



The Practicing the Way Course

Teaching Notes

Session 03: Formation (Part 02)

Intro:

- Growing up, I would spend my summers at my grandparents' cabin up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California.
- There was a river close by where we would go swimming.
- And I remember the first time I tried to swim across the river; I was a strong swimmer, but the *moment* I hit the current in the center of the river, I was immediately swept downstream. I made it across, but had to hike way back up the opposite bank.
- I will never forget that horrible feeling, of swimming with all my energy, and yet being swept downstream by forces far more powerful than me.
- A lot of us feel like that in our spiritual formation.
- ... like no matter how hard we try to become more like Jesus, we are being swept downstream ... by the forces of culture ... all around us ... and by forces inside our own heart.
- It can feel like we're just trying to keep our head above water ...

Seam: If you feel this way, you are not alone.

Stuck:

- I felt this way for many years.
- I grew up in the church. And all through my teenage and young adult years, I felt like — in the words of Paul in the New Testament — I was making “progress” in the spiritual life — like I was becoming more like Jesus year over year.
- Take Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5: I felt like I was becoming more loving and joyful and peaceful and patient and kind.
- But then, it's like I hit a plateau.
- Once my apprenticeship to Jesus began to touch on the *deeper* issues in my shadow side:
 - My anger
 - My perfectionism and critical spirit
 - My anxiety and attachments ...
 - All the deeply ingrained habits of sin in my body that go back *generations* in my family line.

- At that point in my spiritual journey, the formula for Christian Life that I grew up with — go to church on Sunday, read your Bible every morning, and tithe ... all good things, but ... it just wasn't working on the deeper layers.
- Instead of making progress, I felt like I was walking in circles.
- And *then*, as the pressures of adult life began to fall on my shoulders — work, family, responsibility, etc. — I began to feel like I was *regressing*, not progressing!
- Instead of becoming more like Jesus, more loving and joyful and peaceful, I was becoming *less* like Jesus! More irritable and impatient and exhausted ...
- The problem was *not* that I did not *want* to become like Jesus (I did, believe me), or that I wasn't *trying* to become like Jesus (I was, if anything, too hard); the problem was, I did not know *how* to become like Jesus.
- You may be new to following Jesus, and right now you're growing like a weed — that's *great*.
- But after serving as a pastor for over twenty years, I've come to realize: *many* people reach a point in their spiritual journey where they get stuck:
- Stuck in ...
 - Self-defeating habits of sin and shame.
 - Dysfunctional patterns that go back generations.
 - Hurt and wounding.
 - And more
- And — same as me — the problem isn't that people don't *want* to become like Jesus or that people aren't *trying* to become like Jesus. It's that we don't know *how* to become like Jesus.

The training program:

- In Luke 6, Jesus said:
 - “The apprentice is not above the rabbi, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their rabbi.” (Luke 6v40, paraphrase)
- Notice: not only is Jesus' desire for his apprentices to become like him, but he has a training program we can follow *to* become like him.

Seam: But to *enroll* in Jesus' training program will require us to live with a whole new level of *intentionality* in our apprenticeship to him.

Intentional Spiritual Formation:

- Spiritual formation isn't a Christian thing; it's a *human* thing.
- Every minute of every day, we are *being formed* by a complex interplay of forces.
- We're formed by:
 - Our habits
 - Our relationships
 - The stories we believe, and
 - Our environment
- All this happens over time and ...
- Through 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.
- But most of our formation is *unintentional*.
- It just *happens*.
- We wake up in the morning, go about our normal life, years go by, and one day we wake up and realize: we've been *formed* into a particular shape.
- Which means, for those of us who desire to be formed to be like *Jesus*, we don't start with a blank slate!
- We've already been deformed.
- Not into the beauty of Jesus but into the ugliness of sin and shame.
- Therefore, to some degree, all formation in the Way of Jesus is *counter-formation*.
- To be formed to be like Jesus will require an *intentional*, thoughtful, conscious way of life to counteract the many forces that malform our soul.
 1. To counter our habits, we need the practices of Jesus (or the spiritual disciplines), that turn the fulcrum of our heart in a new direction and open our inner world to the presence and power of the Spirit of God to change.
 2. To counter our relationships, we need community — where we travel the Way side by side with other apprentices of Jesus, and we are loved into people of love.

3. To counter the stories we believe, we need the teaching of Jesus — to fill our minds with truth.
 4. And to counter our environment, we need to live aware of and connected to the Holy Spirit, who is the animating center of our life and the ultimate source of all transformation.
- These counter practices form our souls slowly, over time.
 - And especially through times of suffering, where we are not only formed, but *forged* into the love, peace, and joy of Jesus.
 - This is *intentional* spiritual formation — a life architecture of discipleship to Jesus that is deliberately designed to be more robust than the cultural forces all around us and the internal forces of our own heart.
 - The key idea is this: We are going to be formed.
 - Jesus' desire is to form us to be like *him*.
 - But this will require us to organize our days around intentionally following Jesus and finding deep joy in our everyday lives with him.

