

Spiritual Formation

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Date: 02 April 2017

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon. Praise God for beautiful weather. It's a joy to be here.

We are in the middle of a series at Church of the Advent, for those of you who may be here for the first time, exploring our identity and calling. You may, if you've been a part of a church before, you know that from time to time it's important for us to gather and to reflect on who God is calling us to be.

And we do this because everything that we do in the life of this church is responsive. It's a response to what we believe God is calling us to be and to do. And so if you're here and you're not a Christian, you may think that this may not be relevant to you.

I don't want to stress that everything that we're going to talk about is simply a reflection of what we believe not just to be true of Church of the Advent, but for all Christians. This is really what we believe the faith in general calls Christians to be and to do.

So that's what we're going to be talking about. For us at this church, we would summarize our calling with this statement. We've been reflecting on this. As a church, we seek the flourishing of Washington, D.C.

[1 : 1 1] by building gospel-centered communities that practice generous hospitality, spiritual formation, and missionary faithfulness in every neighborhood. And those last three phrases are what we would consider our core values.

And last week we looked at generous hospitality. This week we come to the second of these core values, spiritual formation. So that's what we're going to be talking about this afternoon, spiritual formation.

And I want to define that before we even get started because I think that there's maybe some confusion around what this actually means. We live in a culture that's very fond of spirituality.

And we like the idea, and many people like the idea of spiritual exploration, spiritual growth. But what do we mean by that, right? We could be talking about a good experience hiking.

We could be talking about a great yoga class. We could be talking about a really great brunch, which can be a transcendent experience. And all of those things are good things, but none of those things reflect what we mean when we talk about spiritual formation as Christians.

[2 : 2 0] As Christians we mean something very specific. We would define spiritual formation this way. That it's the process through which we are inwardly transformed such that the personality and the characteristics of Jesus Christ flow naturally out of us whenever or wherever we are.

So it's the process through which we are inwardly transformed such that the personality and characteristics of Jesus Christ flow out of us naturally whenever and wherever we happen to be.

Put simply, spiritual formation is the process of converting faith into fruit. It's converting faith into fruit.

And there are a couple of passages that tell us a lot more about spiritual formation and those we're going to be looking at together. There's a passage from 2 Peter chapter 1 and then the gospel reading John chapter 15.

And you can think of these as complementing one another. 2 Peter is sort of the left brain version and John 15 is kind of the right brain version. And together they really illuminate what spiritual formation is and how it happens.

[3 : 36] And they both kind of tell us the same thing. They both show us this, that spiritual formation has two pieces to it or two aspects. There's a passive or receiving aspect and then there's an active or doing aspect.

So we're going to look at each of those in order. There's a passive aspect which is all about the gift that we receive. And then there's an active aspect, the fruit that we then produce as a result of the gift.

So 2 Peter chapter 1 and John chapter 15. Let's pray and ask for the Lord to lead us. Father, if what we just said is true, then all we do is a response to you.

And we know that all that we do now is a response to your word. That you spoke and we were created. And as you continue to speak, we will be recreated.

And we pray that that would happen. That we would come under the loving care of our maker and that you would sculpt us and shape us and renew us with your word. We pray this for our good, but chiefly, Lord, and ultimately for your glory.

[4 : 44] In your son's name, amen. So, active and passive, passive and active. We're going to begin with the passive side of spiritual formation, the gift that we've received.

The book of 2 Peter, if you're not familiar with it, the whole letter is about spiritual formation and growth and maturity. The whole thing is about that. And yet, at the very beginning of the letter, Peter begins, before he even talks about growth or maturity or any of that stuff, before any of that, he makes one foundational statement.

And you see it in verses 2 and 3. He says, here's the first thing you need to know. May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.

So, you hear what he's saying. He's saying, before we can talk about spiritual formation, before we can talk about maturity or growth, there's one thing that we need to be absolutely clear on.

[5 : 55] By knowing Jesus, saving knowledge, believing the gospel, simply by knowing Jesus, you have received in faith everything that you need.

It's all yours. All of the raw material for life, for godliness. In other words, just by knowing Jesus, by coming to believe the gospel, he gives you automatically everything you need to become like him.

