

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW

Lesson 21

The Spiritual Life – Living by Faith

INTRODUCTION

In the lessons for this week and next week we are going to focus on how to live the Christian life. We have been hitting it hard week after week with Biblical doctrine. Doctrine is great, it is essential, it is the bedrock foundation of Christianity. Without solid Biblical doctrine to ground us we would be flapping in the breeze. As we have said all along – this class is about nailing down what we believe as Christians and that is what we have done so far.

However, there is a danger in studying doctrine for doctrine's sake. We can study, take notes, put it all in a notebook, put it on the shelf and there it sits. There are 2 dangers of studying doctrine for doctrine's sake: (1) We can become arrogant – we feel we know more than the average Christian. (2) the doctrine we study does not change our lives. In other words, to quote Dr. Howard Hendricks, "We become smarter sinners."

How can we guard against these dangers? That is what this lesson and next week's lesson are all about . We want to get practical!

In the first 20 lessons of this class we have asked and answered: What do we believe?

In the next 2 lessons we want to ask and answer the question: How do we behave and grow as a result of what we believe?

Today: Living by Faith – the process called Spiritual Formation.

Next week: The Six Components of the Christian Life.

[TEACHER: Before going any further you may need to share the Gospel with the class. These 2 lessons are for believers in Jesus Christ. You may have picked up new people as the class has progressed – do NOT assume that your class understands the Gospel – share it using the "Steps to Peace With God" booklet or something similar.]

1. SPIRITUAL FORMATION – WHAT IS IT?

Working definition: Spiritual formation is the process of daily transformation into the image of Jesus Christ – to become more & more like Jesus Christ in attitudes and actions. He is the standard!

Core values of spiritual formation...

- It is essential, not optional for Christians.
- It is a process, not an event, class or seminar. It never ends.
- It is God's work in my life but requires my participation, my effort.
- It does not affect just one part of my life but all of it.

- It is not hindered by my background, temperament, life situation or season of life; it is available right now to all who desire it.
 - It is lived out in community(not isolation) and finds its expression in loving & serving others.
- [from *Pursuing Spiritual Transformation* by John Ortberg, Laurie Pederson and Judson Poling]

Spiritual Formation – what it is NOT...

- It is not merely picking out some of Jesus' actions and trying to duplicate them.
- It is not something we can do in our own power.
- It is not following a list of rules & rituals, i.e. trying to be more disciplined.
- It is not being isolated and living the life of a monk.

2. SPIRITUAL FORMATION – WHY DO I NEED IT?

ILLUSTRATION: let's consider the story of Hank. Hank has attended church since he was a boy, he's in his sixties now. He attends church regularly, reads his Bible almost every day, affirms right, Biblical beliefs, is a tither and does church work. But – he has a poor relationship with his wife & children, is not concerned about the poor and has little tolerance for those outside the church. Problem: Hank is not becoming more like Jesus Christ – he is not changing!

There are thousands of people like Hank in our churches running around doing things, busy for God, attending functions, etc. but they are not being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ. They have substituted "*busyness*" for *godliness*. Or, they have substituted acquiring Biblical knowledge for *godliness*.

Problem: the heart – read Jeremiah 17:9. Even after a person trusts Christ as Savior and begins growing in Christ, he will struggle with sin. As we studied in Lesson 17, we have 3 enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil; and we will have them the rest of our lives on this earth.

Another problem: Hank was not accountable to anybody. A core value of spiritual formation is that it is lived out *in community*. We need each other!

3. SPIRITUAL FORMATION – IS IT BIBLICAL?

Absolutely! Let's look at some key scriptures...

Colossians 2:6-7 – How did we receive the Lord? By faith. How do we walk (live the Christian life) ? By faith – firmly rooted and established in Him.

Romans 12:1-2 – This is perhaps the clearest and most concise passage in the NT that teaches the process of spiritual formation. The "therefore" in verse 1 shows the transition from the doctrine Paul has been teaching in chapters 1-11 to the practical living out of those doctrines.

"Present your bodies" - a believer's offering of his total life as a sacrifice to God is sacred service. Such a change in his lifestyle involves a positive and a negative aspect...

“do not be conformed to this world” – This is the negative aspect. Living according to the pattern of this world must now be put aside. The Phillips translation says it best: “Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold.” We cannot live as we once did because we are not the same people we once were!

“...but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” – this is the positive aspect. The meaning is “keep on being transformed or continually be transformed”. It is a process that never ends. The word for “transformed” is “metamorphosis” which means to be changed from the inside out. The key is our mind – the control center of our attitudes, thoughts, feelings and actions. As our mind keeps on being renewed, our life is transformed – we become more and more like Jesus Christ in our attitudes & actions.

Hebrews 5:14 – Solid spiritual food is for the mature. Mature means “perfect”, having the senses trained because of practice to discern good & evil. The context of the verse is leaving the elementary principles, going beyond the basics and growing toward maturity. John MacArthur in his book *Truth War* says, “...the only means to spiritual maturity is mastery of the Word of God.”

Philippians 1:6 – “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 4:19 – “...until Christ is formed in you.” These two verses show that the Lord is the One who makes me into the image of Jesus Christ; I cannot do it in my own power.

