



The Practicing the Way Course

Teaching Notes

Session 02: Formation (Part 01)

Intro:

- Life is a miracle.
- To witness a mother give birth and a child grow up ...
- To watch the gift of life unfold over the years ...
- ... all those key moments imprint on your memory forever.
- And this process of growth and change is fascinating.
- It's why we show baby photos at weddings and wedding photos at funerals ...
- But the most fascinating changes aren't external, but internal; not to our body, as much as to our soul - to who we become.
- In the Christian Way, this process of change is called spiritual formation.

Set up:

- Last week, we covered the three goals of a disciple or apprentice of Jesus:
 1. To be with Jesus
 2. To become like him
 3. And to do as he did
- And we said: Spiritual formation is the *process* by which all this happens, by which our *spirit*, or our inner woman or man, is *formed* into a particular shape, or what we call "a character."
- Whether it be the character of Jesus, or the character of someone *else* ...
- The language of "spiritual formation" comes from the New Testament.
- For example, in Romans 12, Paul writes this to the followers of Jesus in the city of Rome:
 - "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12v2)
- Notice the two verbs: conform and transform.
 - Both verbs are from the same root word in Greek: *metamorphao*. Where we get the English word *metamorphosis* — the word for the process by which a caterpillar is "transformed" into a butterfly.
 - One Lexicon defines it as: to change the essential form or nature of something.

- This is the word picture for the depth of change that is possible in the human soul.
- Not just surface level behavior modification; but deep change.
- And in Greek, both verbs — conform and transform — are in the present passive tense.
- Meaning, they are something that is *already* happening to you.
- You are *already* being *conformed* to be more like “the pattern of this world” or *transformed* to be more like Jesus.
- *There is no option C.*
- *Conformed, or transformed.*

Formation isn't a Christian thing:

- The *first* thing we need to understand about spiritual formation is this: *Spiritual formation isn't a Christian thing; it's a human thing.*
- To be human is to change, we can't help it! Whether we are religious or not, we grow, evolve, go astray, come back to the path ...
- I occasionally hear people say they are “getting into spiritual formation,” by which they usually mean they are reading good books, and beginning to practice ancient spiritual disciplines like solitude and silence, or are in therapy.
- All very good.
- But just to clarify: You've been being spiritually formed since before you took your first breath.
- Spiritual formation begins in utero, and continues through all our days, whether we are “into” it or not!
- Mother Teresa was a product of spiritual formation, and so was Hitler. Queen Elizabeth was spiritually formed, as was Ghengis Khan.
- Their spirits were formed over a long period of time through a complex alchemy of genetic inheritance, family patterns, childhood wounds, education, habits, decisions, relationships, environments, and more.
- Same with you and me.
 - We've *been* formed.
 - We're *being* formed.

- And we *will be* formed in the days to come.
- Spiritual formation is *not* optional.
- The problem is, most of our formation is unintentional.
- No one sits down one day and decides to be “conformed to the pattern of this world.”
- *It just happens.*
- No one sets out to become bitter or angry or greedy or judgemental or fearful ...
- *It just happens.*
- Simply by living in Manhattan or LA or whenever you call home, and living a “normal” life.
- Because of that, I’ve found it *incredibly* helpful to name the forces at work in my life, that are forming, or *deforming* me ...
- In this session, we want to help you do the same.

Seam: To that end, here’s a paradigm we call Unintentional Spiritual Formation ...

Unintentional Spiritual Formation:

- *How* we become *who* we become is a sacred mystery of the human soul — taunting the brightest minds of both science and spirituality, but there is a surprising level of agreement across disciplines.
- We are formed by six primary forces:
 1. Our habits
 2. Our relationships
 3. The stories we believe
 4. Our environment
 5. Time
 6. And experience
- The first four forces are more active, more about what we do.
- The last two are more passive, more about what is done *to* us.
- Let’s take a deeper look at all six ...

- We are formed by our ...

1. Habits

- What we do on a regular basis we become.
 - Reading the news
 - Doom scrolling on social media
 - Going to the gym ...
- The things we do, do something *to* us, they get into the core of our being and shape who we become.
- The journalist Charles Duhigg called this “the power of habit.”¹
- It’s easy to think we’re just watching Netflix or checking email late at night or buying another pair of shoes — but actually, we’re turning a kind of invisible fulcrum in our heart in a particular direction; we’re becoming a type of person.
- Secondly we are formed by our ...