It's all yours. And Jesus, by the way, this is the 2 Peter version, Jesus is talking about the same thing in John chapter 15. Because what is the metaphor that he uses?

Like I said, this is the right brain version. He uses this beautiful metaphor of a vineyard and a grapevine. And what does he say there? He says in verse 5, I'm the vine.

You are the branches. And whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing.

[6 : 59] So he's saying the exact same thing as Peter is saying in 2 Peter chapter 1. He's saying, I'm the vine. Right? And then if you know anything about a grapevine, there's one vine.

And as it goes up and goes out along the trellis, there are lots of branches that come off the one vine. He's saying, I'm the true vine. You know, Israel thought of themselves as the true vine.

That's what they were called in the Old Testament. But what Jesus is saying is that Israel has failed in that calling. And now he is the true vine. He's the one who's meant to bring God's fruit into the world.

But how does it happen? Through us. And he's saying, you're the branches. Your whole ability to produce fruit depends on your willingness to abide in me. It all comes from me. I'm the source. So they're saying the same thing.

So what does this actually mean? Why begin here? If we're talking about spiritual formation, why do we have to begin with this fact that everything we need comes from Jesus? We have to receive it. Well, let me make this a little more practical.

[7 : 58] And I want to do that by bringing us back to a movie that some of us have seen. Michael Hendricks and I were talking about this the other week. And it reminded me of just the power of the movie Saving Private Ryan.

Have you seen it? If you haven't, I'm getting ready to spoil the whole thing. And I'm sorry. But you've had plenty of time. So you have absolutely no excuse. But here's what happens in the movie.

Private Ryan is one of four brothers. And they're at war. And the command finds out that three of his brothers have been killed in combat. And they recognize there's only one surviving brother.

And they say, we have got to get this Ryan boy home to his mom. And so they call up Miller. Miller's played by Tom Hanks. And they tell Miller to take a squad of eight men and to do whatever they have to do to find Private Ryan, to get him out of the conflict zone, and safely home to his family.

They're going to risk the lives of eight people to save this one guy. And so even Miller is a bit incredulous. And he says, at one point he says, well, this guy better be worth it.

[9 : 02] He says, you know, he better go home and cure some illness or invent a longer lasting light bulb. He better be worth it. And if you know how the movie goes, every single one of those men dies.

They all die trying to save Private Ryan, which they do. Miller gets shot. He's dying. He's just got a few seconds to live. And as he is dying, he's there with Ryan.

And Miller grabs Ryan. And his final words, earn this. And then he passes away. So then fast forward 60 years.

It's a grave site in Normandy. And the aging Private Ryan is standing in front of a headstone. And on the headstone, it reads Miller.

And tears are streaming down his face. And his wife comes up to comfort him. And as his wife comes up, he says through his tears, have I been a good man?

[10 : 08] Tell me I've lived a good life. And his wife tries to reassure him that he is a good man, that he has lived a good life, but he keeps crying.

And it's clear that he can't really be sure. He doesn't really know. Did he earn the sacrifice of those eight men?

Did he live a life worthy of that sacrifice? And what's shocking about the scene is, I watched it again this past week, is that his wife walks up, and it's clear that she has no idea who Miller is.

Which tells us what? For all that time, he had carried that pain secretly inside. Not even his wife knew. Did I earn it?

Was I good enough? And the point is this, I think that this movie strikes a chord with us, because I think that we all carry a kind of deep down secret question. Do I measure up?

[11 : 14] Am I worth something? Right? Am I good enough? Did I do it? Right? Do I pass muster? We want somebody whose opinion matters to come and to put their hand reassuringly on our shoulder and say, yes, you are good enough.

You did enough. You measure up. You don't have to keep trying. You've done enough. It's good. Right? The quota has been met. Right? The standard has been surpassed. That's what we want.

I think that's why we crave the approval that we crave from other people, from our parents. You know, I never got the approval from my parents that I wanted. I don't think that it began with your parents.

I think that it's an even deeper longing. Your parents are a substitute. And it's possible that men and women experience this differently. Right? One woman was telling me, we were talking about this, she said, you know, I don't necessarily worry about measuring up.

It's more a desire to be desired above all things. I want to know that I am worthy of someone's top choice.

