

28th September 2025

Practicing the Way: Session Two: Formation

Sermon

I don't know if you meet up with old friends and they say 'oh you haven't changed?'. It begs further questions? How have I not changed? What is the same? Because physically I am a bit older. Things maybe drooping and sagging a bit more. Hair is going greyer. There will be physical changes. But what about changes in behaviour and attitude?

I would suggest that to live is to change. All things change in some sense. And how we change is the topic for this week as we continue our look at Practicing the Way of Jesus: being with Jesus, being like Jesus and doing what he did.

We are all spiritually formed.

Spiritual formation isn't a Christian thing or even a religious thing; it's a human thing. To be human is to grow, to mature, to adapt over time. Formation is simply the process by which our "spirit," or inner person, is formed into a particular shape or character. Over a lifetime, we are spiritually formed by a complex alchemy of genetic inheritance, family patterns, childhood wounds, education, habits, decisions, relationships, environments, and more. The problem is, most of our spiritual formation is unintentional. It just happens. And often, we are "conform[ed] to the pattern of this world," more than "transformed by the renewing of [our] mind."

Take for example the environment in which we live. I took my eldest daughter and all her stuff to her new digs in Lewisham south east London the other week where she will be living for the next year while undergoing training and lecturing. I had to drive there and back because my car was needed to transport all her stuff. It is that time of year when parents up and down the country are moving their children into digs and halls of residences and a flotilla of heavily laden cars stream up and down the motorways of the country.

You spend two hours getting to the outskirts of London and then two more hours driving through the middle of London and out the other side. Lewisham is not handy. The roads are congested and bicycles are coming up on the inside and motorbikes, especially those delivering take away food are bombing up on the outside. My nerves were shredded by the time I got home later that night. And I'd only had one day in the capital. And they have the cheek to charge you for the ordeal – congestion charge, ULEZ – that will be £30 please. I was so glad to be back in the backwater of green, quiet Dursley. Goodness knows how my character would change if I was living in London and coping with that level of stress and aggression every day.

The environment you live in has a factor in how you are shaped.

Obviously, your genetic inheritance and make up, your physiology, will affect you. What good news to hear the other day that one of the cruellest and most devastating diseases – Huntington's – has been successfully treated for the first time. But our physiology, how our brains are wired, how the chemicals and hormones and other stuff going on in here all makes a difference to our moods and character and attitudes.

Life experiences inevitably shape us into who we are today. Psychologists basic rule of thumb is that we are loving to the degree that we have been loved. This is why it's so much easier for those who were well loved by their parents or caregivers in their early years to give and receive love as adults. As a general rule we become more loving by experiencing love, not by hearing about it in a lecture or reading about it in a book. That said no family of origin is healthy enough to transform us into the kind of love we see in Jesus and no family is dysfunctional enough to keep us from becoming people of love in Jesus. All of us have the potential to grow and mature into people of the love of Christ. But to do so we need to experience the love of God. More about that in a moment.

This week's handout which you can get if you click on the link in Tab Matters, or if you prefer a paper copy there are some on the table at the front...gives you a formation audit. You can spend some time reflecting on how you have been formed and hopefully it will give you pause for thought about where you go from here. Whether some influences have been helpful or harmful and how to make changes in your life.

When I did the formation audit I realised I look at my phone too much. Especially at the beginning and end of the day which can wind me up instead of calming me down. It can make me irritable and even angry when ideally I want to be starting the day and ending the day in gratitude, thankfulness and placing myself in the hands of God.

Our habits from doom scrolling on our phones to going to the gym, do something to us. They get in the corner of our souls. Watching Netflix or numerous other streaming channels, internet shopping late at night. All these habits are like a fulcrum in our heart which is being changed.

When we consider our relationships. We become like the people we spend time with. We even start dressing like the people we spend time with. We start to think like them. Who are we surrounding ourselves with? Are they a good influence or not?

The stories we believe. God seems to have wired our brains to search for meaning, a narrative to live in and live out. It's why we love movies and telling stories around the campfire. What is the good life? What is the purpose of life. What we believe is true - we become.

Marriages often end in heartache because no one can live up to the story told in Hollywood of that great romantic attraction and the expectation your relationship will always be like that, smelling of roses and floating on a cloud. Pick your stories carefully. Because they determine who you become.

