

Day 1

Every person, at some point in life, must decide whether to receive Jesus as his or her Lord and Savior. But that is just the starting point of a lifelong journey in discipleship as a follower of Jesus. As the apostle Paul says, we are to grow mature in Christ. We grow up into the head of the Body, who is Christ (Eph. 4:15). Such "growing up" is the process of spiritual formation.

To be formed spiritually means to engage in specific practices and disciplines with one clear goal: to draw nearer to God in Christ and focus less and less on self. Richard of Chichester, a 13th-century English bishop, once said.

"Day by day, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, to love thee more dearly, and to follow thee more nearly."

Spiritual formation is a process that sharpens our attentiveness to God and helps us to be more and more like Jesus.

Finally, in all spiritual formation and development, it is important to remember that spiritual formation does not take us on a journey. A journey is an exploration without a destination. The joy of the journey is in the exploration and discovery along the way. That really is a secular and postmodern understanding of "spirituality." In spiritual formation, we are on a pilgrimage with a clear destination. As Jesus defines his ministry, we are destined for the kingdom of God. We are "in rehearsal" for life in eternity, in the very presence of God. On this earth, we engage in this earthly pilgrimage day by day.

The five areas of spiritual formation are: reflective reading, active repentance, total stewardship, prayer, and community accountability. As we consider specific practices that aid our formation, it will require us to surrender time. Spiritual formation cannot be found in a "Five Minutes to Improve Spirituality" devotional. It will require us to change the pattern of our lives to practice the purposes of God.

Day 2

Reflective reading. For new believers and experienced disciples, Bible reading is a key part of daily activity. There are different approaches to engaging with the Scriptures for spiritual formation and growth. A more "left-brained," factual method is what we traditionally call Bible study. With a reverent approach to the Word of God, we reflect on the factual dimensions of a passage: its context, original language, and links to other scriptural passages. Often Bible study guides or books can help us gain a greater understanding of the setting of the text and ways to apply its teachings today.

A more "right-brained" approach is to read a text to hear how it "resonates" with our inner life and personal experience. There are inductive study and reflection tools that ask questions to help us open up to experience the Spirit of God in the words of Scripture. Many tools are available, including daily devotions which are usually provocative and emotional in tone, and usually offer questions for reflection following the meditation.

As an example of the two methods, look at Matthew 19:24. Jesus said,

"Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

A more deductive study will point out the context: the parable of the rich young man seeking after God but consumed by his wealth. The meditative or reflective approach asks questions: What is the eye of the needle like in today's world? What is hardest about selling all that I have and giving to the poor? Daily meditative reading feeds the spiritual life and helps us to get inside Bible passages so they become a part of us.

Devotional reading can be another personal spiritual formation tool. Thomas à Kempis, a 15th-century French monk, suggested that Christian laypeople practice lectio divina. He says,

"The good devout man first makes inner preparation for the actions he has later to perform. His outward actions do not draw him into lust and vice; rather it is he who bends them into the shape of reason and right judgment. Who has a stiffer battle to fight than the man who is striving to conquer himself?"

Active repentance. Reflective reading is the foundation of a spiritual life, for God's Word helps us to grow in Christ in heart, mind, and spirit. As we grow deeper in Christ, a part of us becomes more confident in taking on his character. At the same time, in our humanness, we become more aware of how unlike Jesus we are. After all, he was

"tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (Heb. 4:15).

As we move through spiritual formation, we become aware of our need to confess our sins to God. Seth calls it, "Seeing the snakes in the grass."

Sometimes that act of confession can happen privately, during a period of personal prayer. We can present our hearts before God, acknowledging our own sin. Or, as Jesus commanded, we may need to go to the one whom we offended (Matt. 5:23-24). At other times, we may need to find a godly third party, such as a pastor, to talk it out with or to help provide accountability. This person can assure us of God's forgiveness, and advise us of ways we can move forward and put Christian practices in place.

1. Do you have sin that you need to confess?

Prayer. Personal prayer is incredibly important in spiritual formation. We present our whole selves before God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, focusing much more on opening our self to God's call and much less on perceived needs. Prayer can be offered in silence and in reflection on God's Word. We can pray through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We might want to employ a pattern for prayer. For example, the ACTS method: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Sanctification.

Prayer must be the primary conversation in our lives. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians—and Christians today—to be totally open at all times to God's grace:

"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:17-19).

Community Accountability. Ultimately, spiritual formation is not about our personal growth in Christ. Rather, it is about growing in faith in a community of believers. Having someone running the race beside you, is the start of accountability in the discipline of prayer and growth in Christ. The fruit of spiritual formation is the discovery and use of spiritual gifts that will allow us to participate more fully in the total ministry of the church. Through spiritual formation, we become a more dynamic disciple who will impact a world in desperate need of Christ.

1. Thoughts?