4. SPIRITUAL FORMATION – WHAT IS MY RESPONSIBILITY IN THE PROCESS?

We cannot do it in our own power – the Lord does it – He makes us more & more into the image of Jesus Christ in our attitudes/actions. And yet, the Scriptures teach that we need to be actively involved in the process...

1 Timothy 4:7 – “...discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” Paul goes on to say in verse 8 that bodily discipline is good but discipline for the purpose of godliness is better.

ILLUSTRATION: Recently, thousands of people ran in the Houston Marathon. Imagine the hours, days, weeks & months of training to prepare for that run. As Paul said, discipline of our bodies is good but godliness is better. What if we used that same amount of time and effort in Bible study, prayer, worship, service, etc.?

Philippians 2:12-13 – In these 2 verses we have both God’s and man’s responsibilities in the process of spiritual formation...

“...work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Notice, it does NOT say “work for your salvation”. We cannot earn our salvation – it is a gift, by grace thru faith. This simply means that we have a part in our Christian lives and spiritual formation. I have to walk across the room, pick up my Bible and read it, pray, attend worship & Bible study, etc. The Lord doesn’t do it for me. Why does it say “with fear and trembling”? This means we have a healthy respect and awe for the Lord and want to be careful to please Him in all that we do.

“For it is God who is at work in you...” – this states God’s responsibility in the process.
So, to put the 2 concepts together: we work out what God puts in!

We’ve already mentioned some of these but my responsibility in my spiritual growth and transformation would include...

- Prayer
- Bible study, devotional time
- Corporate worship with other believers
- Serving others
- Giving
- Telling others about Christ

Now, this is NOT a “to do” list where we get a clipboard and check the boxes. However, we do need to be intentional and disciplined about spiritual things or they will never happen. How am I to be engaged in my own spiritual formation? The danger is that we can go to one of 2 extremes...

1. **Legalism**. This is the clipboard & check the boxes approach. Becoming like Jesus Christ does not mean we focus on rules and checklists. Legalism looks only at my performance and it all depends on me. Legalism ignores the relationship with Jesus and can lead to spiritual pride.
2. **Hully-Gully**. This approach goes something like this: “I will do whatever I feel like doing. In fact, I don’t have to do anything because Jesus loves me no matter what I do or don’t do. So, I will just let go and let God.” The problem with this approach is that I can become a slave to my feelings or appetites. If I don’t “feel” like praying or attending worship then I don’t do it. Jesus gave many commands to His disciples including us: love one another, obey Him, pray, make disciples, etc. It is amazing – not one of those commands is accompanied by the phrase “if you feel like it”! A command is not a suggestion; it is something that He expects us to do.

5. **SPIRITUAL FORMATION – WHAT IS THE BALANCED APPROACH?**

This is our goal in spiritual formation. On the one hand we know that it is the Lord who transforms us into the image of Jesus Christ; and yet, we are commanded to not be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. These are things He expects us to do.

How does it work? What is the balanced approach? Let’s use the example of prayer/Bible study. Everyone is busy; I hate to break it to you but you are no busier than anyone else. We will never “find” the time for prayer/Bible study. We must “make” the time, carve it out or it will never happen. **ILLUSTRATION**: Do you think those marathon runners waited until they “found” the time to train? Absolutely not – they “made” the time and started their training regimen months before the race! That is what it means to make something a priority; it means to say “no” to some things and “yes” to others.

Assignment: So, using our example of prayer/Bible study, here is your assignment for next week: plug into your schedule exactly when & where you are going to have your devotional time. Start with

a doable goal, say, 10 minutes. Can you set aside 10 minutes for prayer and Bible study? Be intentional: turn off your cell phone, find a place/time in which you know you will not be interrupted. Another suggestion: have a plan for your Bible reading. I suggest you not start in Leviticus or Ezekiel. Those are great books but not as a place to begin your discipline of a devotional time. Suggestion: start in the Gospel of John or Mark. Have a notepad and pen to record your thoughts, questions and prayer needs. Ask the Lord to speak to your heart. Stay with it for 7 days and see what God does!

If you already have a consistent devotional time, let's apply the intentional method to something else. Let's move out of our comfort zone and say evangelism – telling others about Jesus Christ. Now, before you run & hide let's break it down into some small steps...

- Pray about who you could invite to church/Bible study class.
- Make a list of those whom the Lord lays on your heart to invite – friends, neighbors, family members, co-workers, etc.
- Look at your list and determine the most likely one who would be agreeable to respond in a positive manner to your invitation.
- Pray specifically for that person/family.
- Have in mind exactly what you will invite them to – worship, Bible study class, a special event, etc. Have a place/time in mind where you will meet them if they say yes.
- With fear & trembling pick up the phone and call that person...and see what God does!

This may seem like a simple method and it is – but this is the way we “work out our salvation”. And, this is how we grow and become more and more like Jesus in our attitudes/actions.

[TEACHERS: Depending on the size & makeup of your class, you could suggest that they come prepared to share with the class their experiences in devotional time or inviting someone to church. If God did something in their lives we would like to know! Assure them that it is voluntary – you are not going to call on someone. But, if you know of a situation you could prepare beforehand for that person to share.]

NEXT WEEK: The 6 Components of the Christian Life.