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HEART-TO-HEART

May 2003
A Pastoral Letter from Richard Foster



Dear Friends,

By now enough water has gone under the Christian Spiritual Formation bridge that we can give some assessment of where we have come and what yet needs to be done. When I first began writing in the field in the late 70s and early 80s the term “Spiritual Formation” was hardly known, except for highly specialized references in relation to the Catholic orders. Today it is a rare person who has not heard the term. Seminary courses in Spiritual Formation proliferate like baby rabbits. Huge numbers are seeking to become certified as Spiritual Directors to answer the cry of multiplied thousands for spiritual direction. And more.

Still, any genuine understanding of Spiritual Formation and its immense importance for the lives of individuals and churches is as remote as ever. Many contemporary books on the subject (and their number is now legion) simply take up the all too familiar recipe of consumer-Christianity-without-discipleship. Seminary programs become quickly polluted by issues that are a far cry from the spiritual growth of students: money (D. Min. programs give seminaries ready cash), pride (degrees abounding), arrogance (our program is better than your program), ATS accreditation concerns (reading lists and contact hours take precedence over soul growth in grace), and a host of other issues that have nothing to do with the life of “righteousness and peace and joy” in the Holy Spirit, and, indeed, are more often than not counterproductive to it. But, all this may be just as well, since Christian Spiritual Formation is really hammered out in the harsh realities of ordinary life—ear infections and broken arms and bosses filled with guile and stock market slumps and neighbors who deceive. Hence, these are the very places where our hardest study and most careful work in Spiritual Formation must go on.

A MOMENT OF GREAT OPPORTUNITY

You can probably detect that I am not overwhelmingly encouraged by the popular expressions of Spiritual Formation today. I’m not; too much is too faddish and too formulaic for me to be optimistic. And yet, we stand at a moment of great opportunity. Human need today is so obvious and so great that no honest person can deny it. People stagger under the burden of human wickedness. Evil is an open, oozing sore. Therefore superficial, half-answers will not do. Not anymore. Today, there is a great new fact in the contemporary interest in Spiritual Formation. And I view it as a source for enormous hope. This great new fact is the widespread belief that we can no longer bypass authentic, pervasive, thorough transformation of the inner life of the human being.

Add to this the fact that the many “spiritualities” that have arisen in our day do not answer the question of how we can become a good person. Nor do they possess the power to make a person good. But genuine Christian Spiritual Formation does answer the question and does possess the power to bring it to pass. And it is an answer and a power that shines brightly throughout the pages of history. It is no accident that the blazing light and life of Christian faithfulness overcame and supplanted all the “spiritualities” of Rome in the early centuries of the Christian Era. They offered a life—a formed, conformed, transformed life—that the Roman spiritualities simply could not match.

The same can happen today. If . . . if we will: 1) understand the absolute necessity of Spiritual Formation (no more optional discipleship), 2) make a firm intention to pursue it at all costs, 3) learn something of its means, and 4) faithfully practice it in daily life. As we move forward in Spiritual Formation, allow me to suggest several essential areas of focus.

FOCUSING ON JESUS

Nothing is more important in Christian Spiritual Formation than our need to continue ever focused upon Jesus. This is not formation-in-general. This is formation into Christlikeness. Everything hangs on this. Everything. Jesus gives skeleton and sinews and muscle to our formation. In Jesus we find definition and shape and form for our formation. Jesus is our Savior to redeem us, our Bishop to shepherd us, our Teacher to instruct us, our Lord to rule us, our Friend to come alongside us. He is alive. He teaches, rules, guides, instructs, rebukes, comforts. Stay close to him in all things and in all ways.

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Then too, as Dallas Willard has taught us, we are constantly learning to live our life as Jesus would live our life if he were we. The point here is that we are not trying to live *his* life but *our* life. In the flesh Jesus' life has already been lived. It is our life that needs the living. Remember, Jesus really is Lord; he is the Master of life, all life. He can teach you and me how to live our life. Really. You're a computer programmer—he can teach you how to do that well. Ask him. Then listen . . . listen over a period of time. You'll learn how to do it as he would do it if he were you. A teacher. Well, he is the Master teacher. How about brick laying? Yes, that too.

Some of the deepest teaching comes in the relationships we must deal with day in and day out. How do we relate to someone who deceives constantly? Jesus knows. Ask and it will be given to you. How about ego-driven colleagues? He understands them too. Jesus is the Master of all human relationships. He will guide you in what to say and what to do and how to respond.

Now, the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the touchstone of our understanding of Jesus. These four Gospels in our Bible give us everything needful and essential about Jesus. They refuse, however, to indulge our curiosity about a whole host of details. How long was Jesus' hair? What color were his eyes? What toys did he play with as a child? Did he play as a child? And more.

Beginning in the second century and continuing right up to the present, various writers have rushed to fill in the gaps with imaginative "lives of Jesus". Even today every now and then some publisher will come out with a new book on "the lost life of Jesus". Please, don't be taken in by such consumer ploys. These flights of fantasy (if I may call them that) do not lead us to the Jesus who is the Way and the Truth and the Life; the Jesus who reveals to us the heart of the Father. No, these fictions reveal not Jesus but the agenda and the biases of the writer. They are a waste of good time and energy. Worse, they so titillate our fantasies that they distract the imagination from its proper function, which is, as Mary, to prayerfully ponder all the realities of Jesus in our heart (Luke 2:19). This prayerful pondering, this sanctified imagination, continually confronts us with the realities of ethical decision and moral choice. Always it drives us to turn from our way into God's way. Always it brings us face-to-face with the reality of Jesus and calls us increasingly to take on his character, his thoughts, his habits, his passion, his compassion.

