

This is Finding Hidden Treasure. Episode number 72. Today's episode is the first in a new series on Spiritual Formation.

This episode is the first in a series which will be devoted to the topic of spiritual formation.

There is much talk today about spiritual formation. Spiritual formation refers to the process by which our spiritual lives are formed, shaped and molded with the ultimate aim of being conformed to the image of Christ.

Where I'd like to begin is one the level of two basic instincts with which we all are very familiar, namely, hunger and thirst.

All of us know what it is to be hungry and thirsty, physically. Without these instincts, our bodies would very quickly die. Nutritional science tells us that there are several different kinds of hunger. One of those is known as "eye hunger." It happens when we see something that looks good to eat and we tell ourselves that it is something we are hungry for.

There is another type of hunger which goes far deeper. It is known as "cellular hunger." It happens when, on the cellular level, our body knows that there is a lack of some nutrient in our bodies. As a result, we crave a food that will replace that deficiency. One example is that if our body is in need of potassium, we might develop a hunger for potassium-rich bananas to replenish our body's store of that element.

I think that Christian spiritual formation is a way of addressing the spiritual equivalent of cellular hunger. I think that Christian Spiritual Formation can help us resolve that hunger for a deeper relationship with God in Christ.

We find in the Bible several references to such deep spiritual hunger. The sixth chapter of the Gospel of John addresses this topic with a wonderful comparison between satisfying our physical hunger and satisfying our spiritual hunger.

Let me provide some context. At the start of the chapter, we read about how the Lord Jesus performed a miracle of multiplying food so that a boy's lunch of five barley loaves and two fish fed a crowd of over 5,000 people. The next day, the crowd followed Jesus and His disciples to another location on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. You don't need to be a world-class bible scholar to understand why this happened. The crowd was looking for another free lunch from Jesus.

The Lord then centered their attention on where their priorities should have been. Rather than looking for more physical bread, they should have been looking for the true bread which came down from heaven. As we read on, we discover that that true bread is Christ Himself.

In verse 35, Jesus told them then and tells us today:

I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

We humans are spiritual as well as physical creatures. We instinctively seek to satisfy that spiritual hunger just as much as we do with the physical.

There are so many ways that we have tried to satisfy that hunger. Pursuing fame, acquiring wealth, sex, drug use. That's only a partial list. However, those physical things can never satisfy the built-in spiritual hunger we have. Only the true bread of life, Jesus Christ, can do that.

The Lord Jesus tells us that for one who has put their trust in Him, they will hunger no more and thirst no more. Yet, a kind of hunger and thirst remains for a believer in Christ. How do we reconcile our experience with Christ's words in John 6:35?

This kind of hunger and thirst is not for MORE than Christ but for more OF Christ. It is the written of well in the opening verses of the 42nd Psalm. David wrote:

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

Christian Spiritual Formation is a purposeful effort to address our deep, spiritual cellular hunger so that we will grow more deeply in our relationship with God in Christ.

I'd like to expand the analogy used earlier about nutrition. In the last several years, at least here in the United States, there has been an emphasis on what is called "clean eating." It has to do with the approach of taking in foods that have gone through little or no processing. Numerous foods available today have undergone extensive processing. In the effort to make a food item look or taste more appealing, the processing that is done can often remove important nutrients and add what have been called empty calories, that is, foods which have a higher caloric content but less nutritional value than its natural equivalent.

The same can be said for our approach to spiritual formation. There is so much good content which is available to us today in the way of books, articles, podcasts, sermons, music and videos. To be candid, I believe that much of what is today is given the label "Christian" in terms of its content is really the spiritual equivalent of an empty calorie food. As you become familiar with the biblical text, through reading the Bible, reflecting on it and being led to follow through in prayer, you will become better equipped to discern the content that will provide you true, Christian, spiritual nourishment.

Some extended criteria for discernment will be offered in subsequent episodes on aspects of spiritual formation. However, let me offer some preliminary ideas:

Ask yourself who or what is really at the center of the book or podcast or video or song, etc. We are told in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that “**whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, to do it for the glory of God**”

Is the glory of God the focus? Is Christ the focus? It helps to keep this as a mental filter through which Christian media content must pass through in your thinking. You may be surprised at the depth of real Christian content or distinct lack of it as you take in and discern.

Let’s go back one more time to the nutrition analogy. Being diligent in bodily nutrition takes planning. It is something done purposely. It will not happen by accident. In the same way, spiritual formation requires planning and a sense of purpose. If someone purchases a membership to a gymnasium or athletic club, the benefits of using the equipment will only happen if time in the gym is planned and purposely set aside. Another way of saying this is that one must make physical training a priority for results to occur.

In the same way, spiritual formation for a Christian must be planned and done so purposely. It must be a priority and I don’t think it goes too far to say that it must be our highest priority. All of us have a range of priorities based on our season and circumstances in life. Christian spiritual formation does not wipe out those other, very real priorities in life (such as caring for your family, earning a living, etc). However, such practices as Bible reading and praying must have priority place in our hearts and minds. Amid all else we are called to do, we must encounter God in Christ by the Holy Spirit to grow. To allow what are unquestionably good things that we are called to do in life and give them continuing priority over the Word and Prayer tells God that these other things, really, are more important than our relationship to Him. It’s easy to slip into that way of thinking. Christian spiritual formation purposely calls us to plan that time with God and grow in Him because it really is our true priority.

