

WHEN WE UNDERTAKE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES with the right focus and the right heart, we can experience the amazing paradox of the commitment that leads to freedom!

What is spiritual formation? What does it look like as it manifests in a person's life, and what is the role of church leaders in facilitating the spiritual maturity of the congregation? These questions are explored in the following paragraphs.

### **WHAT SPIRITUAL FORMATION IS AND IS NOT**

The term “spiritual formation” is derived from several Scripture passages which suggest that the very character of Christ will be formed in His believers; they will display His kind of love, peace, patience, and joy. Two such passages are:

*“My dear children,  
for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth  
until Christ is formed in you...”*

Galatians 4:19

and

*“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.  
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—  
His good, pleasing, perfect will.”*

Romans 12:2

Spiritual formation *is not* merely engaging in a checklist of devotional activities. It *is not* simply carving out a daily quiet time, attending church, and giving a tenth of one's income—though such activities are certainly important.

Spiritual formation cannot be compartmentalized into a few areas of a person's life. *Spiritual formation involves a person's whole life.*

## **EDUCATION VERSUS FORMATION**

Jesus urged His followers to love God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and love their neighbors as themselves. It is absolutely vital that believers use all their minds to study the Holy Scriptures.

*However, information alone does not transform people!*

A common misconception among Christian leaders is that merely feeding people enough information will automatically bring about their spiritual maturity. Yet there are many people who know ten times more about the Bible than the average person, but who are not ten times more loving or joyful.

The true litmus test for spiritual formation is the development of the fruit of the Spirit in a person's character: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

## **THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**

Jesus Christ invites us into new life—a wonderful life—with Him.

Do you feel bogged down by guilt because you do not read your Bible enough or pray more? Remember that the point of those spiritual disciplines is not to show God how committed you are to Him. Rather, such activities are simply a means to the end of more fully engaging in life with Jesus.

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard contends that authentic transformation really is possible if people are willing to rearrange their lives around those activities that Jesus practiced to receive power and life from the Father.

Some of those activities are well-described in Richard Foster's book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

## **OPPORTUNITIES IN EVERY SEASON**

No season of life is a barrier to spiritual transformation. Every season offers its own challenges and opportunities.

Times of solitude may be scarce for a mother of small children, but servanthood opportunities abound. When a mother serves her family with prayerful humility, amazing spiritual growth can occur!

Frequent business travelers may be unable to regularly attend church services, but they can seize opportunities to listen to Christian radio and message tapes, sensitively initiate spiritual conversations with fellow travelers, and maximize times of solitude through prayer, Scripture reading, and journaling.

The goal is to realistically evaluate your particular season of life and, given its opportunities and limitations, look for creative ways to grow spiritually.

## **TWO MAJOR MOTIVATORS**

How we respond to pain greatly determines our level of spiritual growth. Pain teaches powerful lessons to those who draw near to Jesus Christ. Rather than focus exclusively upon making people feel better, ministry workers can serve as interpreters of suffering and help people understand the lessons offered by a season of pain.

Likewise, people who see God at work in a cross-cultural setting are often catapulted to a new level of spiritual maturity. Seek ways to offer such opportunities to the congregation. When people leave their comfort zones, cooperate with the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and trust God in new ways...growth happens!

## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

There are three primary actions church leaders can undertake as they seek to encourage spiritual maturity in a congregation:

**Teach:** Jesus intends for His followers to be radically loving and inclusive truth-tellers who are committed to serving Him and each other. The Church desperately needs teaching that conveys the goodness of God and the life that He offers.

**Inspire:** The best way to inspire people toward spiritual growth is by modeling. People need to see that it is worth giving everything they have to pursue being transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

**Challenge:** Challenge people to ask themselves, “Am I becoming more loving? More patient? More joyful and kind?” Every moment is a chance to be with Jesus and learn how to live in His Kingdom.



*“Whatever you do, whether in word or deed,  
do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to God the Father through Him”*

Colossians 3:17

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