

## Living A Transformed Life Adequate To Our Calling

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*"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called."*

(Eph. 4:1)

*"Since we stand before so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, with our eyes set on Jesus, who initiated our faith and will bring it to perfection."*

(Heb. 12:1-2)

*"There is no good tree which produces bad fruit....*

*The good man out of the good stored up in his heart, brings forth what is good."*

(Luke 6:43-45)

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To fulfill the high calling which God has placed upon us in creating us and redeeming us, we must have the right inner substance or character. We must come to grips with who we really are, inside and out. For we *will* do what we are. So we will need to become the kind of people who *routinely and easily* walk in the goodness and power of Jesus our Master. For this, a process of "spiritual formation"—really, *transformation*—is required.

Spiritual formation for the Christian is a Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self—our "spiritual" side—in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself. In the degree to which such a spiritual transformation to inner Christlikeness is successful, the outer life of the individual will become a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus. We will simply "walk the walk," as we say.

Christlikeness of the inner being is not a merely human attainment, of course. It is, finally, a gift of grace. Nevertheless, well-informed human effort is indispensable. Spiritual formation in Christ is not a passive process. Grace does not make us passive. Divine grace is *God acting in our life to accomplish what we cannot do on our own*. It informs our being and actions and makes them effective in the wisdom and power of God. Hence, grace is not opposed to *effort* (in actions) but to *earning* (an attitude).

Paul the Apostle, who perhaps understood grace as none other, remarks on his own efforts for Christ: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." (2 Cor. 15:10) The supernatural outcome that accompanies *grace-full* action stands out.

Spiritual formation in Christ is the way of rest for the weary and over-loaded, of the easy yoke and the light burden (Matt. 11:28-30), of cleaning the inside of the cup and the dish (Matt. 23:26), of the good tree that cannot bear bad fruit (Luke 6:43). It is the path along which God's commandments are found not to be "heavy." (1 John 5:3)

Before turning to some details of Christian spiritual transformation in the various dimensions of the human being, we need to be clear about **the general pattern** that all effective efforts toward personal transformation—not just Christian spiritual formation—must follow. Because we are active participants in the process, and because what we do or do not do makes a huge difference, our efforts must be based on understanding. The degree of success in such efforts will essentially depend upon the degree to which this general pattern is understood and intentionally followed. Jesus indeed said that without him we can do nothing. (John 15:5) But we can also be sure that if we do nothing it will be without him. So he *commands* us to "abide in the Vine." (15:1-7) We must find a way to do that.

Let us begin with a couple of easy illustrations, and then spell out the pattern in its generality.

## Learning to Speak Arabic

Suppose someone wishes to speak a language they do not presently know: say Arabic or Japanese. In order to carry through with this simple case of (partial) personal transformation, they must have some idea of what it would be like to speak the language in question—of what their lives would then be like—and why this would be a desirable or valuable thing for them. They also need to have some idea of what must be done to learn to speak the language, and why the price in time, energy, and money that must be expended constitutes a 'bargain,' considering what they get in return. If they are to succeed, all of this needs to be clearly before them. They need to be gripped by the desirability of it. That would be their *vision*.

The general absence of such a *vision* explains why language learning is generally so unsuccessful in educational programs in the United States. The presence of such a vision, on the other hand, explains why the English language is learned at a phenomenal rate all around the world. Multitudes clearly see the ways in which their life might be improved by knowledge of English. As the vision is clear and strong, it pulls everything else required along with it; and the language is learned, even in difficult and distracting circumstances.

Still, more than vision is required, and, especially, there is required an earnest *intention*. Projects of personal transformation do not succeed by accident, drift, or imposition. Effective action has to involve order, subordination, and progression, developing from the inside of the personality. It is, in other words, a spiritual matter, a matter of meaning and will, for we are spiritual beings. Conscious involvement with "order, subordination, and progression, developing from the 'inside' of the personality," is required.

Imagine, if you can, a person wondering day after day if he or she is going to learn Arabic, or if he or she is going to get married to a certain person—just waiting, to see whether it would "happen." That would be laughable. But many people actually seem to live in this way with respect to major issues involving them, including spiritual growth. That fact goes far to explain why lives often go as badly as they do. To learn a language, as for the many even more important concerns of life, we must resolutely *intend* the vision, if it is to be realized. That is, we must initiate, decide, bring into being, those factors that would turn the vision into reality.

And that brings us to the final element in the **general pattern** of personal transformation: that of *means* or instrumentalities. Carrying through with the pattern for the illustration at hand, one will sign up for language courses, listen to recordings, buy books, associate with people who speak Arabic, immerse yourself in the culture, possibly spend some intensive times in Jordan or Morocco, and practice, practice, practice. There are means known to be effective toward transforming people into speakers of Arabic or Russian, etc. This is not mysterious. If the vision is clear and strong, and the employment of the means thoughtful and persistent, then the outcome will be ensured.

### Another Illustration: Alcoholics Anonymous

Another illustration of the "general pattern" of personal transformation is provided by Alcoholics Anonymous and similar "twelve step" programs. Here, of course, the significance of the transformation or change is perhaps far greater for the person involved, than in the case of learning a language; and the outcome is a negative one—that is, a *refraining* from doing something very harmful, something that could possibly lead to untimely death. But the pattern is basically the same.

A desirable state of being is envisioned, and an intention to realize it is actuated in decision. Means are applied to fulfill the intention (and the corresponding decision) by producing the desirable state of being: in this case, abstinence from alcohol and a life of sobriety, with all the good that that entails. The familiar means of the traditional AA program—the famous "twelve steps" and the personal and social arrangements in which they are concretely embodied, including a conscious involvement of God in the individual's life—are highly effective in bringing about personal transformation.

### V-I-M: The General Pattern

With these two illustrations before us (language learning and AA), the general pattern of personal transformation should now be clear. We emphasize that it also holds for those transformations that can only occur through Grace: through the initiative and through the constant direction and upholding of God. To keep the general pattern in mind as we continue, we will use the little acronym "VIM," as in the phrase "vim and vigor."

- Vision
- Intention
- Means

"Vim" is grammatically related to the Latin term "vis," meaning direction, strength, force, vigor, power, energy, or virtue; and sometimes meaning sense, import, nature or essence. Now spiritual formation in Christlikeness is all of this to human existence. It is the path by which we can truly, as Paul told the Ephesians, "be empowered in the Lord and in the energy of his might" (Ephesians 6:10) and "become mighty with his energy through his Spirit entering into the inward person" (3:16). It spells out the "life to the full" that Jesus, in his own person, brought into the life of humankind. (John 10:10) Only by receiving this life do we become adequate to our calling. God never intended anything else.

So, if we are to be spiritually formed in Christ, we must implement the appropriate vision, intention, and means. Not just any path we take will do. If this **V-I-M** pattern is not properly put in place and resolutely adhered to, Christ simply will not be formed in us. We do not want to be 'picky' about the details. That can sidetrack us into legalism. But apart from an overall **V-I-M** pattern of life, what we are inwardly will be *left substantially as it was* before we came to know Christ, and as it is in nonChristians. Our inner life—what makes up our inner being of *will, thoughts, emotions, social connections* and even the *dispositions of our body*—will constantly entangle us and defeat us. Paul's penetrating description has never been improved on: "For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish." (Rom. 7:19) Paul, of course, did not stay there. He knew the bitter reality, but he also knew how to move on.

We will make a quick survey of **V-I-M** in spiritual formation, and then return to each part for a deeper look.

### The Vision of Life in the Kingdom

The *vision* of our life in the kingdom of God, is the place we must start. This is the vision Jesus brought. It was the *gospel* he preached. He came announcing, manifesting, and teaching what the kingdom of the heavens was like, and that it was immediately available in Himself. "I was sent for this purpose," he said (Luke 4:43). If we from the heart accept Him and His kingdom, we will find our feet firmly planted on the path of Christian spiritual formation.

What is "the kingdom of God." It is **the range of God's effective will**, where what God wants done is done. It is, like God himself, from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 103:17; see also Psalm 93:1-2; Daniel 4:3; 7:14; and so on). The planet Earth and its immediate surroundings seem to be the only place in creation where God *permits* his will to *not* be done. Therefore we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," and we hope for the time when that kingdom will be completely fulfilled even here on earth (Luke 21:31; 22:18)—where, in fact, it *is* already present (Luke 17:21; John 18:36-37), and is available to those who seek it with all their hearts (Matthew 6:13; 11:12; Luke 16:16). For those who do so seek and find it in Christ, it is true even now that "all things work together for their good" (Romans 8:28, PAR), and that nothing can cut them off from God's inseparable love and effective care (Romans 8: 35-39). That is the nature of a life in the kingdom of the heavens *now*.

