writes Richard Foster. “The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so he can transform us.”<sup>1</sup>

*Discipline* comes from the same word as *disciple*. Disciplines do not earn you favor with God. They aren't a way to measure spiritual success, either. They are simply a means for stepping into the new ways of thinking and behaving that God wants to give you. Disciplines take you from *hoping and trying* to be like Jesus, to *training* with him. They are ways to engage your body, mind, and spirit in loving apprenticeship to Christ, so that he can teach you how to live fully and freely in the present reality of God's kingdom.

Richard Foster cataloged this list of foundational spiritual disciplines, visible in the life of Christ and practiced by his followers down through the ages: *meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration*.<sup>2</sup> Each spiritual discipline supports the concrete ways to follow Jesus that we will look at more closely in section six.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 3rd edition (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, *Celebration*.



## 5.5 Change Takes Focus

***“Come, follow me,” Jesus said. . . . At once they left their nets and followed him.***

MATTHEW 4:19–20

*Will it not make life narrow, this focusing? In a sense, it will—just as the mountain path grows narrower, for it matters more and more, the higher we go, where we set our feet. . . . Narrow as Christ’s life was narrow, this is our aim; narrow as regards self-seeking, broad as the love of God to all around. Is there anything to fear in that?* LILIAS TROTTER



A WORLD-CLASS VIOLINIST WAS ONCE ASKED HOW SHE CAME TO MASTER HER INSTRUMENT. “Planned neglect,” she responded. At first she practiced violin here and there, spending her energy in several directions and pursuing other pastimes. It wasn’t until she *narrowed* her focus and intentionally dropped things from her schedule that she began to excel.

Honing in on following Jesus means dropping anything that competes with that goal. Have you carefully considered what you will need to leave behind to cooperate fully in the process of spiritual formation? Is there anything that stands in the way of your love—love for God and love for others? The spiritual disciplines are wonderful gifts for helping you neglect whatever stands between you and the kingdom.

As we make our life with him our focus, he reorders our priorities and our loves. How you structure your days and order your thoughts supports your focused discipleship. And as you experience God’s renewing influence, more restructuring happens. Your priorities are continually renewed and honed as you follow Jesus.

3 Liliias Trotter, *Focussed: A Story and a Song*, out of print, shared in Miriam Rockness, *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus* (Naples, FL: Oxvision, 2018).







SESSION SIX

# How Do I Follow Jesus?

## 6.1 Enter His Story

*They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”* LUKE 24:32

*Most of us, if we’re going to experience the Bible as a life-changing text charged with the presence of God, are going to have to learn all over again how to read it.* CHRIS WEBB



THE BIBLE’S ANCIENT WRITTEN ACCOUNTS OF JESUS’ LIFE ARE BEAUTIFUL, BUT AREN’T THEY JUST A SECONDHAND WAY TO KNOW JESUS? If Christ were dead and gone, the answer would be yes. But he is risen, alive, active. The gospel story—or any part of the Scripture—can become a place of personal encounter if we read with the genuine desire to meet Christ there and to let him teach us and shape us.

If your engagement with the Bible is haphazard—if you seek Jesus in his story only when the urge hits—your friendship with him will progress slowly, at best. But spiritual disciplines such as a set time of day for reading can provide structure to help you move from good intentions to actually engaging your heart and mind in seeking him.

Even if you know the story so well you could recite it by heart, new depths of knowing and following Jesus are always available. Return to his story over and over again. As you pore over the details and consider his words, let the living Christ appear to you again.



## 6.2 Imitate His Rhythms

*I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do.* JOHN 13:15, THE MESSAGE

*A simple, unvarnished reading of the Gospels will give you an overall way of living that Jesus felt important while among us in the flesh.* RICHARD FOSTER



THE QUESTION “WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?” IS A GREAT STARTING PLACE FOR IMITATING JESUS. But imitation takes ability. If what you do on a daily basis trains you to act in opposite ways, you’ll lack the ability to *do* differently, even if your understanding of Jesus is clear and your heart longs to respond as Christ would.

Jesus had habits of going to certain places and doing certain things. These rhythms weren’t arbitrary. They were places of preparation, of attention to God, of practicing obedience that built up his ability to respond well. A weekly break from business (sabbath), memorizing scrolls of Scripture, regular retreats to solitary spaces, times of fasting . . . These *off the spot* practices empowered *on the spot* responses that were selfless, loving, and God-honoring.

This is great news. It suggests that if we meet our Good Teacher in the atmospheres, activities, and rhythms he modeled, we can receive from the Father the same nourishment and training the Son received there. “I am telling you the truth,” Jesus told his followers during their last supper together, “No servant is greater than his master. . . . Now that you know these things, you will be *blessed* if you put them into practice” (John 13:17).



