

Of all the sources of knowledge and spiritual growth that the Holy Spirit has made available to us, none are as trusted, revered, and accepted as the Word of God, the Bible. From allegories and poetry in the Old Testament to the truths spoken by Jesus in the New Testament, the Scripture is the most certain way we have to learn not only what is expected of us but also how to reach what is expected of us. The formation of the spirit is something that takes shape, it does not just suddenly happen. But how does one know what to do to form their spirit? How does one know what will bring about the change that is needed? Thankfully, the Scripture offers many answers and if one reads Romans 12:1-2 and Ephesians 4:17-20, they would be able to see that the change starts in the mind and then spreads to the daily activities.

In Romans 12:1-2, we are first presented with a heartfelt and passionate request from Paul to the Roman believers to offer their lives as a “living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” and to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Although these two aspects are separate from each other, they cannot live in isolation of each other, if either one is not as equally disciplined as the other the believer will never be able to truly live up to the expectations of true Christianity. Author Dallas Willard, in his book “The Spirit of the Disciplines” makes a profound statement that modern Christians often view the “holy” lifestyle as little more than just a crude guide offered by the Scripture that can be changed at will and is not a real expectation (Willard 1988, 3). However, if this was the expectation of God, then Jesus would have never told the multitudes to give up everything and follow him (cf. Luke 9:57-60).

Mentally, a disciple must be willing to sacrifice their own desires, their own hopes; basically everything the world tells them to want – all for God’s glory. Someone who actually does this will no doubt gather attention for being different. Furthermore, the Scripture promises that if one is able to accomplish these lofty goals, they will be able to discern the perfect will of God, this is something even some of the most devout believers struggle with. If one allows their mind to be refreshed and renewed as the Scripture describes, a deeper sense of purpose and drive will undoubtedly flourish. Yet one must ask, then, if a mental change has occurred, what is the natural progression? Again, the Scripture outlines what one can expect through Ephesians 4:17-20.

Paul is now speaking to the people of Ephesus, a bustling port town in the heart of Pagan society (Publishers 2003, 1565). Not too unlike the world we live in today, the Ephesians were in a permissive society that offered an amalgam of religions and customs for anyone to choose. Being as far as they were from the heart of the church in Jerusalem, the church of Ephesus was known for frequently questioning whether or not a certain Pagan element could be approached in Christianity. Regardless of the level of faith and devotion, all people are prone to wander or confuse elements of their faith with the environment in which they live (Carson and Moo 2005, 482-483). This being the case, it becomes it is no wonder that the Ephesians needed guidance about what *not* to do if they were to live as redeemed people of God.

Paul makes very pointed claims that the people of Ephesus are confused and easily misdirected, and if new believers are to desire Christ, what sets this religion apart from others? Consider the world as it is today – a world full of supposed tolerance for all faiths. It is easy to say that one religion is no different than the other if its adherents seem to act just the same as their counterparts elsewhere. In order to combat this exact same challenge in the time in which

Ephesians was created, Paul first explains that the nonbelievers walk ‘in the futility of their thoughts’ and are ‘darkened in their understanding.’ Not only are their own thoughts futile but it has caused them to be confused. Is it any wonder that they ‘gave themselves over to promiscuity’ and ‘desire for more and more’?

More frightening still is to consider the similarities between Early Christian Ephesus and Postmodern America. The USA tolerates a multitude of things that would have been considered heresy by the Pharisees such as Paul once was. It is ingrained in the culture to desire more and more ‘things’ than we already have – as if owning a bundle of things will somehow make someone appear better. This toxic mindset is so potent that people will do incredibly risky things simply to have a means to acquire more things. A mindset like this can cause a great challenge for someone who is striving to be a more spiritually mature individual as the best practices of Scripture are considered lunacy by modern minds.

Returning to the previous scripture, Romans 12:1-2, it is stated clearly that spiritual formation requires a completely different mindset “...do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ Paul is sending a message that is just as urgent to us in the modern world as it was back in his day – to properly grow spiritually, we simply cannot act the same as everyone else or we will never illustrate the reborn lives we are given. Jesus even warned about this in Matthew 5:13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty?”

Both of the texts discussed point to a single, undeniable fact – being a disciple is not easy and it requires a considerable amount of personal change and sacrifice to succeed in true spiritual maturity. The secret of the easy yoke, as Willard states, is to emulate Christ’s life outside of the

public eye just as much – more even – than in the privacy of our lives (Willard 1988, 9) . That is to say that the true sign of spiritual growth and formation lies in making the changes needed to grow spiritually even if the cost is high and to live a life that shows the change our heart has made.

In a wonderful story I once heard, there was a young man who grew up in a great church family and developed a faith that allowed him to do amazing things. When he headed off to college, he was excited to meet his roommate in his first dorm. The roommate he met was of Middle Eastern descent and soon expressed that he was a Muslim. The young man explained that he was a Christian and shared of his very Baptist upbringing. The poor boy was floored when the Muslim casually asked him if he sleeps with his girlfriend. The boy admitted that he had a girlfriend back home but they had never slept with each other and had only kissed on a few occasions. The Muslim boy told him that he knew several people in the USA who claimed that they were Christians but sleep with their girlfriend out of wedlock. He expressed that he had read the same Scripture as Christians and that it had never told him that doing so was okay.

As the two grew in friendship, the Muslim saw the true loving spirit of Christ in his roommate and was refreshed to know that one Christian actually lived up to the faith he professed. Regardless of the circumstances, the Baptist boy lived a life in reverence to God, a life that showed God's love. After a few years, the Muslim gave his life to Christ and began sharing and living a lifestyle he had learned from the young Baptist boy. The discipline that the boy had shown proved to his roommate that the religion he had been raised to despise could still have many wonderful adherents.

The change required for spiritual growth and formation is mental first and then lifestyle following. The Bible tells us that such changes require us to think, act, and live completely different to what the world at large would lead us to believe is natural. From a clean life comes a fresh mind and a fresh mind will spread to cleanse the spirit of the person as a whole. Every Christian needs to remember that they may be the only bible their friends will ever read and we must ask ourselves if that is what our life reflects.

Bibliography

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