

The Spirit of Spiritual Formation

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Date: 22 September 2024

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[0 : 0 0] All right, the main course, I like that. Okay. Hey, good morning, everybody. Glad that you are here. Those who are listening online, hello to you as well.

If you've got a Bible, go ahead and turn to Galatians chapter 5 and verse 16. So we're launching into a new series, and that new series we are exploring what it looks like to be Christ-like, looking at the fruits of the Spirit and how they point to Christ being formed in us.

Also known as spiritual formation. And today I want to persuade us that we should really care about this. If you are in the room and you consider yourself a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus, this is like discipleship, not just 101, it's like the graduate level course as well, okay?

It's both of those things. And there is nothing more important about you than what you are becoming. Are you becoming more like Jesus or are you becoming more like something else?

Now, the word Christian first appears in the book of Acts, and it was used to describe the early disciples. It was a Greek word.

[1 : 1 1] And what they looked at, they saw these Christians running around and they said, these are Christians, which means little Christ. We see these like, you know, these other versions of Christ all over the place.

And that's what it should be. When people look at us, what they should see is they should see Jesus. Even if it's just his pinky toe in you, they should be seeing something of Jesus in us.

But here's the thing, Christlikeness doesn't come suddenly in a moment. It doesn't come through like a perfect incantation of a prayer, and then like in a moment we are transformed in the twinkling of an eye, and suddenly we're just perfectly like him in every way, shape, and form.

Spiritual formation, this Christlikeness, it is a change continuum. We're on a continuum of change over a lifetime. And that happens, that change happens as we participate with the Holy Spirit in spiritual formation, which is what we are going to talk about today.

So let's jump in to the passage we're going to read from. Galatians 5 verse 16, it says this, But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

[2 : 2 0] For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. For these are opposed to each other. To keep you from doing the things you want to do.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now, the works of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, fear, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies.

Paul, you can stop whenever you feel like it here. And things like these. I warn you, as I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

[3 : 35] If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. This is God's Word. So, Paul brings our relationship to God, the Holy Spirit, front and center in these verses.

Because spiritual formation can only happen from the inside out. And here's the thing. The Holy Spirit is highlighted because He is the Spirit of spiritual formation, which is the title of this sermon.

And when we think about this life in the Spirit, and we think about it in terms of how these verses describe it. In verse 16, it talks about it in walking by the Spirit and living by the Spirit in verse 25.

And that sounds pretty amazing. Like, we get to do those things with God Himself. And as incredible as that may seem, when you start to realize how slow that work is and how costly that is, it actually seizes—it kind of loses its luster.

So, let's start with some of the bad news, some of the hard news, probably is a better way to say that, about spiritual formation. And it's this. Spiritual formation is death to disordered desires.

[4 : 47] Spiritual formation is death to disordered desires. This is such an important kind of theme in spiritual formation.

It gets repeated. Paul repeats himself in verse 16 and 17 and 24. He teases this out in several different ways. And the reason it gets repeated is because it is not an easy thing to do.

To die to your desires, that is not an easy thing to do because that's who we are. We are, first and foremost, creatures of desires. And those desires want to be gratified.

Another way to say that, that word in there, gratification, is actually the desire to be fulfilled. The desire to come into completion. Think about that.

Think about how much you and I hate living in the unfinished and the incomplete. It is torture. And we feel that. We feel it in our body.

[5 : 45] We feel that in our soul. And it comes out through anxiety and lust and anger and fear and grief. Those are the emotions we feel when we have to sit in that incompleteness, that unfinished sense of things, the unresolved.

And those unresolved desires, they torture us with varied degrees of intensity. And they do that. As they do that, they kind of push us and coerce us to move along the path to their fulfillment.

Now, let me give a kind of a more natural example, a morally neutral example. Think about your stomach and hunger.

It produces a desire that demands fulfillment in eating so that your stomach can be full. Right? And it uses that process of eating to get there. Now, thankfully, being hungry isn't a sin because I would just have to give up.

But what about things like anger? Now, there is a desire that forms within us that demands a different kind of fulfillment.

[6 : 47] It begins in the soul, but it manifests through our body. It seeks revenge, intimidation. It seeks to control. It makes us like Shylock, the moneylender from the merchant of Venice who goes around exacting.