## 6.3 Love as He Loves

***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.*** JOHN 13:34–35

*The center of concern for suffering is shifted outside ourselves and distributed with breadth unbounded among all, friends and so-called enemies. . . . Have you experienced this tendering?* THOMAS KELLY



AS SOON AS JESUS RECRUITED FISHERMEN AS DISCIPLES AND SAID TO THEM, “I WILL MAKE YOU FISHERS OF PEOPLE,” HE STARTED TEACHING THEM TO APPLY THEIR STRONG WORK ETHIC TO THE KINGDOM WORK OF LOVING AND SERVING OTHER PEOPLE.

Following Jesus, they watched him show concern for their families, neighbors, and synagogue friends. Jesus led them in wider circles, too: to the streets, to bedsides, to the temple courts, and to tax offices. They were constantly surprised by how interruptible Jesus was, and by how readily and generously he gave attention to people of all sorts—people they would have considered dangerous, disgusting, unworthy, a bad influence, and just plain depressing to be around. Each interaction tested the limits of their compassion. They watched Jesus respond to these people with tenderness and practical help. *This is how God loves. It’s almost as if Jesus was saying to them: Go ahead and fish—for that matter, do any kind of work—but your true vocation, your true calling, is caring for my dear ones. See them? They are all around you. Let my love shape your love. Follow my heart.*

When you follow Jesus’ gaze, you’ll find him directing your attention to those who need compassion. Slowly, gently, he forms the desire to respond to each one as he would. Your heart gradually takes on the tenderness of his. You are being transformed for the work of the kingdom.



## 6.4 Take up Your Cross

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* MATTHEW 16:24

*We must experience the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves.* RICHARD FOSTER



YOU AREN'T FREE AND READY TO DO GOD'S WILL IF YOUR OWN PREFERENCES REIGN SUPREME. There will come a point when your own kingdom comes into conflict with love of God and neighbor. This is exactly what Jesus invites you to crucify. Whenever your will comes into conflict with God's will, the choice to follow him rather than please yourself is a movement deeper into his kingdom.

In Jesus' parable recorded in Matthew 13:31–32, he remarked that God's reign grows like a mustard seed. A mustard plant is miniscule at first but matures into a tree that gives shelter and shade. This parable is Jesus' way of teaching how conversion from your kingdom to his kingdom happens. Complete obedience in your life—the total rule of God's kingdom—is made up of one small surrender after another. Conversions from self-gratification to obedience might seem like laughably small movements—sharing a treat you'd been looking forward to; holding back a sharp word; passing up an opportunity to brag; smiling and talking with someone when you don't feel like it. As you submit to the Lord one after another of your appetites, opinions, and ideas, each small gesture waters the little seed of God's kingdom in you.

“Take up your cross daily and follow me,” Jesus urged in Luke 9:23. *Keep dying to your kingdom and keep reawakening to mine—as many times as it takes for every single part of you to be an eternal YES to God.*



## 6.5 Meet Him in the Midst of Daily Life

*So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. . . . Fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.* ROMANS 12:1–2, THE MESSAGE

*In the noise and clatter of my kitchen . . . I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees in the Chapel.* BROTHER LAWRENCE



IT IS GOOD TO SET ASIDE SPECIAL TIMES AND PLACES FOR INTENSE TRAINING EXERCISES WITH JESUS. But following Jesus also includes the more mundane stretches of daily life. Do you ever find that God slips right out of your mind? Or that following Jesus feels foreign to your present work? Worries and distractions all around us clamor for our attention. So much of what needs doing—laundry, paying bills, preparing food, getting from here to there—doesn't feel like holy ground at all. But there's a way to go about all of this *with* Jesus.

Every part of human life holds the potential to be a meeting place with God, a place where you *keep* following Jesus. In fact, these unspectacular moments contribute mightily to forming a “familiar friendship with Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

Brother Lawrence, a 17th century monk, was a monastery dishwasher. He decided to *practice* returning his mind to the presence of God all day long, even when scrubbing pots and pans. He wasn't necessarily speaking with God the whole time, just finding ways to remind himself that his Holy Friend was near. Whether he was flipping pancakes or sweeping the floor—he did it *with* God and *for* God. Lawrence wrote, “Lift up your heart to Him at your meals and when you are in company. The least little remembrance will always be pleasing to Him.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, edited by Harold J. Chadwick (Newberry, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishers, Pure Gold Classic edition, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, edited by Lightheart, 2002 (Project Gutenberg Ebook, May 1, 2004), Seventh Letter, [gutenberg.org/ebooks/5657](http://gutenberg.org/ebooks/5657).







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