The vision that underlies spiritual (trans)formation into Christlikeness is, then, the vision of life now and forever in the range of God's effective will. This means we are *partaking* of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 3:1-2) through a birth "from above," and *participating* by our actions in what God is doing now in our lifetime on earth. Thus Paul tells us, "Whatever we do, speaking or acting, do all on behalf of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father" (Colossians 3:17, PAR). Being born into his Kingdom, in everything we do we are permitted to do his work. That is what we are learning. That is the privilege extended to us in the gospel. What this vision calls us to is to live fully in the kingdom of God—and as fully as possible *now* and *here*, not just hereafter.

### The Intention to be a Kingdom Person

The vision of life in the kingdom through reliance upon Jesus makes it possible for us to *intend* to live in the kingdom as he did. We can actually *decide* to do it. Concretely, we intend to live in the kingdom of God by *intending to obey* the precise example and teachings of Jesus. This is the form taken by our confidence in him. Our confidence in him is not merely a matter of believing things *about* him, however true and important they may be. Indeed, no one can actually believe the truth about him without trusting him by intending to obey him. It is a mental impossibility. To think otherwise is to indulge a widespread illusion that now smothers spiritual formation in Christlikeness among professing Christians and prevents Christian spiritual formation from naturally spreading worldwide.

Gandhi, who had closely observed Christianity as practiced around him in Great Britain and in Europe, remarked that if only Christians would live according to their belief in the teachings of Jesus, "we all would become Christians." We know what he meant, and he was right. But the dismaying truth is that the Christians *were* living according to their "belief" in the teachings of Jesus. They *didn't* believe them! They did not really trust him.

Knowing the "right answers"—knowing *which* ones they are, being able to identify them and say them—does not mean we *believe* them. To believe them, like believing anything else, means that we are set to act as if they (the "right answers") were true, and that we will so act in appropriate circumstances. And acting as if the right answers are true means, in turn, that we intend to obey the example and teachings of Jesus our Master. What else *could* we intend if we believed he is who his people through the ages have declared him to be?

The idea that you can trust Christ and not intend to obey him is an illusion generated by the prevalence of an unbelieving "Christian culture." In fact, you can no more trust Jesus and not intend to obey him than you could trust your doctor or your auto mechanic and not intend to follow their advice. If you don't intend to follow their advice, you simply don't trust them.

### Intention Involves Decision

Now, an intention is whole and real only if it includes a decision to fulfill or carry through with the intention. We commonly find people who say they intend (or intended) to do certain things that they do not do. To be fair, external circumstances may sometimes have prevented them from carrying out the action. And habits deeply rooted in our bodies and life contexts can, for a while, thwart even a sincere intention. But if something like that is not the case, we know that they never actually decided to do what they say they intended to do, and that they therefore did not really intend to do it. Accordingly they lack the power and order that intention brings into life processes.

Of course the robust intention, with its inseparable decision, can only be formed and sustained upon the basis of a forceful vision. The elements of **V-I-M** are mutually reinforcing. Those whose word "is their bond," or "is as good as gold," are people with a vision of integrity. They *see* themselves standing in life and before God as those who do not say one thing and think another. They "mean what they say." This is greatly valued before God, who abominates "swearing falsely" and honors those "who stand by their oath even when it harms them" (Psalm 15:4, PAR). Similarly, it is the vision of life in God's kingdom and its goodness that provides an adequate basis for the steadfast intention to obey Christ. And that intention, carried through, will in turn enhance the vision by making it clearer and brighter.

### Means

The clear vision and the solid intention to obey Christ will naturally lead to seeking out and applying the *means* to that end. That is the natural order in human life. Here the means in question are the means for *spiritual* transformation: for replacing the inner character of the "lost" person with the inner character of Jesus—his vision, understanding, feelings, decisions, and character. By finding such means we are not left to ourselves, but have rich resources available to us in the example and teachings of Jesus, in the Scriptures generally, and in his people through the ages. They include such practices as solitude, memorization and meditation upon scriptures, fellowship and accountability to others, and so forth. More on this below.

Suppose, for example, we are convinced that we should, as Jesus would, be generous to those who are in need, but who have already taken away some of our money or property through legal processes. Mere "will power," with gritted teeth, cannot be enough to enable us to do this. By what means, then, can we become the kind of person who would gladly do this, as Jesus himself would do it? If we have the *vision* of the goodness of it, and we *intend* (have decided) to do it, we can certainly find and implement the *means*.

For example we might, in solitude, prayer and scripture meditation, identify our resentment and our anger toward the person who needs our help as the cause of our not gladly helping him. And then there is *justice*. Ah, justice! Perhaps in the form of "I do not owe it to him. He has no claims on me." Or perhaps we feel the legal case that went against us and in his favor was rigged or unfair. Or again, perhaps we think we must secure ourselves by holding onto whatever surplus items we have. After all, we may say, who knows what the future holds? Or perhaps we think giving to people what is unearned by them will harm them by corrupting their character, leading them to believe one can get something for nothing. Or perhaps it is just not our habit to give to people with no prior claim on us—without regard to whether they

may also have injured or deprived us. Or perhaps our friends, including our religious friends, would think we are fools. And so forth.

What a thicket of darkness and lostness stands in the way of doing a simple good thing: helping someone in need, someone who just happens to have previously won a legal case against us, possibly quite justly. It is the all-too-customary human thinking, feeling, and social practice that stands in the way. And, truthfully, it is very likely that little can be done *on the spot* to help one do the good thing that Jesus commands. But by a course of study, prayer and practice we can become different inside, and then be able to do it with ease and joy.

This is characteristic of all Jesus's example and teaching. When my neighbor who has injured me or triumphed over me in the past now stands before me in a need I can remedy, I will not be able "on the spot" to do the good thing, if my inner being is filled with all the thoughts, feelings, and habits that characterize the ruined soul and its world. On the other hand, if I intend to obey Jesus Christ, I must intend and decide to *become the kind of person who would obey*. That is, I must find the means of receiving his grace and changing my inner being until it is substantially like his, pervasively characterized by his thoughts, feelings, habits, and relationship to the Father. Overall, this will amount to a life organized around wise *spiritual disciplines under grace*. We learn that we cannot do what we should do just by *trying*, but that by *training* we can become the kind of person who would do it with little thought or effort.

In the spiritual life it is actually true that "where there is a will there is a way." It is true there because God is involved and makes his help available to those who seek it. On the other hand, where there is no will (firm intentions based on clear vision) there is no way. People who do not intend to be inwardly transformed, so that obedience to Christ "comes naturally," will not be transformed. God will not pick us up and throw us into transformed kingdom living, into "holiness."

In sum, the problem of spiritual transformation (really, of the normal lack thereof) among those who identify as Christians today is not that it is impossible, or that effectual means to it are not available. The problem is that spiritual transformation into Christlikeness is not intended. People do not see it and its value, and decide to carry through with it. They do not decide to do the things Jesus did and said. And this in turn is, today, largely due to the fact that they have not been given a vision of life in God's kingdom, within which such a decision and intention would make sense. The 'gospel' they have heard did not bring that vision. As a result, the entire **V-I-M** of Christ's life and life in Christ is not the intentional substance and framework of their life.

Now, with this preliminary survey of how transformation into Christlikeness unfolds before us, let us go back and look into each division of **V-I-M** in greater depths.

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"Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you." (2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1:10-11)

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### **MATTERS FOR THOUGHT:**

1. Is the emphasis upon the 'inner' aspect of spiritual formation correct, or just an evasion of responsibility to act rightly and publicly, sometimes called "privatization"?
2. 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 9:8 and Zech. 4:7 are clear statements of grace as "God acting in our lives to accomplish what we cannot do on our own." Can you find other verses that express this understanding? How does this understanding contrast with or supplement ordinary views of grace?
3. How might spiritual formation in Christlikeness make obedience to God easy?
4. Have you experienced, can you think of, other areas of application for the "general pattern" of personal

transformation?

5. Do you believe that you could change to the point where loving your worst enemy would be the natural thing for you to do?
6. How close is the vision of life now in the Kingdom of God related to what you normally hear as the gospel of Jesus Christ?
7. Can intention really be as important for spiritual formation as suggested here?
8. Are there "means" which you have found especially helpful toward inner transformation into Christlikeness? Describe how they worked.

### **The Vision of the Disciple of Jesus**

As a genuine disciple or apprentice of Jesus, I am caught up in his *vision* of the goodness and greatness of God and of life in His kingdom. On that basis I am *with* Jesus, by choice and by grace, learning from him *how to live in the kingdom of God*. To live in the kingdom means, we recall, to live within the range of God's effective will, his life flowing through mine. Another good way of putting this is to say that as a disciple *I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I*. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, of course; but I am learning how to do everything *I* do in the manner and from the source from which he did all that he did.