[12 : 20] That I am the object of desire. That I am the one. That I'm the apple of someone's eye. That I'm somebody's highest joy. Right?

Now, I don't know how you experience this, but however you experience it, I think deep down, we all carry the same question that Private Ryan carries. And so we have to think about that and think about that inner question.

And then we have to recognize that all religions actually would acknowledge this. Most religions out there acknowledge there's some longing in us for that. And actually, most religions have a way of addressing this longing.

They say, yes, you feel that longing, you have that need, here's what you do about it. So Buddhism says, here's the eightfold path to enlightenment. Right? Hinduism says, well, here's karma, and as long as your good deeds overwhelm your bad, then you'll be reincarnated in a future life at a higher level of existence.

Islam says, at the end of your life, when all of your deeds are tallied up, if you have more good deeds on Allah's scale than the bad deeds, and you have the good deeds outweigh the bad, then you'll go to paradise.

[13 : 30] So they all address it, but do you see the common limitation that they all share? You can't really know until you die.

Right? You can't really ever know. You hope, and you do the best you can, and you do the most good that you can, and you hope, and you try, but you never really know.

You have to wait until you die for somebody to finally tell you whether or not you were good enough, whether or not you passed muster, whether or not you met the standard. So they offer no assurance now.

So for somebody like Private Ryan standing in a graveyard, tears flooding down a space, wondering, did I do it? Did I pass muster? Am I good enough? You know, these religions would say, well, the jury's still out. The jury's still out.

Keep trying. A good faith effort, but no assurance. So here is the thing that makes the good news of Christianity so utterly unique and so glorious.

[14 : 33] Because what does Christianity say? Well, what's the verse that we just read together? 2 Peter 1, verse 3. Jesus, in his divine power, has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness.

Has given. Past tense. It's done. It's over. It's already been given to you. This is saying, the jury has come to a decision and they're unanimous. It's done. There's nothing more that you can do.

There's nothing that you can do to add to it. It's already done. And it's saying, you know, when it comes to God, God's standard is up here. And we're all way down here. But here's what has already happened.

Jesus has come and he's filled in that gap. He's filled in whatever we lacked. And then he went above and beyond. So it's not just about meeting a minimum standard or filling our quota or crossing the line so that God says, okay, that's good enough.

Jesus pours all of his goodness, all of his righteousness, pours that into our lives. So that God looks at us and says, I choose you. You're the one I delight in.

[15 : 42] You're the one. You're the one I want. So therefore, if we think about this in this difference, when we think about what Peter is saying, we think about what Jesus is saying.

You know, this is why Jesus says, I'm the vine. I'm the source of goodness and righteousness. And this is why Peter says, before we can talk about spiritual formation or growth or good works, let me make one thing clear.

If you know Jesus Christ and you have received everything that pertains to life and godliness, that means that no matter what you do, no matter how much you grow, no matter how much fruit you produce, no matter how many good works fill your life, from this point on, you will not add one ounce to the righteousness that is yours in Christ.

You will not add one ounce to the amount that God loves you. And conversely, if you never do anything, if your life never produces anything, right, God will not love you one ounce less.

You will not detract one ounce from the righteousness that is yours in Christ because it all comes from Jesus. And so you see the difference when we begin talking about spiritual formation.

[17 : 01] If you have a religion that says, well, keep trying and hopefully it'll all pan out in the end, what's the motivation there? Well, the motivation is fear. I've got to keep trying and trying and trying and hoping and hoping and hoping.

But with Christianity, because we know it's all already ours, it's all been given to us, the motivation is not fear, the motivation is freedom. Our motivation for growing spiritually is not fear, it's that we have been set free.

We no longer have that anxiety. We no longer have that need for assurance. We have it. And so we simply know that we're set free to be what God created us to be. Branches on the vine that produce fruit.

So that brings us to the next piece, the active side of spiritual formation. If that is true, if we have all of that in Jesus Christ, then what does that mean about our lives?

What are we called to as a result? Now, as we turn our attention to the active side, I want to address a potential objection right up front. And that is that some people may be thinking, well, if that's true, if what we just said is true and Jesus gives us everything we need, then why does there even need to be an active side?