Paradigm teaching:

- Let's explore this paradigm in more depth ...

Seam: First, if our habits are forming us ... if scrolling on social media and reading the news multiple times a day and shopping for things we don't need ... is doing something to us; it's making us more lustful or anxious or greedy ... Then one of the first steps we must take as followers of Jesus is to become more intentional about our habits through ...

1. The practices

- Also known as the spiritual disciplines.
- The practices are activities — or “habits” — that are based on the lifestyle of Jesus himself that slow our busy lives down to connect with Jesus and each other, and make room for God to come in and transform our lives from the inside out.
- Practices like ...
 - Sabbath
 - Prayer

- Fasting
- Solitude
- And more ... [Generosity, Service, Witness]
- Through these practices, we set our whole life before God, and open deeper layers of ourselves to his loving presence and power.
- As we do what we can do — offer our mind and body to God — he does what we *cannot* do — form us into people of love and joy and peace.

Seam: Secondly, if we're being formed by our relationships ... if our view of the world, and value system, and daily behaviors are shaped more by our peer group or family of origin or office culture than by Jesus ... then it's essential that we harness our relational wiring to become more like Jesus through ...

2. Community

- Community is the incubator for all spiritual growth; it's where our rough edges are chipped away, and where our deepest wounds are healed.
- It's our school of love; where we are loved into loving, and when we err, are forgiven, but also where we learn to forgive.
- Living in community is not easy, but it's where all the deepest transformation happens.

Seam: Third, if the stories we believe are forming us ... if we're being formed by cultural narratives that come to us from Hollywood and social media and the education system, more than by Jesus, how do we become more intentional about the stories we believe?

- We fill our mind with ...

3. Teaching

- Or another word for this is truth.
- Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher, a truth-teller; he came to fill our minds and imaginations with his vision of reality, so that we can live in tune with the Creator's wisdom and good intention for his creation.
- We fill our minds with the truth of Jesus in all sorts of ways, through:
 - Scripture

- Teaching
 - Preaching
 - Theology
 - Reading
 - Meditation
 - Contemplation
 - And more ...
- As we think God's thoughts after him, we begin to experience what the Apostle Paul called "the renewal of the mind."
 - If you think about it, this miracle we call *consciousness* is the flow of thoughts and feelings and images that pass through our mind all day long.
 - But if we do not curate our consciousness — or what we give our attention to — someone or something else will.
 - And our mind is the portal to our whole life. What we give our attention to is the person we become.
 - As we empty our minds of lies and fill it with truth, we partner with God to make our mind a beautiful place to live.

Seam: And the animating center of this entire process is ...

4. The Holy Spirit

- ... who is God's empowering presence *inside* us ...
- Through the practices and life in community and teaching, we are opening up deeper and deeper layers of our inner being to God, to heal and free and transform.
- We are drawing on what the New Testament writers call "grace," the freely given, totally undeserved *action* of God on our behalf, his capacity to be who we were meant to be and do what we were meant to do.
- The more intentional we become about practicing the presence of God, and living in step with the Spirit, the more God himself becomes our primary environment, our home.

Seam: This all happens over ...

5. Time

- As the professor James Houston once said, “Spiritual growth is the slowest of all human movements.”
- Spiritual growth is a lot like physical growth, there’s a dramatic beginning and occasional growth spurts early on, but most growth takes place a little bit at a time, as we grow up in the family of God.
- Nobody becomes like Jesus overnight. That’s why Jesus’ metaphors for spiritual growth are all slow — trees, vines, crops that grow over seasons and years.
- Change is a long, slow process.
- Eugene Peterson called it “a long obedience in the same direction.”¹
- We have to be patient, and stay with Jesus, and never lose hope for transformation.

Seam: Finally, this happens through ...

6. Suffering

- Or what Jesus and the New Testament writers call “trials and tribulations.”
- We all *hate* this, but the very experiences that most of us fear and fight tooth and nail to avoid ... the pain and suffering that are *inescapable* in this life — can be our crucible: they can form and *forge* us into people of love and joy and peace.
- As Paul writes in Romans:
- “We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5v3-4)
- But it must be said: the exact same experience of suffering can form *or deform* us; can make us soft and gentle, or hard and cruel; can open us to God, or close us off.
- But when we intentionally open our pain and suffering to God, God will not only meet us in it, but use it to form us to be more like him.

Recap:

- The invitation of Jesus is to enroll in his training program: to intentionally organize our lives around his practices, community, truth, and ultimately around God himself ...
- To do this, you don’t need to become a monk or a nun, you just need to slow down and live

intentionally in the beauty of ordinary life ...