It is in discipleship to Jesus that we become capable of "Walking in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called." For the disciple, there are three main ways in which God comes to fill our vision. Through them the lovely God wins the steadfast love and confidence of the disciple. He comes to us (1) through his creation, (2) through his public acts on the scene of human history, and (3) through individual experiences of him by ourselves and others around us.

#### **"God the Father Almighty, the Maker of Heaven and Earth"**

The apostle Paul explains that all human beings remain responsible before God, no matter how far away they may fall, precisely because of the clear way in which God stands forth in nature: "Since the creation of the world," he says, "God's invisible nature is clearly presented to their understanding through what has been made" (Rom. 1: 19-20).

In a later passage in Romans (10: 18), Paul comes close to identifying the very "word of Christ," the gospel, with the word of God that goes out from nature to "the ends of the earth," according to Psalm 19. Through the ages and up to today, outstanding thinkers have continued to be convinced of the soundness of such thinking, and ordinary people usually grant that it is correct.

But, though the rational processes involved in seeing the Creator through nature are important—and, I believe, they are conclusive when fairly examined—they are not all that is involved in our awareness of God in nature. It may be that for most people God is more *sensed* through nature than *inferred*—somewhat as I "sense" or "read" your thoughts, feelings, and presence when I am around you, and do not infer them.

The words of the poet Wordsworth express what many people find:

"And I have felt  
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things."

However it may come, in the training that brings apprentices of Jesus to live on that solid rock of "hearing and doing" (Matt. 7:24-25), "God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth" must be made present to their minds in such a way that they can see his magnificent beauty and their love can be strongly and constantly drawn to him. This will make a huge and indispensable contribution to their ability to love him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to receive and follow their calling with ultimate confidence in him.

### "Knowledge of the Glory of God in the Face of Christ"

We also bring the heart-wrenching goodness of God, his incomprehensible graciousness and generosity, before the mind of disciples by helping them to see and understand the person of Jesus. On a wearying, dreadful night, Jesus was saying a lot of things that were confusing and upsetting those in his little circle of friends. Philip blurted out, "You talk about the Father all the time. just show us the Father and that will satisfy us" (John 14:8). Jesus patiently replied, "Haven't you yet understood who I am, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (v. 9). No doubt Philip and the others experienced this as just too good to be true. Could the character of God really be that of Jesus? The stunning answer is, "Yes indeed."

The key, then, to loving God is to *see Jesus*, to hold him before the mind with as much fullness and clarity as possible. It is to adore him. For purposes of training ourselves and others, we should divide this into four main aspects.

First, we see his beauty, truth, and power while he lived among us as one human being among others. The content of the Gospels must come to life in such a way that the Gospels become a permanent presence and possession of the mind of the disciple. The radiant person of Jesus shines forth from them up to the present day. We can go through life with him "at our elbow," therefore "Under the shadow of the Almighty." (Psalm 91:1)

Second, we see the way he went to execution as a common criminal among other criminals on our behalf. We don't have to understand exactly how it works. But the *fact* is something we must always have before our minds. That is a good reason to wear or display a cross. For all it's mystery it still says: "I am bought by the sufferings and death of Jesus and I belong to God. The divine operation of which I am a part shoots through human history in the form of a cross." Individual disciples must have indelibly imprinted upon their souls the reality of this wonderful person who walked among us and suffered a cruel death to enable each of us to have life in God. It should become something that is *never* beyond the margins of their consciousness. "God," Paul said, "makes clear the greatness of his love for us through the fact that Christ died for us while we were still rebelling against him" (Rom. 5:8). Upon this vision of God, transformation into Christlikeness is based.

The genuine exclusiveness of the Christian revelation of God lies here. No one can have an adequate view of the heart and purposes of the God of the universe who does not understand that he permitted his son to die on the cross to reach out to all people, even people who hated him. That is who God is. But this is not just a "right answer" to a theological question. It is God looking at *me* from the cross with compassion and providing for me, with never-failing readiness to take my hand to walk on through life, wherever I may find myself at the time.

Paul's sense of the meaning of the death of the God's Son for individual human beings is spelled out in ecstatic detail in Rom. 8:31-39:

"God is for us! Who is against us? Since he did not spare his own Son in reaching us, he obviously is ready to give us every good thing. Who will charge us with anything? God has cleared us of all his charges. Who condemns us? Jesus died for us. Yes, and he passed through death intact, and now stands in the place from which God acts, looking after our interests. Of all the terrible and frightening things the human mind discovers, not one can take us out of his loving hands. We don't just "manage" or cope. We *thrive* on it all! Nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus the Anointed, our Lord." (Paraphrase)

With this radiant passage before us, the last two aspects of Jesus person to be imprinted on the disciple's soul in training are already in view.

Third, we see the reality of Jesus risen, his actual existence now as a person who is present among his people. We find

him in his *ecclesia*, his sometimes motley but always glorious crew of called-out ones. We trace him from those uncomprehending encounters on the first Easter morning, and on through the amazingly different historical periods of the church. But we also find him now active among his disciples. Who he is, is revealed in an essential way in his people.

So the continuing incarnation of the divine Son in his scattered and his gathered people must fill our minds if we are to love him and his Father adequately and thus live on the rock of hearing and doing. And to see how he has been and is lived with and loved and served and presented and celebrated by all kinds of people across time and space adds to the force of our love for him and our vision of The Father.

But fourth, we see the Jesus who is the master of the created universe and of human history. He is the one in ultimate control of all the atoms, particles, quarks, "strings," and so forth upon which the physical cosmos depends.

Human beings have long aspired to control the ultimate foundations of ordinary reality. We have made a little progress, and there remains an unwavering sense that this is the direction of our destiny. That is the theological meaning of the scientific and technological enterprise. It has always presented itself to "man on his own" as the instrument for solving human problems. But without a divine context it becomes idolatrous and veers wildly out of human control, threatening self-destruction.

But this Jesus is master of all reality through his word. Satan, in tempting him, claimed to be in possession of all the kingdoms of the earth. But Satan was lying, as is his nature. Lies are his only hope. It is Jesus himself who is King of the kings of the earth, and who for good purposes allows Satan and evil to have some influence on humanity—for a while. And it is he, as the Logos, the Cosmic Christ, who maintains and manipulates the ultimate laws of the physical universe. In him, the early Christians well understood, "are hidden all of the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge." (Col. 2:3)

Thoroughly presented in all these ways, the love of Jesus for us, and the magnificence of his person, brings the disciple to adore Jesus. His love and loveliness fills our lives. An older Franciscan brother said to Brennan Manning on the day he joined the order, "Once you come to know the love of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the world will seem as beautiful or desirable."

Jesus himself knew that this love was the key. The keeping of his commandments was the true sign of love for him, because that love is what made it possible and actual. In this love of Jesus everything comes together: "If anyone loves me, my word he will keep, and my Father will love him, and we will move in with him and live there" (John 14:23).

### **God's Hand Seen Through the Events of the Disciple's Life**

The third area of vision required to bring disciples to the place where they love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength concerns the goodness of their own existence and of the life received through their natural birth and the following course of their life.

God, as our "faithful Creator" and as presented "in the face of Jesus Christ," is lovely and magnificent. But he will remain something to be admired, or even worshiped, at a distance if that is all we know of him. In order for disciples to be brought into a full and joyous love of God, they must see their very own life within the framework of unqualified goodness. Perhaps "see" is too strong a word, though it is certainly what we should hope for. But they must at least be sure in their heart of hearts that *their* life is a very good thing and that God has done well by them.

Saint Clare, won in her youth to a life of complete devotion to Jesus by Saint Francis of Assisi, had these for her last words: "Lord God, blessed be thou for having created me!" This can be the daily breath of a disciple of Jesus.

Just previously, as she lay near death, Brother Rainaldo had exhorted her to bear her infirmities with patience. She replied, "Dearest brother, ever since I have known the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ through his servant Francis, no suffering has troubled me, no penance has been hard, no sickness too arduous."

Then, before her last words, she was heard to murmur to her soul, "Depart in peace, for thou wilt have a good escort on the journey. Go forth confidently to Him who has protected thee and loved thee as a mother loves her child.""

We will never have the easy, unhesitating love of God that makes obedience to Jesus our natural response, unless we are absolutely sure that it is good for us to be, and to be who we are. This means we must have no doubt that the path appointed for us by when and where and to whom we were born is good, and that nothing irredeemable has happened to us or can happen to us on our way to our destiny in God's world.