FOCUSING ON SCRIPTURE

My mention of the Gospel record leads me to a second essential area of focus for Spiritual Formation: Scripture. Oh, I hope you can feel deep down in your bones the great goodness and wonder of the Bible. God, in sovereign grace and outrageous love, has given us a written revelation of his own being and nature and of his purposes for humanity. That written revelation now resides as a massive fact at the heart of human history. There is, simply, no book that is remotely close to achieving the presence and influence of the Bible. It is truly The Book (*hay Biblos*).

But the intrinsic power and greatness of the Bible does not make it easy for us to receive the life it offers. In fact, we can often use the Bible in ways that stifle the spiritual life and even destroy the soul. This happened to any number of people who walked in the literal presence of Jesus, and it still happens today. Even to those who speak most highly of the Bible.

Sometimes we study the Bible for information alone in order to prove that we are right and others are wrong in particular doctrines or beliefs or practices. At other times we study the Bible to find some formula to solve the pressing need of the moment. But both approaches to the Bible leave the soul untouched. No, we need to study the Bible with a view to the transformation of our whole person and of our whole life into Christlikeness. We come to the Bible to receive the life “with God” that is portrayed *in* the Bible. To do this we must not control what comes out of the Bible. We must be prepared to have our dearest and most fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our associations called into question. We must read humbly and in a constant attitude of repentance. Only in this way can we gain a thorough and practical grasp of the spiritual riches that God has made available to all humanity in his written Word.

We can begin with the **Gospels** looking at the “with-God” life that is fully portrayed in Jesus. And we seek this life abundant that comes in and through Jesus alone. We study the **Epistles** to see the life of God being poured through his people, the Church. And we seek that life for ourselves and for our families and for our churches and for our times. We study the **Psalms** and see the people of God at prayer. And we too enter a living experience of prayer, working in co-operation with God to see his kingdom come and his will be done here on earth. We study the **Pentateuch** to understand the Mosaic Law in the light of grace. And we seek to conform our lives to the heart and spirit of the Law. We study the **Historical books** to understand how God works through the historical particularities of a people. And we ask for God’s life and God’s work in the specifics of our histories. We study the **Prophets** and see their bias in favor of the downtrodden. And we seek the power to live continually with a sensitized social conscience. We study the **Wisdom books** and discover God’s interest in the practical details of everyday life. And we pray for wisdom in the minutiae of our little life. We study the **Eschatological books** and discover that “He’s got the whole world in his hands”. And we place our little destiny in God’s hands too. And more.

Throughout our study of the Bible we are learning greater love: greater appropriation of God’s love for us, and for us to have greater love for God, for others, and for ourselves. All our study of the Bible is so that we might love more and know more of love. Not as an abstraction but as a practical reality by which we are possessed. And since all who love through and through “naturally” (supernaturally, too) obey the Law, we will be ever more obedient to Jesus Christ and his Abba Father. We surrender freely to the life we find in the Bible, trusting the living water that flows from Jesus through the Bible, and living in the reality of its abundance.

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FOCUSING ON SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The life we find in the Bible is meant for us. Jesus’ declaration, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” is intended for you and for me (John 10:10). It is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is solid. It is simple. It is serene. It is radiant. But, it is not automatic.

There is a process, a God-ordained means, to becoming the kind of persons and the kind of communities that can fully and joyfully enter into such abundant living. This is the reason for the Disciplines of the spiritual life. They constitute the way God has given us for intentionally “training ourselves in godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7). This is why the Spiritual Disciplines is the third essential focus of Spiritual Formation.

Frankly, no Spiritual Disciplines, no Spiritual Formation. The Disciplines are the God-ordained means by which each of us is enabled to bring the little, individualized power pack we all possess—we call it the human body—and place it before God as “a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). It is the way we go about training in the spiritual life. By means of this process we become, through time and experience, the kind of person who lives naturally and freely in “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

What are these Spiritual Disciplines I am speaking of? Oh, they are many and varied: fasting and prayer, study and service, submission and solitude, confession and worship, meditation and silence, simplicity,

frugality, secrecy, sacrifice, celebration, and the like. The commonly identified public religious activities are important to be sure, but the less commonly practiced activities like solitude and silence and meditation and fasting and submission to the will of others as appropriate are in fact more foundational for Spiritual Formation. All Disciplines should be thoughtfully and resolutely approached for the purpose of forming the life into Christlikeness, or they will have little or no effect in promoting this life.

It is vitally important for us to see all this spiritual training in the context of the work and action of God's grace. As the great Apostle reminds us, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). You see, we are not just saved by grace, we live by grace. And we pray by grace and fast by grace and study by grace and serve by grace and worship by grace. All the Disciplines are penetrated throughout by the enabling grace of God.

The training of the Spiritual Disciplines must always be seen in the context of an intimate, personal walk with Jesus himself. We are not looking for some exhaustive list of the Disciplines so that we can cross every "t" and dot every "i". Nor are we looking for any "formula for blessedness". No, no, this is a dynamic, interactive life "with God". In practicing the Spiritual Disciplines we are simply learning to fall in love with Jesus over and over and over again.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

And that takes us back to where we started, doesn't it! We start with Jesus and we end with Jesus. As the Cotton Patch paraphrase of the Gospels puts it, "Jesus is tops over all!" Jesus is indeed our everliving Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend. He will guide and direct. All we need do is listen. And obey.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

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