

The Easy Yoke

TRANSCRIPT (AUTO-GENERATED)

If you are a Christian today, like me, you're on a journey of spiritual formation in the way of the Master. At NorthernLife, we call it Wayform, spiritual formation in the way of the Master.

This book came out of a sermon series preached at NorthernLife, exploring Christian spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is both a fancy name for discipleship and the actual process which is underpinning discipleship.

Many of us are probably familiar with the Great Commission of Matthew 28, where the Lord Jesus, just before he returns to heaven, says to his disciples, go into all the world and make disciples. This sounds a lot like, go and convert the world.

Reach them for Christ. Go and evangelize the nations with the emphasis being on evangelism. And then we hear, Lo, I am with you always until the end of the age.

And we're comforted that Jesus will be with us as we play our part in reaching souls for heaven. This is known as the Great Commission. But there's something else that's been referred to as the Great Omission.

The Great Omission is the part that says, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. In other words, teach them how to live the way that I lived, the way Jesus lived. Jesus said teach them the way of the Master.

Teach them how to be formed spiritually so that good fruit would come from the good that is inside them.

Christianity begins with the new birth, which happens through faith in Christ, and the new birth begins a progressive transformation of the inner person to become more and more like Jesus himself.

Jesus said in Luke 6, No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes or grapes from briars.

A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart, for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

Followers of Jesus are changed from the inside out.

This is what Ezekiel prophesied in chapter 36, verse 26. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. So what is spiritual formation?

Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, in essence the spirit or will.

It's being transformed in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ. In other words, over time, spiritual formation makes us act like Jesus naturally, out of habit from the heart.

Christian maturity is not that you can walk through a pathway of temptation and grit your teeth resisting the constant urges and desire to sin. Christian maturity is getting to the place where many sins don't entice anymore.

We're not saying perfection, but we are saying progression. A significant question for Christian maturity is, does my progression towards Christlikeness involve effort on my behalf, or is it purely a work of God?

Do I have a part to play in my spiritual formation, and if so, what is my part and what is God's part? Jesus said in John 15 verse 5, apart from me, you can do nothing. In other words, we are utterly dependent on the grace of Jesus.

The opposite is also true. If you do nothing, it will be without me. That is, if you make no effort at all to learn the ways of the Master, you might find yourself a long way from the Jesus way.

Paul writes in Colossians 3 verse 5, put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature. So who is doing the putting to death? Well, that would be me.

The text goes on to say sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

You used to walk in these ways in the life you once lived, but now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these, anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips.

Peter writes in 2 Peter 1 verse 3, His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness.

Through these, He has given us His very great and precious promises so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort.

Make every what? Effort. To add to your faith goodness and to goodness knowledge and to knowledge self-control and to self-control perseverance and to perseverance godliness and to godliness mutual affection and to mutual affection love.

Grace is not opposed to effort. Grace is opposed to earning. The Bible constantly tells us to choose, to stop, to start, to obey, to put in the effort required by the grace of God to become who we are called to be, who we actually are by faith.

Spiritual formation is the journey of Christianity. A changed heart leading to a renewed mind resulting in a learned way. When we think about Christianity and effort, there's always a little tension created.

The resulting question should be, how can I put in effort to achieve godliness when the gospel itself is a gift? That's the tension of spiritual formation. What's my part and what's God's part?

Lest we become caught up in a world of effort and striving, guilt and failure and striving some more, allow the wonderful truth of Matthew 11 28 to 30 to flow over you.

Matthew 11 28, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Christianity does involve effort, but Jesus describes this effort as an easy yoke.

Jesus says what he offers is rest, rest for the hamsters on the wheel of humanity, for those constantly striving to achieve more, to gather more, to climb higher, to fight off one more enemy whilst avoiding another.

The master of the way says, come, come and sup with me. Are you weary and burdened? What a timeless call.

It doesn't matter which era of history, this call has people's ears pricking up. Come to me, all who are weary and burdened. He doesn't say, I'll give you another burden.

He says, I will give you rest, rest for your souls, rest in the deepest place. Sleep is a marvellous thing, isn't it? Does anyone not love sleep?

Sleep can be elusive though. Ever woken up a little too early and then can't get back to sleep? Then you fall asleep and go into such a deep sleep that you sleep through your alarm.

I had an experience of this literally the other day. I went back into such a deep sleep when I woke up. I felt like I was coming out of a general anesthetic.

Jesus offers us rest, deep rest. The Greek word means refreshed. Work is paused, and you are refreshed.

Come to me, Jesus says, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Who is the offer to come to? Not come to church, come to the commandments, come to the ministry center.

Jesus says, come to me. This statement is the foundation of spiritual formation. It's the foundation of the Christian life.