Most of our doubts about the goodness of our life concern very specific matters: our parents and family, our body, our marriage and children (or lack thereof), our opportunities in life, our work and calling (which are not the same thing), and our job. Careful study, teaching, training, and guidance must be received with reference to the all aspects of the disciples' lives: parents, body, love and sexuality, marriage and children, experience with work and jobs. The object in each case is to enable the disciple to be thankful for who they are and what they have. An often painful progression will be required: from honesty to acceptance to compassion and forgiveness and then on to thankfulness to God and the honoring of our lives in all of the aspects indicated. And when this training has been completed, Paul's words will make perfect sense: "Always giving thanks for all things on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father" (Eph. 5:20). And again: "I have learned how to be content whatever the circumstances.... I can do all things in him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:11, 13). This is the vision of God that must undergird our calling.

It is being included in the eternal life of God that heals all wounds and allows us to stop demanding satisfaction for the hurts we have received. What *really* matters, of a personal nature, once it is clear that you are included in God's eternal life? You have been chosen. God chooses you. This is the message of the kingdom. A very touching passage occurs in the writings of Isaiah the prophet on this point. In his day, non-Israelites were always "on the outside looking in," as we say. And likewise eunuchs, who could never have a family of their own. But God says to them, "I will give them a place forever in my house, and a name better than sons and daughters; a name that will stand forever (Isa. 56:2-5). The greatness and goodness of the great God who takes us up into his life—that is our peace and our joy.

### **MATTERS FOR THOUGHT:**

1. How would you characterize the normal or usual vision of life in Christ today?
2. What do you think is the most important thing to believe ('see') about God?
3. What is the place of *nature* in the Gospel? (Consider Romans 10:13-20)
4. What does Jesus show us that nature cannot? Why can't people do with just nature?
5. Say aloud, "God has truly done well by me!" Say it to others.

### **Intention in Spiritual Formation**

A clear vision of God and of the place he has made for us in him enables us to form a strong and clear intention to live in that vision. One of the most helpful things ever written on *the centrality of intention and decision* in the life of the disciple is Chapter Two of William Law's book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. The chapter is titled, "An Inquiry into the Reason, Why the Generality of Christians Fall So Far Short of the Holiness and Devotion of Christianity." What follows is a major portion of that Chapter. In the previous Chapter he had discussed at length on the failure of the usual Christian, in his country at the time, to be different from non-Christians. Then Law writes:

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It may now be reasonably inquired, how it comes to pass, that the lives even of the better sort of people are thus strangely contrary to the principles of Christianity?

But before I give a direct answer to this, I desire it may also be inquired, how it comes to pass that *swearing* is so common a vice among Christians? It is indeed not yet so common among women, as it is among men. But among men this sin is so common, that perhaps there are more than two in three that are guilty of it through the whole course of their lives.... Now I ask, how comes it, that two in three of the men are guilty of so gross and profane a sin as this is? There is neither ignorance nor human infirmity to plead for it; it is against an express commandment, and the most plain doctrines of our blessed Savior.

Do but now find the reason why the generality of men live in this notorious vice, and then you will have found the reason why the generality even of the better sort of people live so contrary to Christianity.

The reason of common swearing is this; it is because men have not so much as the intention to please God in all their actions. For let a man but have so much piety as to intend to please God in all the actions of his life, as the happiest and best thing in the world, and then he will never swear more. It will be as impossible for him to swear, whilst he feels this

intention within himself, as it is impossible for a man that intends to please his Prince, to go up and abuse him to his face.

It seems but a small and necessary part of piety to have such a sincere intention as this; and that he has no reason to look upon himself as a disciple of Christ who is not thus far advanced in piety. And yet it is purely for want of this degree of piety, that you see such a mixture of sin and folly in the lives even of the better sort of people. It is for want of this intention that you see men that profess religion, yet live in swearing and sensuality; that you see clergymen given to pride, and covetousness, and worldly enjoyments. It is for want of this intention, that you see women that profess devotion, yet living in all the folly and vanity of dress, wasting their time in idleness and pleasures, and in all such instances of state and equipage as their estates will reach. For let but a woman feel her heart full of this intention, and she will find it as impossible to patch or paint, as to curse or swear; she will no more desire to shine at balls or assemblies, or make a figure amongst those that are most finely dressed, than she will desire to dance upon a rope to please spectators: she will know, that the one is as far from the wisdom and excellency of the Christian spirit as the other.

It was this is general intention (to please God in all things), that made the primitive Christians such eminent instances of piety, and made the goodly fellowship of the saints, and all the glorious army of martyrs and confessors. And if you will here stop, and ask yourselves, why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance, nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it. You observe the same Sunday worship that they did; and you are strict in it, because it is your full intention to be so. And when you as fully intend to be like them in their ordinary common life, when you intend to please God in all your actions, you will find it as possible, as to be strictly exact in the service of the Church. And when you have this intention to please God in all your actions, as the happiest and best thing in the world, you will find in you as great an aversion to every thing that is vain and impertinent in common life, whether of business or pleasure, as you now have to any thing that is profane. You will be as fearful of living in any foolish way, either of spending your time, or your fortune, as you are now fearful of neglecting the public worship....

Again, let a tradesman but have this intention, and it will make him a saint in his shop; his every-day business will be a course of wise and reasonable actions, made holy to God, by being done in obedience to His will and pleasure. He will buy and sell, and labour and travel, because by so doing he can do some good to himself and others. But then, as nothing can please God but what is wise, and reasonable, and holy, so he will neither buy nor sell, nor labour in any other manner, nor to any other end, but such as may be shown to be wise, and reasonable, and holy. He will therefore consider, not what arts, or methods, or application, will soonest make him richer and greater than his brethren, or remove him from a shop to a life of state and pleasure; but he will consider what arts, what methods, what application, can make worldly business most acceptable to God, and make a life of trade a life of holiness, devotion, and piety. This will be the temper and spirit of every tradesman; he cannot stop short of these degrees of piety, whenever it is his intention to please God in all his actions, as the best and happiest thing in the world. And on the other hand, whoever is not of this Spirit and temper in his trade and profession, and does not carry it on only so far as is best subservient to a wise, and holy, and heavenly life, it is certain that he has not this intention ; and yet without it, who can be shown to be a follower of Jesus Christ ?

Again, let the gentleman of birth and fortune but have this intention, and you will see how it will carry him from every appearance of evil, to every instance of piety and goodness. He cannot live by chance, or as humour and fancy carry him, because he knows that nothing can please God but a wise and regular course of life. He cannot live in idleness and indulgence, in sports and gaming, in pleasures and intemperance, in vain expenses and high living, because these things cannot be turned into means of piety and holiness, or made so many parts of a wise and religious life. As he thus removes from all appearance of evil, so he hastens and aspires after every instance of goodness. He does not ask what is allowable and pardonable, but what is commendable and praiseworthy.... He will not therefore look at the lives of Christians, to learn how he ought to spend his estate, but he will look into the Scriptures, and make every doctrine, parable, precept, or instruction, that relates to rich men, a law to himself in the use of his estate....

I have chosen to explain this matter by appealing to this intention , because it makes the case so plain, and because every one that has a mind may see it in the clearest light, and feel it in the strongest manner, by only looking into his own heart. For it is as easy for every person to know whether he intends to please God in all his actions, as for any servant to know whether this be his intention towards his master. Every one also can as easily tell how he lays out his money, and whether he considers how to please God in it, as he can tell where his estate is, and whether it be in money or land. So that here is no plea left for ignorance or frailty as to this matter; everybody is in the light, and everybody has power. And no one can fail, but he that is not so much a Christian, as to intend to please God in the use of his estate.

You see two persons: one is regular in public and private prayer, the other is not. Now the reason of this difference is not this, that one has strength and power to observe prayer, and the other has not; but the reason is this, that one intends to please God in the duties of devotion, and the other has no intention about it. Now the case is the same, in the right or

wrong use of our time and money. You see one person throwing away his time in sleep and idleness, in visiting and diversions, and his money in the most vain and unreasonable expenses. You see another careful of every day, dividing his hours by rules of reason and religion, and spending all his money in works of charity: now the difference is not owing to this, that one has strength and power to do thus, and the other has not; but it is owing to this, that one intends to please God in the right use of all his time, and all his money, and the other has no intention about it....

So that the fault does not lie here, that we desire to be good and perfect, but through the weakness of our nature fall short of it; but it is, because we have not piety enough to intend to be as good as we can, or to please God in all the actions of our life. This we see is plainly the case of him that spends his time in sports when he should be at Church; it is not his want of power, but his want of intention or desire to be there....