All this formation happens over time and through experience. It is largely unintentional formation. Which is why it is good every now and again to stop for a moment and reflect on the question 'Who or what am I becoming?'

Imagine at 70, 80, 90. What kind of person you see. Who am I becoming?

If you plot a trajectory - who is the person you see. It can be a wake up call to major life changes. Do you wish to alter the trajectory of your life more in the direction of Jesus?

How can we let God love us into people of love?

How can we be transformed?

Paul writes in Romans '*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*'

The Greek word for conform and transform is the root word from which we get metamorphosis such as when a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. To change the essential form or nature of something. Not just surface level change but deep level change.

We are all being formed by something. Question is who is forming me. And who am I becoming? Can we make our formation conscious. For Paul writing this letter to the church in Rome he was asking them how was Rome shaping them into Romans. Was this a good thing? Was it shaping them into being like Jesus?

In the coming weeks we will look at some practices that we can intentionally adopt that will help shape us into people who know the love of God and can be loving like Jesus.

John Mark Comer in his book talks about the practice of contemplation. As we gaze, as we look at God, looking at us in love. This simple uncomplicated act has the potential to transform our inner lives and heal our deepest wounds in ways that more bible study, church attendance and even therapy (as good as these are) cannot possibly touch.

Comer writes:

I will never forget when my spiritual director advised me 'John Mark, sit in your sin and let God love you'. He did not mean 'keep sinning and don't feel guilty.' He meant 'when you sin (and you will and we all will) don't hide it from God. Hold it before God, with no excuses, no blame shifting, no denial, just utter vulnerability, and let God love you as you are. And then let God love you into who you have the potential to become'.

This is a very different kind of prayer than many of us are used to. I grew up praying in a mode that was wordy, fast paced, and a bit demanding. Prayer, to me, meant asking God for things, mostly good things, but still the aim was to use a lot of words to ask God for what you needed and desired. And there's a place for that. Yet contemplative prayer isn't looking to get anything from God; it's just looking at God. I look at God. God looks at me and we are happy.

It's a deeper layer of prayer that I found most challenging and most rewarding. Challenging not because it's unpleasant (the opposite in fact) but because it requires the very capacity of which our world schemes to rob me: attention.

The capacity to set the hearts attention on God – so basic to following Jesus – is the very commodity we are losing to the attention economy, trading looking for liking and gazing for doomscrolling. But if we can't pay attention we can't pray.

The French Philosopher Simon Weil defined prayer as 'absolutely unmixed attention'. The Quaker Douglas Steere said to pray is 'to pay attention to the deepest thing I know'.

It's not that words are bad, they aren't. It's just to reach a point in any relationship, but especially with God where words and even thoughts no longer carry you forward toward intimacy. There is a kind of knowledge that goes beyond words. From a person to person experience.

Which is where contemplative prayer differs in direction from say mindfulness. In Buddhist meditation the goal is self-emptying; prayer invites a similar emptying but its goal is to make room for God. In mindfulness the goal is simply to be present in the moment. In prayer it's to be present to God's presence in the moment and ultimately to God's love. This may sound very mystical to you but we need to cultivate our inner mystic to move on in the spiritual life.

I try to start the day 'wasting time with God'. I know I have an advantage in this in that I get paid to waste time in prayer but literally anyone can do it – just have to have the intent and make sure you make time for it at some point in the day in some way. Whether it's sitting in an armchair in a quiet corner of the house or going on a walk or a drive.

Like Comer in his book I know some days even when I try to make time my mind is like a 'banana tree filled with monkeys' an expression he borrowed from Henri Nouwen. Its all over the place, I am troubled and anxious and struggle to pay attention. Other times I just sit there and breathe and listen for God and sense God's loving presence and look at what my eyes cannot see.

If your experience of prayer is closer to boredom, distraction, and scary emotions coming to the surface of your heart – please don't shame yourself or self-flagellate. That won't help. Just keep praying. Just keep showing up. Don't stop until you know the experience I'm struggling to name with words.

Don't conform. Be transformed. It takes time. It is reshaping your life intentionally to be open to the love of God and to be with Jesus. That's the reward.