Come to Jesus, to the person, God, man, Saviour, King. Come and be yoked with him. John's Gospel makes it clear.

The eternal life God offers through his Son is in his Son. Any life more than that, eternal life, we have as Christians, is directly because we have the Son. Whoever has the Son has life.

Whoever does not have the Son does not have life. Come to me and put my yoke on you. It won't be ill-fitting.

It's the oxen's yoke. The two oxen would work the field together, the older one teaching the younger one the way, which involves learning how fast to break up the field, the cadence of walking and pulling, when to rest.

It's an easy yoke because Jesus knows us intimately and His Spirit is our coach. Spiritual formation is coming to Jesus and learning His unhurried rhythms of grace. Christianity is a way.

It's a learned way of life. It's the way of the Master. Can you see why it's so important to stop and listen?

To come under the sound of the Word of God, because there are aspects of the way of the Master which don't come naturally to us. The easy yoke is a type of mentoring. I wonder, have you ever experienced a great mentoring relationship?

When they work, they provide a profound opportunity to learn and grow, to be encouraged and inspired. I've both been mentored and have mentored others, and rarely is it unfruitful.

The important thing to remember in the easy yoke life, which though easy, involves effort, is that in the New Testament, the end goal is always agape love. Jesus as our mentor is guiding us into a life of love.

2 Peter 1, 7 says, And to godliness, mutual affection, and to mutual affection, love.

Colossians 3 is an awesome passage about spiritual formation, and it ends with, Bear with each other, and forgive one another, if any of you has a grievance against someone.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you, and over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Love is the goal of inner transformation, which is a fruit of the spirit.

At NorthernLife, we are familiar with the concentric circles of formation. These were first conceived by Dallas Willard. The following diagram is designed to explain the multiple aspects of human personhood wrapped together within the living soul.

The parts of our personhood include, from concentric circles moving inside to out, include the heart, spirit and will at the core, which in many ways are hard to separate.

We then have the mind, our emotions, the body, our social context, and holding it all together, the soul. So if you imagine an arrow going into a target, like a round target, that's what the picture looks like.

The order of executive power in our lives is this order. God renews us at the deepest place, the will, heart, spirit, like the bullseye on a dartboard.

And this changes and renews, reframes and reorders our thoughts, which is our mind, which in turn impacts our emotions. This affects the actions of our body and then how we interact with our social context.

Things get messed up when the order of executive function is flipped, which happens quite easily. In a flipped order, life is driven by our social context. We do whatever our body desires as we're driven by unregulated emotions.

Lagging behind is our mind, our spirit heart and transformed will. You really need to, if you're listening to the audio alone, you need to have a look at the book to understand the diagram.

When Jesus called those first disciples, he was inviting them into the Easy Yoke to walk with him, observe him, live with him, sleep next to him, learn from him, and be ministered to by him. It was exactly what Matthew 11 says.

Matthew 11, Are you tired, worn out, burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me, and you'll recover your life.

I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me. Watch how I do it.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me, and you'll learn how to live freely and lightly.

What Jesus uses to teach us the way of the Master is the Golden Triangle of Spiritual Formation. Again, if you have a book, it will be much easier to look at this diagram.

The Triangle of Spiritual Formation has at the top of a triangle the whole Gospel. Down the right-hand side, at the bottom of the triangle, you have habits of the way. And then across to the left, we have trials and temptations.

The whole Gospel refers to the Gospel which both gives a believer access to Heaven when they die, and also access to Heaven in their heart before they die.

As they say, the Gospel is as much about getting into Heaven as it is about getting Heaven into us. Habits of the way, the Lord uses habits to train us in godliness.

Time-honoured practices known as spiritual disciplines, including but not limited to study, prayer, worship, service, giving, submission, solitude, silence and others.

And then on the left-hand side, the bottom left of the triangle, you have trials and temptations. The Lord uses the trials and temptations of this life to shape and mould us into the likeness of Christ.

As the Spirit of God and the Word of God drive the process, we interact with the school of life, which is outlined across the base of the diagram. To expect to travel the way of the Master without the base of the triangle is misguided and even naïve.

Trials, temptations and sufferings handled through the empowering of the Spirit accessed by grace, through habits, routines, practices of godliness, is simply how a Christian gets shaped into the likeness of Christ.

Christians become like Christ through the dynamic of this triangle. James says it succinctly.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Mature in Greek is teleos, meaning perfect.

Spiritual formation is a process, and if you believe the gospel and the born again, you are on this process of transformation. Have you noticed that there is this four letter word that we have been mentioning? The will, my will.

From a little baby, we learn about the power of the will. The will of a human being can be called the executive center of the self. The will is actually quite complex.