This doctrine does not suppose, that we have no need of Divine grace, or that it is in our own power to make ourselves perfect. It only supposes, that through the want of a sincere intention of pleasing God in all our actions we fall into such irregularities of life as by the ordinary means of grace we should have power to avoid; and that we have not that perfection, which our present state of grace makes us capable of, because we do not so much as intend to have it. It only teaches us, that the reason why you see no real mortification or self-denial, no eminent charity, no profound humility, no heavenly affection, no true contempt of the world, no Christian meekness, no sincere zeal, no eminent piety in the common lives of Christians, is this, because they do not so much as intend to be exact and exemplary in these virtues.

### **MATTERS FOR THOUGHT:**

1. What important bearings of intention, or the lack thereof, have you seen on human life? In business, education, health, marriage, etc.?
2. What is Law's point about swearing? Do you think he is right?
3. Is the transfer of the point about swearing to "pleasing God in all things" a fair and accurate one?
4. Is Law's picture of the "tradesman" (business man or woman) as "a saint in his shop" realistic? Desirable?
5. And what of "the gentleman of birth and fortune" (a wealthy, upper-class person)? Realistic? Desirable? Have you seen examples?
6. Is the way Law brings in grace at the end biblically correct?

### **Means to Growth in Grace**

William Law's words seem shocking to contemporary Christians, because it is no part of how we see the Christian life today that we would actually intend and choose to do what Jesus taught. Of course that was also true in his own day, and in the day of a later writer, William Wilberforce, who in 1797 published his *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*. But we today are perhaps all the more shocked because we are almost totally out of touch with the practices, familiar to both Law and Wilberforce, through which transformation toward Christlikeness can reliably come to pass.

Those practices were understood as "means of grace," in the language of Law (see above) and, more famously, in that of John Wesley, one of his careful readers. That is, they are activities which open our lives to the action of God in our heart, mind, body and soul, to progressively remake our whole personality. Another name for them—more ancient, and also more in use recently—is "spiritual disciplines," or "disciplines for the spiritual life." They train us for leading the life which God intended for us: one which has the power and character to fulfill our calling. They are *methods* by which we obey the command to "put off" the old person and to "put on" the new person who is in the likeness of Christ. (Col. 3:9-10; Eph. 4:22-24) They are "exercises unto godliness." (I Tim. 4:7-8) Through them we become capable of doing, with God, all the wonderful things commanded in the Bible, which we know are impossible in our own strength and wisdom.

In general, a "discipline" is *any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort*. Though we may not be aware of it, we experience "disciplines" every day. In these daily or "natural" disciplines we perform acts that result in a direct command of further abilities that we would not otherwise have. If I repeat the telephone number aloud after looking it up, I can remember it until I get it dialed. Otherwise, I probably couldn't. If I train rigorously, I can bench press 300 pounds; otherwise certainly not. Playing a musical instrument and carrying on a lively and interesting conversation are other illustrations of ordinary activities which require discipline in

our physical or "natural" life. We have to "practice" them. Discipline, one can see, is an essential component of any worthwhile human existence.

But essentially the same thing happens with disciplines for our *spiritual* life. When through spiritual disciplines I become able heartily to bless those who curse me, pray without ceasing, to be at peace when not given credit for good deeds I've done, or to master the evil that comes my way, it is because my disciplinary activities have inwardly poised me for more and more interaction with the powers of the living God and his Kingdom. Such is the potential we tap into when we use the disciplines for the spiritual life.

### **Some Activities That Serve as Disciplines.**

What, then, are some particular activities that can serve as disciplines for the spiritual life? And which should we choose for our individual strategy for spiritual growth?

In answering these practical questions, we need not try to come up with a complete list of disciplines. Nor should we assume that *our* particular list will be right for others. Quite a few well-known practices will have a strong claim to be on everyone's list. On the other hand, there are a number of good activities that may not usually be thought of as disciplines, though they can be, and yet others that have served through the ages as spiritual disciplines but are now largely forgotten. For example, there is the *peregrinatio*, or voluntary exile, introduced by the Irish St. Brenden (born 484) and widely practiced for some centuries thereafter. There is the vigil or "watch," where one rejects sleep to concentrate on spiritual matters. The keeping of a journal or spiritual diary continues to be an activity that serves some individuals as a vital discipline, though it probably would not show up on any "standard" list. Sabbath keeping, as instituted in the Old Testament, can be a most productive discipline when adapted to modern life. Physical labor has proven to be a spiritual discipline, especially for those who are also deeply involved in solitude, fasting, study, and prayer. (1 Thess. 4:11-12)

An activity that can be an especially effective spiritual discipline for those who are used to "the better things in life" is to do grocery shopping, banking, and other business in the poorer areas of the city. This has an immense effect on our understanding of and behavior toward our neighbors—both rich and poor—and upon our understanding of what it is to love and care for our fellow human beings.

In our modern society, which proceeds at such a frenetic pace, simple sleep and rest may be disciplines in the sense just described. They will, as we have said, enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort, including staying in good emotional and physical health, and possibly being loving and sensitive to our family and co-workers. But usually when we rest we would not be *practicing* resting—though, in the current world, that too may sometimes be needed, for some people actually cannot even rest by simply doing it. Practice is discipline, but there are disciplines which do not amount to practicing.

Now spiritual disciplines are also *spiritual* disciplines, and not mere bodily behaviors. That is, they are disciplines designed to help us be active and effective in the spiritual realm of our own heart, now spiritually alive by grace in relation to God and his kingdom. They are designed to help us withdraw from a *total* dependence on the merely human or natural; and, in that precise sense, they help us to mortify the "flesh," kill it off, let it die (Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5), and to learn how to depend upon the ultimate reality, which is God and his kingdom.

Thus, for example, I fast from food to know that there is another food that sustains me. I memorize and meditate on scripture that the order of God's kingdom would become the order and power of my mind and my life.

In shaping our own list of spiritual disciplines, we should keep in mind that very few disciplines can be regarded as absolutely indispensable for a healthy spiritual life and work, though some are obviously more important than others. Also, some are more important than others at different stages of our spiritual life. Always practicing a *range* of activities that have proven track records across the centuries will keep us from erring. And, if other activities are needed, our progress won't be seriously hindered, and we'll probably be led into them.

So, to help us make our way into a life of planned disciplines, let us list some activities that have had a wide and profitable use among disciples of Christ, and discuss how to approach some of them in a prayerful, experimental way. The following list is divided into the disciplines of "abstinence" and the disciplines of "engagement." We cannot here discuss what each of these activities is and how each can make an especially important contribution to spiritual growth. But we will be illustrative and point the way to further study.

***Disciplines of Abstinence***

solitude  
silence  
fasting  
frugality  
chastity  
secrecy  
sacrifice  
watching

***Disciplines of Engagement***

study  
worship  
celebration  
service  
prayer  
fellowship  
confession  
submission

As we organize our plan for spiritual growth around some selection of these activities, and as we put that plan into practice, we will see steady transformation of our thoughts, emotions and will—even our body and social context—toward the character of Christlikeness. From the stages of early discipleship, where "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," we increasingly pass to the stages where the flesh—think of that as what we more or less automatically feel, think, and do on our own strength alone—is increasingly aligned with the Spirit and supportive of its deepest intentions in us. This is absolutely essential in a training that successfully brings us to do from the heart the things that Jesus knows to be best.

A further help in understanding what spiritual disciplines are for the disciples of Jesus is to recognize them as simply a matter of following him into *his own practices*, appropriately modified to suit our own condition. We find our way into a life where the power of inward hindrances to obedience/abundance are broken, by observing what Jesus and others who have followed him actually do, and learning to structure our lives around those same activities. Thus, although scripture does not tell us in formulaic terms what to do in order to build our life upon the rock, everyone who knows anything about Jesus' life, and that of his most effective followers, really does know what to do to that end, or can easily find out. It is not a secret. Or perhaps it is an "open secret."

So, basically, to put off the old person and put on the new we only follow Jesus into the activities that he engaged in to nurture his own life in relation to the Father. Of course, his calling and mission was out of all proportion to ours, and he never had our weaknesses. Still what he practiced is, roughly, what we must practice, in order to enter into his heart and character. For example, solitude had a huge place in his life, as the Gospel records show.

**Two Disciplines Of Abstinence: Solitude And Silence.**

By solitude we mean being out of human contact, being alone, and being so for lengthy periods of time. To get out of human contact is not something that can be done in a short while, for such contact lingers long after it is, in one sense, over. And silence, a gift of many dimensions, is a natural part of solitude and essential to its fulness. Most noise *is* human contact. Silence means to escape from sounds and noises, other than the gentle ones of nature perhaps. But it also means not talking, and the effects of not talking on our soul are different from those of simple quietness. Both dimensions of silence are crucial for the breaking of old habits and the formation of Christ's character in us. Silence well-practiced is like the wind of eternity blowing upon you.

