

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IS A SOCIAL PROCESS

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Spiritual formation, good or bad, is always profoundly social. You cannot keep it to yourself. Anyone who thinks of it as a merely private matter has misunderstood it. Anyone who says, "It's just between me and God," or "What I do is my own business," has misunderstood God as well as "me". Strictly speaking there is *nothing* "just between me and God." For all that is between me and God affects who I am; and that, in turn, modifies my relationship to everyone around me. My relationship to others also modifies me and deeply affects my relationship to God. Hence those relationships must be transformed if I am to be transformed.

~ Dallas Willard ~

Jesus made the social aspect of spiritual formation very clear to His closest circle of disciples as recorded in John 13, a record of the events and teachings of Jesus the night He was betrayed and arrested. Beginning with verse 31 we read:

John 13:31-35

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³²If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' ³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

If indeed we are in Christ's yoke, then He will most certainly train us in the way of love. The nature of this love is here defined: it is the quality of love with which Jesus loved the Twelve. It is not a feeling. **Jesus' quality of love is a commitment to do what is in the best interest of the one's He loves whether they are present or absent.**

This quality of love is not characteristic of us because of our self-centeredness and because of our woundedness. In our self-centeredness we are committed to doing what is in our best interest. In our woundedness we have built defenses to protect ourselves from the lovelessness directed at us. It is possible for us to be born again, but to continue to relate to others out of our self-centeredness and woundedness; this is clear from the Scripture we will read in just a moment. But more importantly, it is now possible for us to be reformed in such a way that we love with Jesus' quality of love. Turn with me to 1 John 3 beginning with verse 11. As you will see, this is the Apostle John's commentary on Jesus' command in John 13:34 which we just read.

1 John 3:11-24

¹¹For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

This seems to be a reference to our Lord's teaching recorded in John 13:34.

¹²We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he

murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.

Through these two examples, John is teaching us that we should not hate one another in the church the way Cain hated Abel and the way the world hates the church. Hatred is characteristic of those who live outside of Christ, who are dead towards God. Notice that the ability to love one another with Jesus' quality of love is one of the proofs that we really have been born again to eternal life.

¹⁴We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.

To fail to develop this quality of love is to continue to live according to the old life outside of Christ. Notice that the one *who does not love*, who is simply indifferent towards others in the church, is living in the way of death.

Whoever does not love abides in death.

John does not say that the one *who hates* still abides in death. To not care and not proactively receive other Christians into our affections and into our commitment to do them good is to continue to live in a manner at odds with God's very nature. This exposes the lie of those who say, "I'm a Christian" or "I believe in God, but I don't go to church because you don't have to go to church to have a relationship with God". We cannot enter into the life of God unless we are growing in the life of love. And we cannot grow in the life of love unless we are intentional about developing relationships with one another in the church.

Whoever does not love abides in death also makes clear that attending a church service once a week is wholly inadequate for spiritual transformation. By its very definition, spiritual transformation involves building relationships through which we learn to love and receive love from one another in the church. If this is not happening in your life and mine, then we are continuing to live the life of God's enemies. And if we are continuing to think and act like the world, we are prone towards not just a lack of love, but towards hatred. When we are hurt or snubbed or ill treated by a fellow Christian, (which will most certainly happen) we react in the way of Cain, not in the way of Jesus. And in hating we reveal that we are not living in step with Jesus' quality of life, but we are completely living like the world.

¹⁵Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

¹⁶By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

In these verses, John is defining love or rather, he is making explicit what Jesus meant when He told His disciples to love one another as Jesus had loved them. As I said earlier, love is not a feeling. Feelings are attached to love, but Jesus' quality of love is to do what is best for those He loves. Jesus laid down His life for us to pay the penalty of our sin. We are to lay our lives down for one another. John gives one illustration of self sacrificing love – meeting a brother's physical needs.

To finish the passage:

¹⁹By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²²and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴Whoever keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

As we conclude our study this morning, I hope you have come to see that Christ being formed in you is not simply a private affair. Your spiritual transformation is very much a social process. It must be because God is love; Jesus is love. Christ formed in us in its very essence is to love like Jesus loved. It is not a matter of personality – it is a matter of potential realized through spiritual transformation. In our next study we will think about what resists our transformation in love.