It's like, you owe me, I'm going to get my pound of flesh if you don't pay me back. And anger is this desire that moves us along a sinful pathway, and that could be expressed in many ways.

It can be through withdrawal, where we withhold ourselves, or it could be through verbal assaults or physical assaults. But it does those things because it seeks fulfillment.

It seeks to be gratified. It seeks to find its completion. And when it does, typically somebody gets hurt. That's how we get our pound of flesh, through the form of anger.

Now, that's just an example. So now, when we think about spiritual formation and something like, let's say, anger, or something like lust, sexual immorality, or those things, what's the remedy?

[7 : 49] Is it just like, well, I need to stop being angry. I need to stop lusting. Well, how's that working for you? Okay, so if it's just not like, okay, I've got to just will myself to stop this, then how do we do it?

Because the passage says you've got to kill that thing. And that brings us into a whole new set of questions. Okay, how do we do that? How do we kill a desire? How do you put something to death that you can't touch and see?

Is it like, oh, do we create negative association with these things? So every time I start feeling angry, I stick a fork in a light socket?

And just like, oh, maybe. I'll start to get that, like, anger equals bad. I'm going to stop doing that. Well, that's not going to work. Actually, putting disordered desires to death requires something of us that, to be honest, we might find harder and more difficult than sticking a fork in an outlet.

Verse 18 says it this way, you and I have to be led by the Spirit. Which sounds like, I mean, that sounds great, but if you were to like, if I was to give you five minutes to really think about that, you would probably start, you know, Jess, that really sounds like something that, like, the weird mystics and the monks and the pastors, that sounds like a you guys thing.

[9 : 08] What about us, regular folks? No, it's for everybody. This is an everybody thing. Being led by the Spirit means you got to get comfortable with not being the boss.

Spiritual formation happens as we hand control over to God. Sorry if I just ruined your day. But control, I want to say this, control is the ultimate desire we have to put to death in us.

It is what is underneath all the disordered desire. When you trace sin back to its seedling form, you will find this to be the truth.

Think of the Garden of Eden. And the very first thing, the thing that was offered to Eve and then offered to Adam by the serpent in temptation is, you know what, you can become like God.

You don't have to let him be the one calling all the shots anymore. Control. Everything that we do that is ungodly and sinful, every desire in that vein comes from that root.

[10 : 20] We want to de-God God. We may think he needs a little bit of our help. He needs a little bit of our counsel.

In spiritual formation, friends, rises and falls upon us understanding how deeply we are infected by our need to control.

All sin is self-reference control to do what we want for our pleasure, for our pride, for our protection, and our profile enhancement.

And that is a wonderful P alliteration, if you didn't notice. In spiritual formation, we learn and practice dying to this kind of control.

How? By living by the Spirit, by walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit. Now, maybe you are hearing this. You don't like the idea of losing that much control.

[11 : 18] Is there any other way, Jesse? Unfortunately, that is the only option you have as a disciple of Jesus. Because being a disciple means you aren't your own anymore.

Like verse 24 says, you belong to Christ. Spiritual formation must happen because you belong to Jesus. Now, I want to say this.

I think the Western church waters that idea down, what it means to belong to Jesus. Because we are so given to this idea of freedom and liberty and individualism that belonging to Jesus looks more like something like being a fan of the Carolina Panthers.

Which is a life of suffering. Okay. I say, yeah. But think of it this way. They are your team. And you can say, hey, I belong to them in a sense.

But in the end, that team, the Carolina Panthers, they really have no control over you. Except maybe how frustrated you may feel at any given time. They don't have any real authoritative claim on you, do they?

[12 : 28] But you know who does? Jesus does. Jesus has a claim on you. The Bible, it uses the term bondservant and slave quite openly to describe our relationship to Jesus as disciples.

Now, I want to say I understand why recent history causes us to recoil from that definition of discipleship. It makes sense. But it's in there.

And the Bible says Jesus bought us with a price by his own death. That's a legit thing. And to the principalities and powers who would seek to destroy you and enslave you and perform their own works of darkness through you, Jesus says, hands off.