Now why, precisely, are these disciplines of abstinence so central to the curriculum for Christlikeness? A primary objective in training in Christlikeness is to break the power of our ready responses to do the *opposite* of what Jesus teaches: for example, scorn, anger, verbal manipulation, payback, silent collusion in the wrongdoing of others around us, and so forth.

These responses mainly exist at what we might call the "epidermal" level of the self, the first point of contact with the world around us. They are almost totally "automatic," given the usual stimuli. The very language we use is laden with

them, and of course they are the "buttons" by which our human surroundings more or less control us. They are not "deep"; they are just *there*, and just constant. They are the area where most of our life is lived. And in action they have the power to draw our whole being into the deepest of injuries and wrongs. ("Mob psychology" and "group think" are well-known testimonies to that.)

Now it is solitude and silence that allow us to escape the patterns of epidermal responses, with their consequences. They provide space to come to terms with these responses and to replace them, with God's help, by different immediate responses that are suitable to the kingdom environment—and, indeed, to the kind of life everyone in saner moments recognizes to be good. They break the pell-mell rush through life and create a kind of inner space that permits people to become aware of what they are doing and what they are *about* to do.

We hear the cries from our strife-torn streets: "Give peace a chance!" and "Can't we all just get along?" But you cannot give peace a chance if that is *all* you give a chance. You have to do the things that make peace possible and actual. When you listen to people talk about peace, you soon realize, in most cases, that they are unwilling to deal with the conditions of society and soul that make strife inevitable. They want to keep them and still have peace, but it is peace on their terms, which is impossible.

And we can't all *just* get along. Rather, we have to become the kinds of persons who can get along. As a major part of this, our epidermal responses have to be changed in such a way that the fire and the fight doesn't start almost immediately when we are "rubbed the wrong way." Solitude and silence give us a place to begin the necessary changes, though they are not a place to stop.

They also give us some space to reform our inmost attitudes toward people and events. They take the world off our shoulders for a time and interrupt our habit of constantly managing things, of being in control, or thinking we are. One of the greatest of spiritual attainments is the capacity to do nothing. Thus, the Christian philosopher Pascal insightfully remarks, "I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room."

Now this idea of *doing nothing* proves to be absolutely terrifying to most people I speak with. But at least the person who is capable of doing nothing proves capable of refraining from doing the wrong thing. And then he or she will be better able to do the right thing.

And "doing nothing" has many other advantages. It may be a great blessing to others around us, who often hardly have a chance while we are in action. And possibly the gentle Father in the heavens would draw nigh if we would just be quiet and rest a bit. Generally speaking, he will not compete for our attention, and as long as we are "in charge" he is liable to keep a certain distance.

Every person should have regular periods in life when he or she has nothing to do. Periods of solitude and silence are excellent practices for helping us learn how to do that. The law that God has given for our benefit tells us that one seventh of our time should be devoted to doing nothing—no work, not by ourselves or any of our family, employees, or animals. That includes, of course, religious work. This is *Sabbath*.

What do you do in solitude or silence? Well, so far as things to "get done," *nothing at all*. As long as you are doing "things to get done," you have not broken human contact. So don't go into solitude and silence with a list. Can we enjoy things in solitude and silence? Yes, but don't try to. Just be there. Don't try to get God to do anything. Just be there. He will find you.

Even lay aside your ideas as to what solitude and silence are supposed to accomplish in your spiritual growth. You will discover incredibly good things. One is that you have a soul. Another, that God is near and the universe is brimming with goodness. Another, that others aren't as bad as you often think. But don't *try* to discover these, or you won't. You'll just be busy and find more of your own doings.

The cure for too-much-to-do is solitude and silence, for there you find you are safely more than what you do. And the cure of loneliness is solitude and silence, for there you discover in how many ways you are never alone.

When you go into solitude and silence, you need to be relatively comfortable. Don't be a hero in this or in any spiritual discipline. You will need rest. Sleep until you wake up truly refreshed. And you will need to stay there long enough for the inner being to become different. Muddy water becomes clear if you only let it be still for a while.

You will know this finding of soul and God is happening by an increased sense of who you are and a lessening of the

feeling that you *have* to do this, that, and the other thing that befalls your lot in life. That harassing, hovering feeling of "have to" largely comes from the vacuum in your soul, where you ought to be at home with your Father in his kingdom. As the vacuum is rightly filled, you will increasingly know that you do not have to do many of those things—not even those you want to do.

Liberation from your own desires is one of the greatest gifts of solitude and silence. When this all begins to happen, you will know you are arriving where you ought to be. Old bondages to wrongdoing will begin to drop off as you see them for what they are. And the possibility of really loving people will dawn upon you.

Soon you will enter into the experience of what it is to live by grace, rather than just talk about it.

These are some of *the fruits of solitude and silence*. The apprentice will have to learn *how* to keep in solitude and silence, of course. For most of us, wise and loving practical arrangements must be made with those around us. And we should encourage and help family members and coworkers to enter such spiritual disciplines themselves.

Obviously the effects of these disciplines will greatly benefit our objective of loving God with a full heart. For the usual distractions of life greatly hinder our attention to God, and the habit of thinking about everything else is almost impossible to break in the bustle of life. Time away can help. People often complain that they cannot pray because their thoughts wander. Those thoughts are simply doing what they usually do. The grip of "the usual" is what must be broken. Appropriate solitude and silence are sure to do it.

### **Two Disciplines Of Positive Engagement: Study And Worship.**

It is a profound truth about human beings that our first area of freedom concerns where we will place our mind. Until solitude and silence have had their effects, our minds will very likely continue to be focused on the wrong things, or on good things in an anxious attitude of trying to dominate them. But as we, through relocating our bodies into solitude, escape and change the inputs that have constantly controlled our thoughts and feelings, we will have additional freedom to place our minds fully upon the great God, His kingdom, and its peace and strength.

This, in turn, will transform our emotional state, and thereby the very condition of our body. Most of those around us will sense that and begin to act differently themselves. The social context will change for the better, and what we have to respond to will be much more in the spirit of the kingdom. I have observed this on many occasions.

Once solitude has done its work, the key to progress in spiritual formation is study. It is in study that we place our minds fully upon God and his kingdom. And study is brought to its natural completion in the worship of God.

When I study anything I take its order and nature into my thoughts, and even into my feelings and actions. At one time I did not know the alphabet, for example. But then I studied it. I brought it before my mind, with the help of my teacher, and related my body to it in ways well known to all. Before very long the order that is in the alphabet was in my mind and body. From there, that order enabled me to reproduce, recognize, and use the alphabet and its parts. The order that I took into myself by study gave me power to do many good things that I could not do until, by study, it had become mine.

What we learn about study from this simple example of the alphabet is true in all areas, from the most theoretical to the most practical. It is also true when we study what is evil, a very dangerous thing to do. Then we take on orders and powers of evil—or they take us. But, thankfully, most of what we naturally come to study is good. A student of plumbing or singing, for example, takes into his or her mind certain orders by purposely dwelling upon the relevant subject matter and activities in appropriate ways. That is how study works. And, of course, it always enables individuals "to do what they cannot do by direct effort"—the mark of a discipline.

The "blessed man" of Psalm 1 (and Joshua 1:8) is one whose "delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers." You can't achieve that outcome on your own. You do it by indirection, absorbing your mind in the ways of God.

Now *disciples* of Jesus are people who want to take into their being the order of the Kingdom of God that is among us. They wish to *live their life in that Kingdom as Jesus himself would*, and that requires internalization of its order. Study is the chief way in which they accomplish that. They devote their attention, their thoughtful inquiry, and their practical experimentation to the order of the kingdom as seen in Jesus, in the written word of scripture, in others who walk in the

way, and, indeed, in every good thing in nature, history, and culture.

Thus Paul's practical advice from his jail cell to his friends at Philippi: "Whatever things are true, serious, right, pure, lovable, well regarded, any virtue and anything admirable, *let your mind dwell on them*. What you have learned, received, heard and seen in me, do that. And the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:8-9). For all such good things are of God and his reign.

Of course, in all our study as and with disciples, the person of Jesus is the center of attention. But he is not really separable, for us, from the written revelatory word, including the law, the prophets, the history, and the wisdom of the Old Testament. One who would train disciples "to hear and do" will direct them to all these, still centered on the person of Jesus.

And the Twenty-third Psalm is also an exquisite summary of life in the kingdom. The mind of the disciple should have it prominently displayed within, to always foster the joy and peace of the kingdom as well as to orient all of his or her actions within it. The Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, Romans 8, Colossians 3, Philippians 2-4, and a few other passages of scripture should be frequently meditated on in depth, and much of them memorized. This is an essential part of any training for Christlikeness. Positive engagement with these scripture will bring kingdom order into our entire personality. This is something you will strongly *experience* as you go through the process of such study.