[18 : 10] Right? I mean, why do anything? What's the motive? And I would say that's a really great question. And the answer, quite frankly, is that we're all exactly like Louis C.K., the comedian.

We're all exactly like him. I'll tell you what I mean. There's a comedy special, and Louis C.K. is talking, and at one point, he's talking about beliefs. And he's talking about something that he thinks is important that we should all believe in.

He says, you know, I believe in it too. And then he says, but I don't actually do it. And then he says, you know, I have a lot of beliefs, and I live by none of them.

That's just the way I am. They're my beliefs. I just like believing them. He says, I like that part. They're my little believeys. My little believeys.

They make me feel good about who I am. Right? But if they get in the way of a thing I want to do, I still do it. And I think that he's nailing something about human nature.

[19 : 07] We love having beliefs. It's so great to believe what we just said about Jesus and to believe that God chooses us and God loves us. That makes me feel good. That helps me when I'm depressed.

It gets me out of bed. Right? Helps me cheer up when I've had a hard day at work. Those are good, fun beliefs. Right? Unless they actually get in the way of something we want to do.

Right? And so it's for this very reason that both Jesus and Peter emphasize that our faith needs to be converted into fruit. That this is the purpose of salvation.

Not to earn God's love. We have it. But because this is what we were made for. This is who we were created to be. And so they say we need to convert that faith into fruit.

And so that's why in verse 5 Peter says make every effort therefore to supplement your faith. You know, to build on or to add to or another translation says to furnish your faith.

[20 : 06] And I like that because the image is you have the house. The house is there but it's an empty house. And to make it something that you can live in it needs furniture. So he's saying furnish your house of faith.

Live inside it. Right? And so to use another image as Peter is listing these out he's essentially listing what amount of virtues. And what is a virtue?

A virtue is just a habit. It's a habit that you're not necessarily born with but over time as you do it more and more and more it becomes more natural. It's wired into your character.

This is what a virtue is. And so think about musicians or athletes. Some of you are great athletes. You know? Or maybe you used to be. But at some point you've probably been around great athletes.

Some of you are great musicians. Right? We had some very gifted musicians up here. And these people are not born with these abilities. They're born with the potential but that has to be turned into ability and something that can be expressed through practice.

[21 : 09] And to put a finer point on it through the developing of muscle memory. Right? Somebody doesn't just learn to play the piano overnight. You have to practice and practice and practice and practice and practice until it comes naturally to your hands.

Until the piano becomes an extension of yourself. And in the same way an athlete has to practice again and again and again and again and again until it comes naturally. Until you develop that muscle memory.

And so spiritual formation means supplementing our faith by developing a kind of spiritual muscle memory. That's what it is. That's what a virtue is.

It's like spiritual muscle memory. So here are the virtues that we're called to cultivate. The first one is just virtue which means goodness. Right? A good moral character.

So cultivate a solid moral character that reflects the character of Christ. And then he says and then add to that knowledge. And by that he doesn't mean saving knowledge.

[22 : 05] Here he means doctrinal knowledge. So learn scripture. Learn what God is like. Learn the story of salvation. Learn the kinds of things that God cares about.

Learn what God's people are called to be. Doctrinal knowledge. And then he says add to that self-control. What is self-control? Well it's just the ability to enjoy good things without allowing them to become ultimate things.

Right? So go out and enjoy good food and drink but don't live for food and drink. Right? Enjoy the pride of a job well done but don't live for pride and approval and praise.

Right? Enjoy the company of your friends and enjoy the way that you guys can celebrate together but don't live for the approval of your friends.

Right? Love your job and pour yourself into your job but don't live for your job and stake your life on success. Right? So self-control in all of these ways.

[23 : 08] Steadfastness he says is something that we should add to that. Now what is steadfastness? Well that's just the ability to hang in there to trust God to remain devoted to God even when life is hard or when it feels like God is silent.

He's saying all of these things are not things that just happen naturally they're habits of the heart they come just by doing them by practicing them. Godliness is next and what is godliness? Well here godliness simply means having an integrated faith.

So decompartmentalizing your faith is not just something that happens on Sunday and Wednesday your faith is fully integrated into the way you understand your vocation and the unique specific ways that God has wired you to serve and to love and to live in his world.