You have no authority. He, she is mine. I have ultimate claim on them. To belong to Jesus means you lose all control because you belong to him.

He claims you as his own. But this claim, it goes beyond being a bondservant. That's not the only description of who we are, right? We are also called sons and daughters.

[13 : 34] We're his children. We are, Jesus calls us his friends. In another place, in many other places, Jesus, he's the bridegroom. And we as his people, we're his bride.

In a sense, you might say we are taken captive by Jesus, who defeated our puny little kingdom of self that we lived in, amongst the greater tyrannical kingdom of darkness that we were enslaved to.

And he came and he made us his own. He saved us to make us his own. We are in his victory parade. He's conquered us, hasn't he? And it is possible and it is proven that captives can become captivated and dedicated to the very people who conquered them and made them their own.

There's this fascinating story from history. In the 1800s in America, Cynthia Ann Parker was captured by Comanches at the age of nine. And she lived among them for 24 years before she was found.

Now, when she was found, she was brought back into white society. But here's what confounded everybody. She didn't want to return to live among the white man's world.

[14 : 49] She wanted to stay at Comanche. She wanted to live with them. And she was frequently running away from her white family to get back to her Indian family. She looked white on the outside, but her heart and her character were Comanche through and through.

See, the captive became captivated. The captivated became just like her captors. They became her people. They became her family.

It reminds us of the book of Ruth where Ruth tells Naomi, Hey, I might be a Moabitess. I might be from Moab. But you know what? I'm going home to Judah with you.

I'm going to Bethlehem with you. And your people are going to be my people. And your God is going to be my God. Ruth had been captivated by something. And this transformation requires seeing and believing that the new being made available to us is superior and better than the old that we've been living in.

And in that way, the captive begins to take on the characteristics of the captor and assimilate their culture. And spiritual formation means God's character is becoming ours.

[16:01] We're becoming like him. And that is what the fruit of the spirit is. The fruit of the spirit is God's very character becoming ours. Now, if you are like, Ah, Jesse, why do you keep using that spiritual formation word?

It sounds a little hippy-dippy, a little new-agey. Can you use something else? Even though I would argue, actually, it's been used a lot throughout church history. All that being said, if that is your, like, barrier to entry here, just realize spiritual formation is character formation.

That's what we're talking about. But it's not your character being refined and adjusted. It is God's character being formed in you.

He is putting something in you that can't be there otherwise. It can't happen apart from God. Jesus gave us a great metaphor for this in John 15 when he said, I am the vine.

I am the central trunk of the vine. You are branches coming off of this. If you abide in me, then you're like that branch that can produce fruit. If you don't abide in me, guess what?

[17:07] You can do nothing. You ain't going to produce no fruit. You can try as hard as you can. You can concentrate as hard as you can. Ain't no fruit coming out of you. So to be Jesus's disciple is to be infused with God's life that produces God's character that becomes more and more evident through us.

It comes out in our lives. But here's the thing. You have to abide in the vine. Meaning you have to abide with Jesus. How does that happen? By the Holy Spirit.

That's why he's a blessing. He was given to us for that. Jesus says, I gotta go, guys. He tells his disciples in the flesh, standing right next to them, I need to go because someone else is coming.

And it is for your benefit that I go so that he can come. For the sake of his people, for the sake of his church, Jesus ascended to heaven. We don't see him in bodily form, but we experience him because the Holy Spirit comes and manifests the very character and nature of God to us.

And we get to have fellowship with him. And through that fellowship with him, we get to fellowship with Jesus Christ and God the Father. You have to abide in the vine. Abiding explains why Cynthia Ann Parker's transformation happened.

[18:18] She was a Comanche to the core. She abode with them for 24 years. Belonging means abiding. And abiding leads to formation.

So connecting those dots, spiritual formation means our lives are defined by withness. And you're right, that isn't a real word, but it should be.

And it explains what Paul is teasing out in verse 25. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit withness.

What is withness? Well, keeping in step withness means that sometimes you are catching up to the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it means you are slowing down. He's the pace setter.

The point is we have to remain with the Holy Spirit, which means you are constantly checking in with the Holy Spirit. Here's the good news.