I know many people who profess serious allegiance to Jesus, and claim him as their Savior. But, unfortunately, they simply will not take essential scriptures into their soul and body and utilize them as here indicated. The result is that they continue to recycle their failures and make little or no real progress toward the abundance/obedience essential to "walking worthily of the calling wherewith we are called." Some of them even try to use other spiritual disciplines, but with little result. An essential ingredient is missing, and the order of their mind and life remains other than that of the kingdom.

Study is by no means simply a matter of gathering information to have on hand. Intensive internalization of the kingdom order through study of the written word and learning from the Living Word establishes good "epidermal responses" of thought, feeling, and action. And these in turn integrate us into the flow of God's eternal reign. We really come to think and believe differently, and that changes everything else. "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee." (Psalm 119:11)

Now we must not *worship* without study, for ignorant worship is of limited value and can be very dangerous. We may develop "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom. 10: 2), and then do great harm to ourselves and others. But worship must be added to study to complete the renewal of our mind through a willing absorption in the radiant person who is worthy of all praise. Study without worship is also dangerous, and the people of Jesus constantly suffer from its effects, especially in academic settings. To handle the things of God without worship is always to falsify them.

In worship we are ascribing greatness, goodness, and glory to God. It is typical of worship that we put every possible aspect of our being into it, all of our sensuous, conceptual, active, and creative capacities. We embellish, elaborate, and magnify. Poetry and song, color and texture, food and incense, dance and procession are all used to exalt God. And sometimes it is in the quiet absorption of thought, the electric passion of encounter, or total surrender of the will. In worship we strive for adequate expression of God's greatness. But only for a moment, if ever, do we achieve what seems like adequacy. We cannot do justice to God or his Son or his kingdom or his goodness to us. So we must constantly return to worship.

Worship nevertheless imprints on our whole being the reality that we study. The effect is a radical disruption of the powers of evil in us and around us. Often an enduring and substantial change is brought about. And the renewal of worship keeps the glow and power of our true homeland an active agent in all parts of our being. *In the atmosphere of worship*, to "hear and do" is the clearest, most obvious and natural thing imaginable.

Now we have very briefly touched upon four specific spiritual disciplines: solitude and silence, worship and study. Around these a individual and group "Curricula for Christlikeness" can be framed. It should be clear how strongly such disciplines will nourish and be nourished by the principle objective of such a "curriculum"—that of bringing the disciple of Jesus to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. Other disciplines, such as fasting, service to others, fellowship, and so on, might be discussed as well, and, indeed, in a full treatment of a curriculum for Christlikeness they must be discussed. But if these four are pursued with intelligence and prayer, whatever else is needed will certainly come along.

The important insight to guide us at this point is that, to build our house upon the rock of obedience (Matt. 7:24-25),

putting off the old person and putting on the new, we must have a definite plan for doing so. Although this cannot be done without interaction with the grace of God, neither will it be imposed upon us. We must devise steps to the fullness of Christlife that are biblical, time-tested, realistic, experimental. Such steps, as seen in the disciplines for the spiritual life, are not laws of righteousness; they are *wisdom*, and our Teacher will help us in every need as we live with him in the **V-I-M** pattern.

(For further study and direction concerning spiritual disciplines, one may wish to consult Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, or Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.)

### **MATTERS FOR THOUGHT:**

1. What is your understanding of "means of grace"? Have you had experiences with any, or seen any implemented in Church life?
2. The concept of "discipline" applies both to natural activities and to those that require Divine assistance (grace). Does that seem right to you? Scriptural? Practical?
3. What would you take to be the most important and generally applicable of the specific disciplines listed? Why?
4. What about the idea of "doing nothing" in solitude and silence? It is one of the hardest things for most Protestant believers to accept. Could it, nevertheless, be a good thing in pursuing spiritual formation under God? Why or why not?
5. How are study and worship interdependent in making spiritual progress?
6. Has scripture memorization played a significant role in your life with God? How might it help us to enter into the blessed life of Psalm 1?

### **A Composite Picture of "Children of Light"**

We can view the ideal outcome of the **V-I-M** process by sketching a composite picture of "the children of light," drawing on how they have changed in the various essential dimensions of their being. To call them *children* of light is, in biblical terminology, to say that they have the basic nature of light: that light is their parent and has passed on to them its nature, as any parent does. The apostle John summed up the message that he and his friends had heard from Jesus as this: "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." (1<sup>st</sup> John 1:5)

Now, the people who have moved into the light of Christ are not perfect and do not live in a perfect world—yet. But they are remarkably different. The difference is not one of a pose they strike, either from time to time or constantly, or of things they do or don't do. They are not "performing"—though their behavior too is very different and distinctive. Where the children of light differ is primarily and most importantly on the "inside" of their life. It lies in what they are in their depths, in what they would do and could do.

**Thought life:** Perhaps the first thing that comes to our attention when we get to know their inner life is what they think about, or what is on their mind. Simply stated, they think about God. He is never out of their mind. They love to dwell upon God and upon his greatness and loveliness, as brought to light in Jesus Christ. They adore him in nature, in history, in his Son and in his saints. One could even say they are "God-intoxicated" (Acts 2:13; Ephesians 5: 18), though no one has a stronger sense of reality and practicality than they do. Their mind is filled with biblical expressions of God's nature, his actions, and his plans for them in his world. They do not dwell upon evil. It is not a big thing in their thoughts. They are sure of its defeat, but they still deal with it appropriately in specific situations.

Because their mind is centered upon God and oriented to all else with reference to him, all other good things are also welcome there. Again: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise," their mind ponders those things (Philippians 4:8). They are positive, realistically so, based upon the nature of God as they understand it. "I have set the Lord continually before me," the Psalmist says, "Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken." (16:8)

**Feelings:** And then perhaps we notice—and small wonder given what has already been observed—that the emotional life of these children of light is deeply characterized by love. That is how they invest the emotional side of their being. They love lots of good things and they love people. They love their life and who they are. They are thankful for their life

—even though it may contain many difficulties, even persecution and martyrdom (Matthew 5:10-12). They receive all of it as God's gift, or at least as his allowance, where they will know his goodness and greatness and go on to live with him forever. And so joy and peace are with them even in the hardest of times—even when suffering unjustly. Because of what they have learned about God, they are confident and hopeful and do not indulge thoughts of rejection, failure, and hopelessness, because *they know better*.

**Will (spirit, heart):** Looking a little deeper we find that these children of light really are devoted to doing what is good and right. Their will is habitually attuned to it, just as their mind and emotions are habitually homing in on God. They are attentive to rightness, to kindness, to helpfulness, and they are purposefully knowledgeable about life—about what people need, and about how to do what is right and good in appropriate ways. They are not obsequious, but respectful of the rights and responsibilities of others.

These are people who do not think first of themselves and what they want, and they really care very little, if at all, about getting their own way "Let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not look out for your own personal interests, but for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). These are easy and good words to them. They are abandoned to God's will and do not struggle and deliberate as to whether they will do what they know to be wrong. They do not hesitate to do what they know to be right. It is the obvious thing to do.

**Body:** That, of course, involves their body. Their body has come over to the side of their will to do good. It is constantly *poised* to do what is right and good without thinking. And that also means that it does not automatically move into what is wrong, even contrary to their resolves and intentions, before they can think *not* to do it. It is no longer true of them that their "spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 20:41) They know by experience that those words of Jesus are not a declaration about the inevitable condition of humans, but a diagnosis of a condition to be corrected. The Spirit has substantially taken over their "members." (Rom. 6:13)

Consequently, we do not see them always being trapped by what their tongue, facial expressions, eyes, hands, and so on have *already* done before they can think. For their body and its parts are consecrated to serve God and are habituated to be his holy instruments. They instinctively avoid the paths of temptation. The bodies of these people even *look* different. There is a freshness about them, a kind of quiet strength, and a transparency They are rested and playful in a bodily strength that is from God. He who raised up Christ Jesus from the dead has given life to their bodies through his Spirit that dwells in them. (Rom. 8:10-12)

**Social relations:** In their relations to others, they are completely transparent. Because they walk in goodness they have no use for darkness, and they achieve real contact or fellowship with others—especially other apprentices of Jesus. "If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (I John 1:7). And "The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause of offence in him" (2:10, PAR). They do not conceal their thoughts and feelings (nor do they impose them upon everyone). Because of their confidence in God, they do not try to manipulate and manage others. Needless to say, in their social contexts they do not go on the attack or on the hunt, intending to use or to hurt others.