Set up for group conversation:

- That's a lot to process, so let's process it *together*.
- Circle up in groups of 3 to 5 people, and talk through the following questions ...
 1. Have you ever had a moment in your discipleship where you felt "stuck" — whether in habits, unhealthy emotional patterns, or in your relationship to God?
 2. With the paradigm of Intentional Spiritual Formation in mind, how have you participated in your own formation over the years?
 3. How have you understood the Holy Spirit's role in spiritual formation?
 4. Have you had an experience of intentionally opening your pain and suffering to God? What did God produce in your formation through that experience?
- Take the next few minutes for conversation ...

Set up:

- Now we're ready to turn to the week ahead.
- For those of you following along in the *Practicing the Way* book, this coming week we're reading Part 3.
- Go ahead and open your Guide to Session 3 as we explore our next practice ...

Tutorial:

Week 3: Reading Scripture

- A recent study estimated that 87 percent of people sleep with their smartphone next to their bed, and most of them check it first thing upon waking.
- Perhaps we wake up to a text from someone at work ... or see a news alert of another tragedy across the world ... or get sucked into social media ... and just as we're beginning our day, we're feeling anxious or angry, jealous or sad ...
- Do you know the feeling?
- What if there is another way to begin our day? What if there is a practice we can adopt from

the life of Jesus to help us begin each day with the peace of God?

- Last week, you conducted a formation audit.
- You made a list of all your habits and relationships and then attempted to connect the dots between these forces and your formation — or *deformation*.
- Did you identify any habits, relationships, or stories that seem to be having a negative effect on you?
- For many of us, the next step would be to replace an old habit with a new practice.
- To that end, this week's practice is to read Scripture daily.
- Maybe you noticed last week that the very first thing you do in the morning is read the news or go on social media. Or just before bed, you surf the Internet or play video games to relax. Though these things might have given you an initial burst of energy, you might have started to realize that they ended up making you feel restless or anxious. The practice for this week encourages us to replace these habits with the practice of relaxing into God's presence with Scripture.
- When we read Scripture, we turn our attention to God, who is good, beautiful, and true. And as we focus on God, we grow more like God. As Daniel Siegel, a professor of psychiatry points out, "Where attention goes, neural firing flows, and neural connection grows."² In other words, we become like what we pay attention to. When we meet God through Scripture, we are spiritually and neurologically formed.
- You may already be reading Scripture daily. If so, this week's practice is to continue what you are already doing. But if this is not the case for you, the daily reading of Scripture can serve as an important foundation for your spiritual journey.
- In your Guide, we have recommendations for reading plans for Scripture and resources from our friends at BibleProject. You might also explore a Bible reading practice like *Lectio Divina* — where you meditate on Scripture with an open heart — so that God's word can speak to you in a deeply personal and powerful way. Remember, the goal of reading Scripture is not to consume information, but to experience God deeply and intimately.
- To help you process your experiences with these practices we have included a practice reflection in your guide.
- Before you come back next week, take ten minutes to reflect on your week with God and be ready to share what God is teaching you.
- God bless and form you as you immerse your mind and heart in Scripture this week.

Summary:

- Let's review all that we covered in this episode:
 - Many of us desire to change and become more like Jesus, but we feel stuck in our spiritual formation.
 - The problem isn't that we don't want to become like Jesus or that we aren't trying to become like Jesus, but that we don't know how to become like Jesus.
 - We need a training program; a reliable pathway to transformation.
 - We find this in the Way of Jesus.
 - By following his Way, we are formed by:
 - The practices
 - Community
 - Truth
 - And the Holy Spirit
 - All this happens over time and through suffering.
 - And one of the best ways to begin to change is to replace an unhealthy habit with the practice of reading Scripture daily.

Outro:

- It's sad but true: many modern Christians have no idea of the level of transformation that is possible in this life — if we will only apprentice under Jesus.
- Let the vision of Jesus raise your horizon of possibility! You can change. You can heal. You can grow. You can become like Jesus ... by the power of Jesus.
- Transformation *is* possible.
- But — it's not inevitable.
- Nobody becomes like Jesus by accident!
- Nobody wakes up one day at fifty and thinks, "Weird, I became the next Mother Teresa?"
- "I just woke up one day and found that I was no longer anxious about anything, and I was full of love for my enemies ... weird!"

- No ... there are no accidental saints.
- We can't transform ourselves; deep change is God's work, not ours.
- But we *can* follow the practices of Jesus, like beginning each day in quiet prayer and reading Scripture.
- We *can* live in community.
- We *can* fill our mind with truth.
- And in doing so, we can open deeper and deeper layers of our soul to the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit.
- In Scripture, the *Spirit* is also likened to a rushing river.
- In that same river I grew up swimming in in the Sierra Nevadas, there was a small waterfall that was safe to go over ... my siblings and I used to swim out into the middle, lean back, and let the current carry our bodies over the side.
- That's a good metaphor for spiritual formation; get yourself into the current of God's Spirit, and let him carry you places you could never possibly imagine.

Notes

1. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (1980)
1. *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human* (2016)