There is what might be called the impulsive will. This is a willing that is outwardly directed and moved by and toward things which are simply attractive. You see this in a baby.

A little baby very quickly begins to be attracted to things, to reach for them and move in relationship to them. And that's all there really is to the will for a baby.

I want and it pleases me a way to drive this will, but it's pretty clear that the impulsive will is not the most sensible way to express your autonomy and agency as a mature human being. There also exists what's called reflective will.

The reflective will is oriented toward what is good for the person as a whole, not merely what is desired. The reflective will takes, as the name suggests, time to reflect and to appraise.

The reflective will engages in a conflict which we all know too well as human beings, between the good and the bad, and the good and the not so good, and the good and the better.

This reflective angst goes on constantly in our lives, and it trips up people at all stages of life.

When you bring the reflective will to life in Christ, and add the instruction of the Bible, and the person of Christ through his spirit, along with the fellowship of his body, you have the capacity to live in such a way that God is glorified in

everything you do. The anticipation of this is reflected in amazing passages like Colossians 3, 17. Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

When the will is trained to be in sync with Christ, Colossians 3 becomes a real possibility. Reflective will is the will oriented toward what is good for the person as a whole, not toward what is merely desired.

So there are two ideas at the core of spiritual formation.

Impulsive will, where you simply choose what you desire, and reflective will, where instead of just doing what you want, you choose what is good, and especially as Christians, what is good under God in the kingdom of God.

The tricky thing about the will is that one of these wills tends to get embodied in a person to a place of automation.

Embodied will is where either the impulsive will or the reflective will has sunk down into your body to such an extent that you automatically do what it dictates. This is the standard situation for most human beings on earth.

Their body is running their life from choices that have formed their will and positioned it in their body. Hopefully your mind is going back to the diagram of the concentric circles.

Take the case of the Apostle Peter's denial outside the meeting of the Sanhedrin as they judged Jesus as an illustration. His failure to stand for Jesus was a demonstration of his embodied will.

Peter didn't reflect on the situation and then decide what to do. When he was faced with the accusation of association with Jesus, he blurted out the denial. That is embodied will for evil.

Peter reflected after the fact and discovered what he was really like inside. To take another example, when people are insulted, what do they normally do? They insult in return.

When they are hurt, they hurt back. This is embodied will, as it exists in a fallen world. When you're driving and you don't do what someone thinks you should, they may honk their horn at you and do all sorts of things towards you that are rageful.

Those responses are expressions of the embodied will. It's what you might call an epidermal response because it lies right at the surface of the person's skin. If you can get that picture, you can see what it means to be spiritually formed in Christ.

For spiritual formation in Christ transforms your embodied will. Christian spiritual formation is the process through which the embodied reflective will takes on the character of Christ's will.

It's a deep level change which, oddly enough, lives in our bodies. One of the ironies of spiritual formation is that every spiritual discipline is a bodily behavior. The term spiritual sounds like it's non-bodily, but the exact opposite is true.

We have to involve the body in spiritual formation because that's where we live and what we live from.

So spiritual formation is formation of the inner being of the human being, resulting in transformation of the whole person, including the body in its social context. Spiritual formation is never merely inward.

So this learned way of the Master has some habits to appropriate, some practices to get ingrained in our neural pathways. The process involves effort.

One practice to consider in learning the way of the Master is learning to hand over outcomes to God. Sometimes it's referred to as abandoning outcomes to God. Anxiety is often a control issue.

When we truly come to Jesus and put on his yoke, we realize we're not doing this life of ours alone. The with God life is the Christian life. Jesus isn't way off somewhere in the sky.

Rather, by his Spirit, he is with us by faith. So we do our part, we bring our will in line with his, and then we let go. We do what is our part, and we let God do his part.

We submit control to the one who is actually in control. We carry responsibility for our part, and then we abandon the outcome of the situation to God because he is good and he is sovereign. So do you need to abandon some outcomes to God?

I can only imagine you do, like me. A great way to practice this discipline is with a breath prayer. Breath prayers use inhaling to say the first part of a sentence and exhaling to say the second.

When Jesus went to the cross, there would never be a more profoundly disturbing situation to say, Father, I abandon outcomes to you. What did Jesus say at this moment? He said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

This is a powerful breath prayer to use yourself. As you breathe in, pray, Father, into your hands I commit, and then fill in the blank. I commit my frustration.

I commit my fear. Father, into your hands I commit, you fill in the blank. Jesus said that we could not only live the way he lived, but he suggested we could teach others how to live his way also.

What a privilege it is to be on this journey together with the Lord. This is Jesus' invitation to you today. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. The Easy Yoke is Wayform, spiritual formation in the way of the Master.