Moreover, they are completely noncondemning, while at the same time they will not participate in evil. They pay it only the attention absolutely required in any social setting, and beyond that, patient and joyful nonparticipation is the rule. They know how to really "be there" (wherever "there" is) without sharing in evil, as was true of Jesus himself. (Of course, as with him, others may disapprove of their "being there," and there are always some occasions where one should just step away.) But they do not reject or distance themselves from the people who may be involved in such situations. They know how to "love the sinner and hate the sin" gracefully and effectively.

**Soul:** Finally, as you come to know these people—though those who know only the human powers of the flesh will never be able to understand them (I Corinthians 2:14)—you see that all of the above is not just at the surface. It is deep, and in a certain obvious sense, it is effortless. It *flows*. That is, the things we have been describing are not things the children of light are constantly trying hard to do, gritting their teeth and carrying on. Instead, these are features of life that well up out of a soul that is at home in God.

This, then, is the outcome of spiritual formation in Christlikeness. Again, it doesn't mean perfection, but it does mean we have here a person whose soul is whole: a person who, through the internalized integrity of the law of God and the administrations of the gospel and the Spirit, has a restored soul. The law and the Lord have restored it. (Psalm 19:7 & 23:3) Such a soul effectively interfaces God with the full person and enables every aspect of the self to function as God intended.

### The Scriptural High Points

Now, with this composite picture of the inner and outer person of the children of light before us, let us compare it to some of the New Testament descriptions of what the disciples/apprentices of Jesus are to be like. We are now in a position to understand them in a new and, I believe, very encouraging way. Certainly, that is just the opposite of their usual effect, even on very devout people. Usually, I think, these bright passages may inspire longing, but a longing that is tinged with hopelessness and guilt. Now we are in a position for that to change, for we know the realism and practicality of the **V-I-M** pattern.

The passages we have in mind are very well known. Of course Matthew 5-7 heads the list, but properly understood it really goes no further than familiar passages in Paul's letters, or in those by Peter, James, and John. And there are similar, though on the whole somewhat less penetrating, passages in the Old Testament. We might cite in this connection Romans 12:1-21, 1 Corinthians 13, 2 Corinthians 3:12-7:1, Galatians 5:22-6:10, Ephesians 4:20-6:20, Philippians 2:3-16 and 4:4-9, Colossians 3:1-4:6, 1 Peter 2:1-3:16, 2 Peter 1:2-10, 1 John 4:7-21, and so on. Perhaps Micah 6:8 could serve well as an Old Testament point of reference. Deuteronomy 10:12-21 would also serve. It would be very worthwhile to plan a full day in silent retreat to read and reread these passages meditatively.

### The Contrasting Picture of Children of Darkness

These passages portraying the children of light are given additional force by contrasting passages on the "unfruitful works of darkness" (Ephesians 5: 11, NRSV). In Galatians 5 Paul described "the deeds of the flesh" where natural human impulses and abilities are allowed to be the rule of life. These "deeds" are acts of "[sexual] immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities [or grudges], strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these" (verses 19-21).

Another of Paul's "dark" passages—we don't have time to explore Romans chapter 1—is 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:2-5. Speaking of "the last days," apparently when evil on earth will have had time to "ripen," he says that "men will be lovers of self, lovers of money boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, [despisers] of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." They may be religious in outer form, but their words and acts belie all that is genuine in it.

### "Redeeming the Time"

Now the life of faith in Jesus Christ, following the **V-I-M** pattern, leads us out of darkness evermore into the light. The time allotted to our life is redeemed by opening oneself to God and His kingdom through non-legalistic practices that break internal bondages and gives us new habits and character. In his essay "On Method," Samuel Taylor Coleridge makes a remarkable statement on the power of ordering our time aright:

If the idle are described as killing time, he [the methodical man] may be justly said to call it into life and moral being, while he makes it the distinct object not only of the consciousness, but of the conscience. He organizes the hours, and gives them a soul; and that, the very essence of which is to flee away, and evermore to have been, he takes up into his own permanence, and communicates to it the imperishableness of a spiritual nature. Of the good and faithful servant, whose energies, thus directed, are thus methodized, it is less truly affirmed, that he lives in time, than that time lives in him. His days, months, and years, as the stops and punctual marks in the records of duties performed, will survive the wreck of worlds, and remain extant when time itself shall be

no more ....

Indeed, one of our greatest tests of faith—of our confidence in God—is how we plan to use our time. In particular, will we have faith to do the things which will secure us in goodness of God, in "his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33); or will we neglect them, and lose our lives in inefficient and futile struggles with powers that are too great for us. With his usual acuteness William James, in his *Talks to Teachers* gave this advice:

Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day. That is, be

systematically heroic in little unnecessary points; do every day or two something for no other reason than its difficulty, so that, when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test. Asceticism of this sort is like the insurance which a man pays on his house and goods. The tax does him no good at the time, and possibly may never bring him a return. But, if fire does come, his having paid it, it will be his salvation from ruin. So with the man who has daily inured himself to habits of concentrated attention, energetic volition, and self-denial in unnecessary things. He will stand like a tower when everything rock around him, and his softer fellow-mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast.

This may seem only a council of human wisdom. It *is* that, but it is more. For the same principle applies to we embodied, social beings who have stepped into Christ's kingdom as his disciples. It speaks of that area of freedom and responsibility where our desire and choice for God determines what we will or will not do in pursuit of God. Because the way of the kingdom is open before us, it is our opportunity and responsibility *to lead right where we are in the character and power of Christ*. And in such a position "the fire" will certainly come.

### **Christian Leaders Responsible for the Future of the World**

Because the resources of God's Kingdom are available to them, the responsibility for the condition of the world in years or centuries to come rests upon Christian leaders and the teachers in the Christian church. They alone have at their disposal the *means* to bring their surroundings increasingly under the rule of God. On the one hand, they have the "all power" that is in the hands of the One who bid them go and teach all human groupings to do as he commanded, and promised to be with them always (Matt. 28:18-20). On the other hand, the teachers of the gospel have Christ's Kingdom fellowship to live in and to offer to all. They have millions of people who regularly come to them, submitting to their leadership in the spiritual life even when unclear about what that means. And, further, they have knowledge of concrete practices of submission to righteousness within which, given adequate teaching and example, they and their hearers can make regular and remarkable progress into the character and power of Christ himself.

The disciplines for the spiritual life are available, concrete activities designed to render bodily beings such as we ever more sensitive and receptive to the Kingdom of the Heavens brought to us in Christ, *even while living in a world set against God*. Lovingly and intelligently practiced, they join with grace to enable us matter-of-factly to "come boldly to the very throne of God and stay there to receive his mercy and to find grace to help us in our times of need." (Heb. 4:16, LB). Therefore our calling to lead for God where we are is a realistic one, for it can be carried out from the resources of the Kingdom.

A beautiful prayer from Coventry Cathedral, built in 1043 and destroyed in 1940, shows how to bring the fulness of God into the fullness of human life:

Hallowed be Thy name in Industry:  
God be in my hands and in my making.  
Holy, Holy, Holy; Lord God of Hosts;  
Heaven and earth of full of Thy Glory.

Hallowed be Thy name in the Arts:  
God be in my sense and in my creating.  
Holy, holy, holy; Lord God of Hosts;  
Heaven and earth of full of Thy Glory.

Hallowed be Thy name in Commerce:  
God be at my desk and in my trading.  
Holy, holy, holy; Lord God of Hosts;  
Heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory.

Hallowed be Thy name in Government:  
God be in my plans and in my deciding.  
Holy, holy, holy; Lord God of Hosts;

Heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory.

Hallowed be Thy name in Education:  
God be in my mind and in my growing.  
Holy, holy, holy; Lord God of Hosts;  
Heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory.

Hallowed be Thy name in the Home:  
God be in my heart and in my loving.  
Holy, holy, holy; Lord God of Hosts;  
Heaven and earth are fully of Thy Glory.

Albert Schweitzer concluded his *Quest of the Historical Jesus* with this picture of the personal call of Jesus:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

### **MATTERS FOR THOUGHT:**

1. How would you like to have mature "children of light," as described, for neighbors, supervisors, family members? What difference would it make?
2. Does being a "child of light" seem a really good thing to you. Could you live in this world if you were like that?
3. Are Paul's "dark passages" true to life? Or are they overly "dark"? Unfair to humanity?
4. How do you experience time, and the mastery (or lack of mastery) of time, in the process of your spiritual journey? Your spiritual formation?
5. Is it correct to say that "the responsibility for the condition of the world in years to come rests upon Christian leaders." That is, upon leaders who are Christians? Are any corrections or qualifications to this statement needed?