[19 : 17] This doesn't mean that you start hearing voices. All right? But you do start praying things like, Holy Spirit, help me to be aware of what you're doing in and around me. Holy Spirit, make me aware of the opportunities to be kind and loving and helpful to others in front of me.

Holy Spirit, show me where you might already be at work and how you might be calling me to participate in that. It's praying those simple prayers.

And what will begin to happen is that you will become more people aware as you walk through everyday life. You'll become more spirit aware as you walk through everyday life.

And you know what? Your routines may not change that drastically. You may still be running kids around everywhere. You may still be going to work and doing house chores and still going and have fun and recreating and still going to church, still going to community group.

None of that has to change, but how you live in them will. You'll begin to be more curious about what is happening with people you've been spending time around, which means you'll shift from spending time around people to spending time with them, and there is a big difference.

[20 : 31] This way of life makes you more aware of God's loving presence at all times. And it also makes you more aware of others and what they might be going through, whether that is joyful, good, wonderful things, or pains, or injustice, or needs, and other things that God really, really cares about.

And this growing awareness calls us to respond because we start to care. Sometimes it's as simple as what Jesus said, go and give that little kid a cup of cold water.

He said, if you do something like that, you're doing it to me. Translate that today. That might mean sit down, play a game with your kids.

Give them your attention. Read a book with them. Give them five minutes. Sometimes it's a bigger commitment. Sometimes it's stepping into the difficult and the craziness of addiction and helping those in those places.

It's reaching out and helping the homeless. Some of you have fostered kids. That's a big commitment. Some of you have adopted. That is a big commitment.

[21 : 49] All those things, small and big and everything in between, what those are, those are manifestations of witness. Because that's the internal life of the Holy Spirit, the internal life of God bearing fruit in you.

And I want to say this at the risk of being super cheesy, and I love being super cheesy, so I'm just going to go for it. Witness leads to witness. I'm just reveling in the eye rolls right now and the groans.

This kind of fruit-filled life is available to everybody. You don't need to be a theologian. You don't need to join a monastery. You don't have to turn your whole life upside down.

You just got to be faithful to witness in the life you're living right now. And let me give you some simple witness practices you can add to your life.

Man, grab a prayer book. Some of you, you're just like, prayer can't do that, Jesse. It's so hard, I've tried it. I have grown to appreciate books of common prayer.

[22 : 56] They're pre-written prayers that guide you through things that the church has been praying for centuries upon centuries. Saints across the world and across generations. And they're beautiful. And you know what?

They're often better than the prayers I pray. And they bring me into, and they give me words that like, man, that's the thing I actually really want to say. And the movements are going from those written prayers into reading scripture and back into, and singing a hymn.

And back into written prayer. And then praying for others. And praying the Lord's Prayer. And it's a beautiful thing. There's one that I really love. I'll leave it up on the screen for you here.

It's one I've been doing for about a year now. It'll take you just a few minutes every single day as it guides you through a wonderful time with God. Just leave that up so people can, hey, this is me encouraging you to take your phone out right now.

I'm like, click on that if you want to. Yeah, go for it. Go for it. Here's another one. Man, we have this thing called Seeing Jesus Together journals. And there's nothing really magical about it, except it just gives you a pathway to follow of opening your Bible, either in solitude by yourself or with some close friends.

[24 : 10] Just reading some scripture, responding to it, confessing and caring for one another. And you can maybe grab that, do it by yourself. Maybe grab a couple of close friends and meet once a week or every other week or once a month.

Whatever that may be, you could do that. There's some men that get together on Wednesday mornings. Kind of just happened organically. And men in this church.

And they get together early on a Wednesday morning for some bougie coffee. And they get together and they share what's going on in their lives and they pray for one another. The fancy word is called a confessional community.

But they're creating sacred space where they can come and they can confess where they're struggling and when they're experiencing pain. And they can hold that for one another.

And they can care for one another and encourage one another and provoke one another and do the things that are necessary for discipleship. Now, hear me clearly.

[25 : 19] Don't try to do everything all at once. If you're doing nothing, don't be like, man, I'm going to like, I'm just going to like, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. I'm going to do this. I'm going to do this. I'm going to do this. I'm going to do this. Just pick one thing to start.