2. Relationships

- We become like the people we spend time with.
- Think about your family and friends. The odds are very high that you dress like them, think like them, talk like them, vote like them, spend money like them, and so on.
- Third we’re formed by ...

3. The stories we believe

- God wired the human brain to search for meaning, to take all the data points of reality and turn them into a story — a narrative to live *in* ... and live out.
- This is why we love movies and novels and telling stories around the campfire ...
- And every day we are exposed to stories — stories about what is the good life, what will make us happy, what the purpose and meaning of life even *is* ...
- These stories shape us far more than we realize.
- And whatever stories we come to believe are true, determine the kind of people we become.
 - For example, one of the reasons so many marriages end in heartache, is because no marriage can possibly live up to the story we are told by Hollywood and pop music ... which is very different from the story Jesus tells.

- The stories we believe give shape to the thousands of decisions we make every day, from whether we stay in a marriage to how we spend our money to how many hours we spend at work.
- Pick your stories carefully, because they will determine who you become.

Seam: And our stories and relationships and habits all come from an ...

4. Environment

- Whether you live in a small town or a global city; in a Western, secular culture, or a traditional religious culture ...
- ... we all become *like* the place we live.
- And in the digital age, we all live in two places at once, in our city or town or area and in the echo chambers of the algorithms that define our digital home ...
- This may be good, or it may be bad, but it *is*: you will become *like* your environment.

Seam: These forces work on us slowly ...

5. Over time

- They sneak up on us, little by little, and have a cumulative effect: we wake up one day and realize — we’ve changed.

Seam: And ...

6. Through experience

- We are deeply shaped not just by what we *do*, but by what is *done* to us ...
- Nowhere is this more true than in our family of origin and our childhood, but it’s also true of our whole lives — do we go to college? Or drop out of high school? Get our dream job? Or file for bankruptcy? Get married? Get divorced? Or stay single?
- Our experiences deeply shape who we become.

Summary: In summary: We are formed by our habits, relationships, the stories we believe, and our environment; this happens over time, and through experience.

- We call this paradigm “Unintentional Spiritual Formation” because it’s a synopsis of how we are formed with no *intentionality*; just by waking up in the morning and going about our day.
- The question isn’t: “Are you becoming someone?”

- It's: "Who or what are you becoming?"

Who are you becoming?

- When I reflect on this paradigm, I find it both sobering and hopeful.
- Let me guide you in a short reflection exercise ...
 - Close your eyes for just a moment
 - Take a few deep, slow breathes ...
 - Ask God to direct your mind ...
 - Now, imagine yourself at 70 or 80 or 90.
 - What kind of person do you see?
 - Ask yourself: Who am I becoming?
- I remember the first time I ever did that exercise: I was about thirty, and I had enough life under my belt to plot a hypothetical trajectory and imagine myself at 40 or 50 or 60 ... and the person I saw on the horizon was terrifying ...
- I was becoming more hurried and anxious and irritable ... not more loving and joyful and peaceful and patient ...
- In my case, it was a wake up call: I realized I had to make some major life changes.
- What about you?
- What changes do you need to make to alter the trajectory of your spiritual formation in the direction of Jesus?

Discussion groups:

- Thank you for listening.
- Now it's time to process this truth about spiritual formation together.
- You may be feeling a number of emotions as you realize you're *becoming* a person, and that all sorts of forces in your life — from your morning routine to your friend group to your social media feed — are *deforming* you, more than forming you ...
- Let's process this together.

- Circle up into groups of 3 to 5 people and talk through the following questions:
 1. What habits do you keep in your daily and weekly life? How might they be shaping you?
 - This might be as simple as what you do after you wake up, or what activities fill up your free time.
 2. Who are the most important people in your life? What do those relationships look like?
 3. As you reflect on your own journey, what stories have shaped the way you view the world and where did these stories originate?
 - These stories could be: what's your version of a good life, what should you spend money on, how should you interact with family?
 4. Did God reveal anything new to you in this session that you want to say more about?

Seam: Take a few minutes and discuss ...

Discussion break:

- Now it's time to take the next step.
- For those of you reading the *Practicing the Way* book alongside the Course, this week we're reading Part 2.
- And, as we said in the last session, each week we'll offer a spiritual exercise for you to move forward in your discipleship to Jesus.
- Everything we offer is invitational.
- We make recommendations, you make decisions.
- But open your Guide to Session 02, and let's explore this week's spiritual exercise ...