As we go through these podcast episodes on spiritual formation, I will stress the importance of the resources which we have available to us in the early 21st century. When I have spoken to others about the blessing of abundant resources which we have available to us, I have used a real-life object lesson that I heard of over ten years. Someone I worked with had spent a career in the U.S. Navy. One day, a friend who was a fellow Navy officer visited my co-worker’s ship. As they were walking down one of the corridors of the ship, the friend asked my co-worker where the ship’s machine shop was. My co-worker said that the ship didn’t have a machine shop. The visiting friend was assigned to a ship of the same class as my co-worker. He said that every ship of that class had a machine shop at that part of the ship. They later inspected the plans for my co-worker’s ship. As it turns out, the plans indicated a machine shop precisely where the visitor said it should be. Upon further investigation, they found out that when the ship was being built, someone forgot to cut a hole in the wall for a door to the machine shop. When the hole was eventually cut, there stood a state-of-the-art machine shop on the other side of the wall. For all that time, the sailors and officers on the ship had the

resource of a machine shop in their midst but never used it because they didn't know it was there.

I think that for many of us, the resources available to us in helping in spiritual formation are like that machine shop. We don't access the resources because we might not know that they are available to us. As we go through these episodes, I will point out resources which can help us in our walk with Christ.

I want to stress something here concerning resources. There are so many good resources available to us in the way of books (paper and electronic), podcasts, sermons, music, etc. I will make sure to point these out as we proceed. However, I sense that one resource that we might overlook is our access to fellow believers. Our fellow believers have experience with the Lord as well as us. Perhaps a younger believer might be a good resource for us when we need encouragement that those in your generation are not the last generation of Christians on Earth. The younger believers can look to those who have more years with Christ than they to learn how to navigate the circumstances of life and remain faithful to Christ when doing so.

One big potential danger of entering spiritual formation is that of becoming a 21st century Pharisee. The Pharisees mentioned throughout the gospel accounts offer a valuable lesson in how to approach spiritual formation. The Pharisees were a group whose name "PAROOSHEEM" meant "the separated ones." They saw themselves as those who, by their example, would show the people of Israel how to live a holy life. Yet, for what may have been good intentions when first founded two centuries earlier, the Lord Jesus pointed out that Pharisee evangelism resulted in those converted becoming "Twice a son of hell" than those who preached to them. They recognized the Old Testament books as being inspired by God (not everyone did at this point in history). They had access to those texts and may very well have had large sections, if not the entirety of it, memorized. Despite this level of interaction with the text, they somehow missed Christ as the one those texts refer to. See John 5:37-40.

The Pharisees mistook the means for the ends. It is something we can be in danger of doing as well. In Episode 71 of the podcast, I quoted from Andrew Murray, a pastor and evangelist who lived in the 19th and 20th centuries. Murray made the point that Christians are in danger of letting the very acts of Bible reading and prayer act as a substitute of real, living interaction with God in Christ.

In engaging in the practices of spiritual formation, we must never allow ourselves to think that the actions are ends in themselves. Bible reading must never become a simple, checklist item in which we might fool ourselves into thinking we have become more holy simply because the words of the text have passed through our eyes or ears. Spiritual formation is a means of interacting with and fellowshiping with God in Christ. It must never be done for its own sake.

As we discuss various aspects of spiritual formation, we will see that these practices have corporate and/or individual aspects. Prayer, for example, can (and should) be

done individually as well as corporately, that is, along with others. Fellowship with other Christians must be done corporately.

We see both of these dimensions of corporate and individual practice modeled by none other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. There were times when the Lord Jesus would minister to other people, and on at least one occasion, preaching to a crowd in excess of 5,000 men along with women and children. There were also times in which the Lord Jesus would separate Himself from the crowds and even His own disciples to seek His Father alone in prayer.

In a web-based environment such as this podcast exists in, face-to-face fellowship with those who live in scattered nations across the Earth is simply not do-able. I highly recommend that as you look to grow deeper in Christ, look for, or perhaps start, a community of believers who can grow together spiritually.

To foster a level of community as we go through these episodes, I will be posting on Twitter some links to what I hope are helpful resources and insights to help your growth in the faith. These posts will be on the Restoring The Core Twitter feed which you can find using our Twitter name of @restorethecore. I will be using a hashtag of #spiritualclay. Isn't that really what we are? We are living beings who dwell in both a physical and a spiritual dimension.

I'd like to close with what I hope to be words of encouragement. We can imagine what a more spiritually-disciplined, Christ-hungering life would look like for us. However, we might doubt that such a life is even possible for us in the real world, amidst real life and everyday circumstances.

Please pray about this and trust that Christ and God's Holy Spirit will work within you to make what you imagine, a God-honoring reality. God can change and has changed those who have looked to Him in faith. In fact, I think it's safe to say that God wants His people to grow into the image of His Son, Jesus even more than we do.

Our next episode will be on the topic of one of the four core practices of Christians as found in the Acts 2:42. We will be discussing the role of the Bible in our spiritual formation.