Right? Integrating your faith into all of your relationships integrating your faith into how you think about your money and how you think about your body and how you think about your time and how you prioritize that your faith is fully integrated that's godliness in this context.

And then brotherly affection means Philadelphia right? Love for other Christians your Christian brothers and sisters love for the church that's a habit of the heart right?

[24 : 15] If you don't feel very lovingly toward your brothers and sisters in Christ it's because it's a habit that needs to be cultivated in other words you act lovingly and the feelings emerge over time we were just in the foundations class earlier and we were talking about how often in our culture we think that we should be led by our emotions but that in reality if you know anything about your heart that's like letting my six year old drive the car right?

It's just not I mean he needs to be in the car he deserves a place in the car but he should not be behind the wheel now he wants to be behind the wheel but he shouldn't be behind the wheel it means disaster for everybody right?

So we need to learn how to drive our hearts they're meant to be driven they're meant to be led they're meant to be shaped and that's what virtues do they shape and cultivate our desires that's how it works and so ultimately what is all this leading toward?

Well ultimately not just brotherly love brotherly affection but agape love which doesn't just mean love for other Christians and people who are like you it means love for everybody regardless of what they believe regardless of where they come from regardless of what they look like love for everybody and so this is a great thing to notice here in one sense the order doesn't matter a lot of times people make a lot out of the order that you have to do one before you do the next before you do the next I really don't think there's any evidence for that there are lots of lists like this even in the Bible and sometimes they appear in different orders but one thing that you always see it always begins in faith begins in faith and it always culminates in agape love and that tells us very simply that the purpose the aim of all virtues is love they all come together and culminate in love the other thing I should point out is that as we look at this list of characteristics or virtues what we're really seeing is a description of the character of Jesus Christ so when we say that spiritual formation is inward transformation such that the personality and characteristics of Jesus flow naturally out of us these are the characteristics we're talking about so as we look at this and just to kind of draw all of this together

I want to show you how these work together how does the passive part and the active part work the gift that we receive and the fruit we produce how do they work well here's how it works it's a cycle and it's a cycle that we live out again and again and again and again and again thousands upon thousands of times throughout our lives we begin by receiving grace we receive it as a gift he gives us everything pertaining to life and godliness it's all ours and then we recognize the freedom that we have that we're empowered for good works and so we go and we begin to do that I want to be self-controlled I want to worship the Lord I want to love my brothers and sisters I want to love everybody and we go and we begin to do that and then we fail and sometimes we fail big if you haven't failed yet you have failed and you just don't know it you will fail and then what happens well you either plunge into guilt and self-recrimination and or apathy and say forget this this is too hard or you come back in the cycle to the gospel oh it doesn't depend on me it doesn't hinge on me god doesn't love me any less

[27 : 40] I'm no less worthy because I failed in this way everything that I need I already have I can't add to it at all and you recognize and remember the love that you have through Jesus Christ and hopefully you have brothers and sisters reminding you of that and then you get back up and you try again and then you fail and then you plunge into grace and then you come and you try again and so on and so forth and what happens there well two things are happening simultaneously the more you do that cycle the more on the one hand you will be cultivating virtue and character you try and you try and you try and over time it will shape you and shape your mind and shape your heart it's just the way human beings are wired it's the beauty of neuroplasticity we are shaped by our habits right it will have an impact on you but on the other hand what's also happening every single failure is driving you deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper into the unlimited depths of Jesus' grace and so spiritual formation for Christians involves both kinds of growth on the one hand

I'm developing a more godly character and on the other hand I'm developing a much deeper awareness of my sin and my need for grace and both happen simultaneously so this is why Paul over the course of his ministry on the one hand you see him in chronological order if you look at his letters in chronological order on the one hand he's becoming more and more and more shaped by Jesus Christ he's growing in his character but on the other hand simultaneously his self-estimation isn't increasing he's not saying man I'm such a better person now than I was ten years ago it's going in the reverse direction right actually the more godly his character becomes the more he becomes aware of his own identity as a sinner so he goes from just referring to himself as an apostle to referring to himself near the end of his life as the chief of sinners right so this is the unique way that Christian spiritual formation happens and so this is the kind of community that we want to have at Church of the Advent at every level we want this happening in every sphere whether it's on a Sunday like this or just a group of friends hanging out on a random night of the week we want this culture to exist right because we recognize that if you have a church