Just pick one thing to start. And as you grow to enjoy that, stop and consider if you have bandwidth to add in something else. And if you don't, no big deal.

The point is, I don't want you to run out of here and be a shooting star, burning really bright and then, you know, you're really bright and then, boom, done. Burnt out. Now, shooting stars, they grab our attention.

For brief moments, we go, wow, but that is not the experience of watching fruit grow. Have you ever watched an apple grow on an apple tree? If you have, you're a different person.

Well, maybe a more nice way to say that, you're special. But I think watching fruit grow is so, but that's the point.

[26 : 19] I think it's not impressive. Spiritual formation is the patient work of growth over a lifetime. Fruit grows slowly. So, be committed and be patient.

Be committed and be patient. And stay out of the two ditches that derail spiritual formation, which is one, the first ditch is, oh, I love grace, and grace means I don't got to try.

The other ditch is, it's all about me, and the more effort I put in, the more I'm going to see results. Now, we fall for those two lies because there is a kernel of truth in both of those things.

We do believe, as Christians, that God's grace is given freely to us. It is not in response to our good works. We believe that grace includes the Holy Spirit's help to bring about spiritual formation, a.k.a. fruit.

But let's remember, as Dallas Willard said, grace isn't against effort, it's just against earning. So, stay out of the ditch of spiritual laziness, but also stay out of the ditch of it's all up to me.

[27 : 30] Just like doing nothing isn't going to bring much change, so also trying harder won't change you faster. Spiritual growth is about being diligent, faithful, patient, willing, surrendered, and humble.

So, don't underdo it, and don't overdo it. And guess what? If you're like me, you are going to ping pong between those two extremes quite a bit. It's not, I don't know if I've ever found anybody that sat in the perfect middle of that for very long.

So, if you find yourself a mom of babies or toddlers without much time for withness, or you're in the stage of life that demands that you take care of your elderly parents, that cuts into your time for withness, or you're holding down multiple jobs to make ends meet that leaves you exhausted and not finding much meaning in your withness, just breathe.

Do what you can. Be patient in the season you're in, and let Gandalf's words comfort you. This too shall pass. But also, let's be honest to check ourselves here.

If your phone screen time is six hours a day, or you regularly catch yourself in two-hour death scrolls on social media, or if you're feeling the void quite often with Netflix or Prime or Hulu or Disney Plus or CNN or Fox News or ESPN or on and on and on, the list can go.

[29 : 07] Now is the time to step into integrity and confess that you are the one derailing withness. Make some changes. But do so knowing this.

Wherever you're at on the withness spectrum, God will never love you more than he does right now. God will never love you more than he does right now.

And if you ponder that long enough, I don't think it leads to less withness. I think it leads to more. God loves you that perfectly. He loves you that unconditionally.

He loves you that faithfully. And that's someone worth spending time with. Come to him. And we're going to do that right now. As we prepare to take communion, as the band comes up, we seek to respond.

If you're here, you're not yet a follower of Jesus. Before you come to Jesus at the communion table, you have to come to him in humble surrender.

[30 : 04] Come to the God who will never, who can't love you more than he does right now. And the proof is that he sent his son Jesus to die for your sins, to pay the ultimate price, so that he can have claim on you as his son and as his daughter upon whom he wants to shower his affections and his love upon.

In a moment, there's going to be an opportunity to respond. There will be a prayer to pray up on the screen, and I want to urge you to do that. Now, if you're here and you're already a follower of Jesus, we're going to make space right now to come to the God who can never love you more than he does right now.

But what has he been saying to you throughout this sermon? How has he been calling you to respond? Go to him. He is a father of loving presence.

Go to him. Reflect. Listen to his voice. Respond as he speaks to you. And when you're ready, come to the communion table. Lord, bless this moment right now as we spend some time with you, and then as we respond in our ways, for those in the room who are thinking about praying that prayer that's up on the screen for the first time, I pray that you would meet them right where they are at.

For those who are wrestling with how to respond to this sermon, they're already followers of you, Jesus, before they come to the table, that they would find you in rich, wonderful ways.

[31 : 35] They would come in this moment of communion with you as they take the bread and the cup, that you would meet them in profound, in a profound manner. We pray that in your name.

Amen.