Tutorial:

Week 2: Life Audit

- Our exercise for this coming week is to conduct a "life audit."
- For me, going through this life audit has been a powerful and illuminating experience. Prayerfully going through an exercise like this can help us become more self-aware and set

the stage for our growth toward wholeness, for our becoming more like Jesus.

- In this exercise, we take an inventory of all the forces that are currently forming us.
- To help you with your audit, we have created a template for you to work through, which you can find in your Guide in the On Your Own section for session 02.
- In this audit, we will work through each of the six forces that form us: the stories we believe, our habits, our relationships, our environment, and our time and experiences.
 - The first step is to write out your morning routine, your workday, your evening habits, and your eating and sleeping patterns.
 - You then write about your various relationships and your family history.
 - The next step, which requires more reflection, is to identify how these patterns and relationships are forming you. You might want to process this step with a wise, trusted friend, counselor, pastor, or spiritual director.
- As you work through your life audit, try not to be judgemental. Don't beat yourself up. Just write down everything that has shaped you, past and present.
- For example, you might look at your morning routine and notice that you start your day by reading the news. You might ask — What is this habit doing to me? What kind of person am I becoming by letting the news — much of which is alarming — be the first thing in my consciousness every day? As you reflect on your routine, you may consider how you might develop a new morning routine, like the one we started last week — beginning your day with quiet prayer and reading Scripture.
- Similarly, as you reflect on your day at school or work, you might think about your interactions with people. Do they leave you feeling stressed and anxious or energized and grateful?
 - Finally, you might consider what you typically do at night. Do you tend to be on your phone, watching Netflix, or playing video games? Or perhaps you have a ritual that helps you recollect the day and give thanks? How do these habits and rituals shape you?
- Remember, try not to be judgmental, don't beat yourself up.
- Just write out all the forces in your life, past and present.
- This exercise can take more than an hour. We encourage you to take an evening this week or a quiet morning to do this. Although it's a longer exercise, it can open the door to profound transformation as you grow in self-awareness and are inspired to establish habits that help you grow into the person you long to become.

- As you reflect on these forces, ask yourself, “How are they forming me?” Are they leading me to a sense of life, and peace, and closeness to God. Or are they causing me to feel restless, anxious, and distant from God?
- As you continue the daily prayer rhythm you practiced last week, use some of that time to offer whatever feelings, desires, insights, or intentions you have to God and pray that the Holy Spirit will lead you onto the path to life.
- As you conduct your life audit, as David prays at the end of Psalm 139
 - May God search you and know your heart;
 - test you and know your anxious thoughts.
 - See if there is any offensive way in you,
 - and lead you in the way everlasting.

Summary:

- Now let’s review what we covered in Session 02.
 - Spiritual formation isn’t a Christian thing; it’s a human thing.
 - We are formed by a complex web of forces, but especially by:
 - Our habits
 - Our relationships
 - The stories we believe
 - And our environment
 - This happens over time.
 - And through experience.
 - Most of our formation is unintentional.
 - One of the most important questions to reflect on is: Who am I becoming?
 - And: Am I being intentional about who I am becoming?
 - And one of the best ways to do this is through this coming week’s practice: a Formation Audit.

Outro:

- The philosopher Dallas Willard used to say, “The main thing God gets out of our life is the person we become.”²
- It’s hard for me to imagine right now, but one day, I am going to wake up and — God willing — I’ll be 70, or 80, or 90 years old.
- And what will matter on that day is not how much money I made or how “successful” I was by the standards of the world, or whether or not I saw that new TV series ...
- What will matter is the person I *became*.
- This is why Saint Benedict in the 6th century said, “Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die.”³
- He urged people to meditate daily on their coming death — not to provoke fear or dread, but to remind us: *don’t waste your life*.
- Live for what matters.
- So that when we come to the end of our lives, we can die at peace ...
- But this will require us to reflect on our life today ... and connect the dots between how we are living — and *who we are becoming*.
- So as you apprentice under Jesus, and you conduct your Formation Audit and start to make decisions about your life, may you live for what matters; may you treat each day as a precious gift to be stewarded with gratitude and joy.
- And may every day find you more and more at peace in God.

Notes

1. *The Power of Habit* (2012)
2. “*Streams in the Desert and Wells of Living Water*,” 2004 speech at Baylor University
3. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (530)