Tom and Allison you guys are here oh my gosh good to see you if you have a church if you have a church that only focuses on the passive it's only what Jesus has done for us and never talks about what we're called to as Christians then you're going to have a church that understands grace and understands the cross but only so far because it takes actively failing to then really remind me of the real meaning of grace I have to fail to feel the need so I will plunge into that pool right and because I'm never called to anything I won't change I won't grow there won't be any transformation right it's the cross without the resurrection but on the other hand if you have a church that only focuses on the character and the virtue and what I'm called to and obedience but forgets about grace it may actually be worse because you have a culture where people look like they've changed right there's conformity happening but underneath the surface everybody's concealing right

Christianity just becomes avoid the obvious sins and hide all the rest right and so it becomes a legalistic culture of conformity but again no actual change in order to have a culture where you actually are transformed and grow you need both right and this is what we want Advent to be so on the one hand we want to take holiness seriously God calls us to holiness God calls us to holiness in all that we do right that virtues matter that we should have a culture where we are calling the best out of each other where we want to become more than we are where we want to grow and character matters but on the other hand we want to have a church that when we confront sin when we challenge one another when we have those hard conversations that it always leads back to grace that we recognize that we are all fellow strugglers fellow sinners drawing from that well right and so this is the kind of culture where real transformation happens and so this is why we talk about the three C's at Church of the Advent it's just a mnemonic for remembering the kind of pathway of discipleship that the first C we just want everybody every week to be here at communion this all of what we're talking about we're reminded of this every week that we come together so you should be here every week even Super Bowl Sunday and if that isn't the case if you're not here if you're out of town if you're traveling then we encourage you to make every effort to try to find a church where you are and worship find a good local church and go worship there you know if you don't if you're just visiting and you don't live here or you're part of another church in the city that's awesome but you should really be a part of that church on a weekly basis that's the first thing communion second thing community having people in your life who know you outside of Sunday that happens in our church through core groups but having people who know you well enough so that they can do both of these things in your life they can call you to virtue and call you to character and call you to holiness and godliness and they can also speak grace and love into your life and they know you well enough to know when you need each of these and then the third thing is commitment it's just encouraging people that if you're going to be a part of a church whether it's Advent or another church that you should be fully committed that you should really strongly consider membership that you should be actively giving actively serving finding ways to contribute actively giving of your time giving of your money giving of your energy and your gifts now why would we talk about that in spiritual formation well as we talk about the cultivation of virtue that's the place where you're most going to be called out in terms of you're going to be asked to step up right you have to have a certain amount of character you have to have a certain amount of virtue to be willing to follow through on your commitments to say you're going to do something and then do it right to order your time and order your spending and order your energy such that you're able to give regularly and sacrificially to the body that is one of the greatest places for growth and in my own life it's been one of the places where I've most experienced growth is when a church really asked me we need you to be fully in we need you we need your time money energy we need you to be a part of contributing to the vitality of this community so these are the things that we talk about but we need to remember that all of this is rooted in the grace of Jesus Christ that the way we produce fruit is by first receiving the gift so going back to Private Ryan just as we try to draw all this together think about Ryan think about him standing in that graveyard think about the tears his wife can't assure him am I good enough did I earn it his wife can't assure him no matter what she says his kids can't assure him his friends can't assure him his counselor can't assure him his pastor can't assure him what does he really want he wants

Miller to come back from the grave and to say you did it you earned it that's what he wants but that's impossible right and beyond that even if Miller were to come back I suspect that even that wouldn't fully give him the assurance he's looking for why because I suspect that he had that in him long before he even met Miller because he's a human being but here's the good news of the gospel someone has come back from the grave Jesus Christ and if Jesus Christ were to meet Ryan in that graveyard and Ryan were to ask Jesus did I earn it you know what Jesus would say no no you didn't but here's the good news I did and here's the best part all of it all of it

[36 : 16] I did for you and that's the gospel let's pray that's the gospel good I bijna yes you and bye
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