

RENOVATION OF THE HEART: INTRODUCING SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Today we begin our series on Renovation of the Heart which I have adapted from Dallas Willard's book of the same name. I need to say right up front that I'm not pretending this is my work. Some of it will be my own thoughts, but most of it will be his. Those of you that have the book and have read it will find a lot that is familiar! Today we outline some of the issues and set the direction for the next few weeks.

The Need of Transformation

I think that those of us who are honest about ourselves and the nature of things in the world will recognise that the greatest need we have is a renovation of the heart.

- Apart from anything else, just think about what happened at a soccer game in Egypt this week.
- For ourselves, just think how close evil is to the surface in our own lives.

The heart is a summary word for our spirit and will and is that thing that is the real us, the inner part from which the outer parts flow. We live from the heart and so it is crucial that we care for it and have a good understanding of it.

Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

[23] Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

It is from the heart that we see our world, interpret reality and make our choices that lead to thinking and action. Spiritual formation—for good, bad or otherwise—is inescapable. Our hearts have been formed, largely through the choices and experiences that have been part of our past. There are two problems here:

- Our heart, that inner part of our lives, is very complex, subtle and can even be quite devious. It isn't even fully comprehended by ourselves.
- A lot of that formation has happened within the context of a world away from God and so our hearts are in desperate need of transformation.

Jesus Transforms Hearts

That's what Jesus came into the world to accomplish. He didn't do that through the transformation of social institutions and laws, but first and foremost by the transformation of the human heart, the inner person. This is a transformation that penetrates to the deepest layers of the human soul and results in changes to ideas, beliefs, feelings, habits, bodily tendencies and social relationships. It is only God who fully knows the real us, and it is only he who can transform the things within us which need transforming.

Christian Spiritual Formation

Christian spiritual formation is the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself. Christian spiritual formation is focused completely on Jesus and its goal is an obedience or conformity to Christ that comes from inner transformation through the grace of God in Christ.

John 14:21 (NIV)

[21] Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."

This is a change to the inner person that is then reflected in the outer life.

It's really important that we grasp something here as we move into this series. Over the last few months, some of you might have unsuccessfully tried to send an email to the McDougall's. I say unsuccessfully because, if you ever heard Allan talking about his computer, you would have heard him say things about how slow it was, what a waste of time it was, it would be better as a boat anchor, and as for Telstra....(enough said!). He tried a number of things to get it sorted, none of which made any difference. However, they then got a new computer and suddenly everything was working as it should, if not better! The problem was that the real issue was the internals of the computer itself, not all the external things he tried to get sorted.

In the same way, if we want to experience spiritual transformation, there is no point simply trying to change the externals. All it will lead to is deadening legalism, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. It has no life.

2 Corinthians 3:6 (NIV)

[6] He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

For the externals to change, our focus has to be on the internal, the work of the Spirit of God in the formation of Christ within us. Right attitudes and actions will flow from an inner transformation.

Spiritual Formation and Human Effort

What this means is that changing the inner person involves much more than human effort and actions that might be under our control. Human effort is needed, but being like Christ in the inner self is not a human attainment. It is a gift of grace, an interactive work of the Spirit of God within a person. As such, spiritual formation is not only formation **of** the spirit or the inner being, but it is formation **by** the Spirit of God, by his word and by our interaction with the people of God and the great traditions of the past. The primary learning is not about how to act; it is who we are in our thoughts, feelings, dispositions and choices, the inner person, that counts. While spiritual formation is profoundly a manifestation of God's grace working within us, is it also at the same time something for which we are responsible before God. This is a balance we have to work out as we seek his transforming work within.

THE SIX ASPECTS OF THE PERSON

As we take a look at the whole person, we see that there are six aspects that integrate to make us who we are. Together they make up human nature.

Thought

Thought brings things into our minds in various ways and enables us to consider them in various respects and trace out the interrelationships between them. Thought, through things like the imagination, enables us to reach far beyond the immediate boundaries of our environment and senses. Thought enables reasoning and things like scientific thinking, imagination, creativity and art, and it is also the means by which divine revelation can come.

Feeling

Feeling and thought always go together because there is no feeling without there being something in the mind. Feeling inclines us toward or away from things that come into our minds. It can involve pleasure or pain, attraction or revulsion. Their connection is so intimate that thought and feeling are often considered to be the one thing. In the ruined soul apart from God the mind can become a fearful wilderness with rampant thoughts and feelings.

Will (Spirit, Heart)

The will is the power to do either good or evil and is a power which belongs to individuals alone. The choices we make are an expression of the exercise of our wills. Nothing makes us do the good or evil we do. It is possible for us to do it or not do it. The capacity for willing forms the spirit in a person, and it is this spirit that is in need of transformation to a godly nature. Just as thought and feeling are inseparable, so the will is closely entwined. There is no choice that doesn't involve both thought and feeling. On the other hand, what we feel and think is very often a matter of choice or the will. One of the characteristics of contemporary life, perhaps more so than in previous generations, is that we are increasingly driven by feelings. If I feel as though I'm in love I must be in love; if I don't feel as though I am then I'm obviously not in love. Feelings can sometimes take precedence over everything else and we use them to validate and justify our actions—it feels right. What we fail to understand is that feelings and thoughts, especially feelings, are in reality a matter of choice. While human life doesn't run on the will alone, it must be organised around the will if it is to be organised at all. Chaos will be the result otherwise.

Body

The body is the means by which we interact with the physical and social world and is the means by which our choices, our will, is effected in the world. The problem is that the body is trained in a world of wrongness and evil and so the body can act wrongly even before we think. However, we need to remember that the body is not essentially evil, but it is infected with evil and needs transformation.

Social Context

To be a full person is not to be a lone individual. We need each other. The most fundamental other we need is God himself, then other people. We only live as we should when we are in right relation to God because that will also put us in right relationship with others. But being with others is also not separated from our thoughts, feelings, choices and actions because these things are not independent of our social setting.

Soul

The soul is that dimension of the person that interrelates all the other dimensions so that they form one life. The soul refers to the whole person. It is the deepest part of the self that is always active within us, often without us realising what is actually happening because a lot of it is automatic.

Our actions in life always result from the interplay of these aspects of our person. Often what we do is the result of a relenting pressure on the will by one or more of the dimensions of the self. Actions are not impositions on who we are, but they are the expressions of who we are. They come out of the heart, the inner person.

Matthew 7:15-20

[15] "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. [16] By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? [17] Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. [18] A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [20] Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Spiritual transformation only happens as each essential dimension of the human being is transformed into being like Christ. That is a work of the grace of God and is a cooperative work between the Spirit and our spirit. It is not the result of mere human effort and it cannot be accomplished by trying to change the will alone. That's what we'll be considering over the next few weeks, and may we submit our hearts to the Father's will and purpose in our lives so that we be further transformed by him.