

THE FOUNDATIONAL SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Introduction

Last week we talked about the human condition apart from God and the fact that

the essential human problem is self centeredness

that is, we desire to be at the center of the universe. What happens when we place ourselves in the place of God is that we take on an impossible pursuit of trying to control our kingdoms and dominate the other kingdoms around us which leads to tremendous levels of stress and strife. In addition, we turn to the sensual, to the physical; we live the life of the flesh to derive for ourselves some sense of purpose and pleasure, but even that becomes self defeating because ungrounded desires can never be satisfied – we are always left wanting more, we are never satisfied and content. All this and the end result is clearly explained in Romans 1 as we studied in our previous session.

Self Denial Is The Foundation For Spiritual Transformation

For those who no longer want to be evil, covetous, malicious, deceitful etc people, Jesus offers a qualitatively different life. But if this new life is to be had, Jesus informs us that the self centered life must die.

Matthew 16:24-25 ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Jesus will not help us to live the self centered life, the life of the flesh as the Apostle Paul refers to it. The self centered life is death:

Romans 8:5-8 ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

This is why self denial is the foundation for spiritual transformation. This is why the beginning point of genuine discipleship is to understand that the source of our problems is not God, is other people that won’t do things our way. The source of the conflict is our self centeredness. And the beginning point of spiritual transformation is to agree with Jesus that our self centeredness needs to die. That in its place needs to develop God centeredness and a centeredness on others.

Self denial does not mean we hate ourselves, but it does mean that come to the place where we want the self centered life to come to an end and we want the God centered life to begin.

There are three things that must be in place for this transformation to take place and it is my growing conviction that this needs to be the message of the church and of those who help others to follow Christ. These three things are Vision, Intention and Means.

VISION

Vision is the realization that you really do have options. It is daring to believe God that your life can actually be re-formed on the inside so that you, in fact, share more and more of the character qualities and values of Jesus.

This vision comes to us through reading the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament authors who describe for us the extraordinary life to be had by those who choose to walk in the Spirit of Christ rather than in the flesh. This vision comes to us through preaching and teaching. And this vision should also come to us through our fellowship within the church as we are saying to one another, “I see so much potential in you to serve God and to impact people for good.” This really is an important aspect of the disciple making process – inspiring others with a vision of what they can become in Christ.

INTENTION

Intention is the response of our heart, our will, to the vision of this new life. It is desire coupled with determination. Intention is the turning of our will to exercise our power of choice to move in the direction of the God centered life of Jesus.

MEANS

Means are the concrete things we must do to attain the God centered life. But with means we must be very clear about something and that is that we grow in the God centered life by indirection, not by head-on will power. We’ve talked about this previously, but let me illustrate. Let’s think about being loving. The most famous passage on love is 1 Corinthians 13:

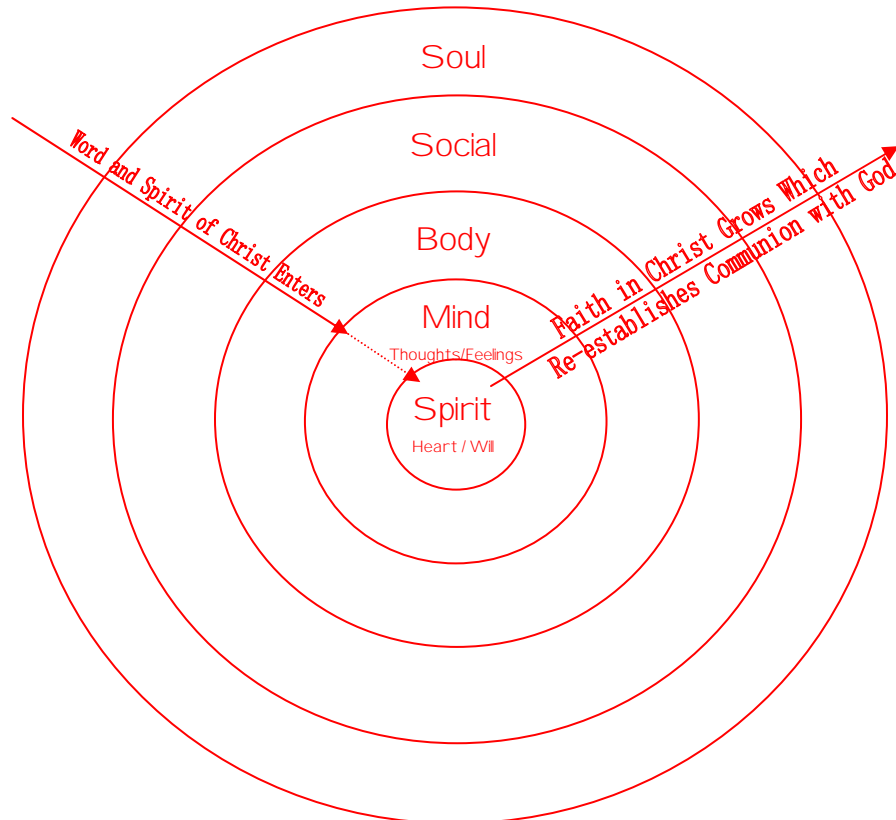
1 Corinthians 13:4-7 *⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

We hear a sermon on 1 Corinthians and think to ourselves, “I need to be more loving”, and so we decide we’re going to start being more loving by being more patient and kind and not being irritable etc. And before the day is out we’ve been impatient and irritable. It is because we cannot become loving by trying to be loving directly by sheer willpower. We can, however, become more loving indirectly by training, by the renewal of our minds. All outward behavior flows from inner character. Transform the inner character of a person and her outward behavior will be transformed as well. This is why Christianity has never been about outward conformity to a Christian code of conduct or about legalism.

The first means of spiritual transformation involves the transforming of our minds. This must be so because of the mind’s relationship to the heart.

Transforming Of The Mind

~ Infinite Environment ~



~ Infinite Environment ~

(Graphic from *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard)

Transforming our mind is the first move in spiritual transformation. The core freedom we all possess is what we will allow to enter our minds. The ideas and images we hold in our minds accompanied by the feelings they generate determine the choices we make which in turn affects our bodily behavior and habits, our conduct and impact socially and the forming of our soul.

We see the wisdom of God's Word in that the necessity of transforming of the mind is emphasized throughout the Old and New Testaments:

Psalm 1:1-4 ¹*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;* ²*but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and **on his law he meditates** day and night.*

³*He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.* ⁴*The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.*

John 8:31-32 ³¹So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³²and **you will know the truth**, and the truth will set you free.”

Romans 12:2 ²Do not be conformed to this world, but **be transformed by the renewal of your mind**, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Conclusion

Spiritual transformation is built on the foundational spiritual discipline of concentrated time in God’s Word. To that end I am bringing to you several resources to help you establish this essential daily discipline: The Daily Bible, Your Daily Walk and several Bible reading guides.