

Are we, as humans, more what we think? Or are we more what we feel? Put differently, are we fundamentally a set of ideas in our head? Or are we fundamentally a combination of our longings and loves?

It was the 17th Century Philosopher, René Descartes, that famously declared, "I think therefore I am." And it was the dominant model of understanding the human person throughout Modernity. Descartes proclamation viewed the human person as fundamentally a "thinking thing," a mere brain on a stick, and the brain was largely a container for ideas. He surmised that humanity is merely a mind or consciousness. We are a cognitive machine, a set of thoughts and ideas that constitute who we are. At least according to Descartes. And this idea predates the 17th Century and finds resonance in Plato and other philosophers throughout the centuries. It reduces the human to a mere thinking thing that is purely fueled and changed by a steady stream of ideas that are brought in through our minds and then changes who we are.

At the risk of showing both my age and at the risk of using a dated sermon illustration, how many of you have seen the 1999 classic movie, Matrix? If you haven't seen Matrix, it is a sci-fi film featuring Keanu Reeves as Neo, who finds the monotony of his daily life troubling. He is eventually targeted by a character named Morpheus, who awakens Neo to the "real world." Where he has come to realize he has been living in a dream world all this time dubbed, "the Matrix." There is a scene in the film right after Neo has "awakened," and he is undergoing training. But the training looks different than we would expect. Neo sits in this chair, and a computer programmer plugs something into the back of his head, that goes directly into his brain, and then uploads a program that teaches him all he needs to know. After going through the training program, at one point, he looks up to Morpheus and declares, "I know Kung-fu."

This is exactly Descartes' understanding of the world. Plug an idea into one's head and know you are the embodiment of that thing. I think, therefore I am. And for many of us, myself included, we have a propensity to think of our discipleship and spiritual formation in just that way. We think of it as the process of information transfer and out comes a more robust Jesus follower. Before we rush past this, notice how this dominates our modern world. Consider a moment we have all had before. The moment when you are standing in line checking out at the grocery store. You look to one side of the aisle, and you see a rack of glossy magazines, most of which are making quite the claim: "5 steps to flatter abs," "Eating your way to less weight," or "This simple diet secret changed my life."

The headlines promise nuggets of knowledge, ideas that can feed our brains and make a promise for a changed life. And they are partly right. Inside, they offer part-truths, if you were to grab one of the magazines and begin reading them, you would notice that they do offer genuine truth. Eat fewer carbs, sugars, and smaller portions - true.

But, notice the dissonance most of us feel in that moment. As you are standing in line reading the magazine, something catches your eye on the other side of the line, directly opposite of the magazines with promised nuggets of truth that will change your health life. And as you look up, there is something else staring at you that does not have nuggets of truth, but nougat and chocolate! Directly across from these magazines is the candy rack. And all of a sudden, if you are like me, you begin to feel this serious dissonance between what you know and what you love.

I would venture to guess that more often than not, what you love wins out. You placed the magazine back on the rack and somewhat begrudgingly grab the Twix. Slowly you move forward as if you had never seen the magazine. Are we more what we think and know? Or are we more what we love?

Why am I telling you this? I am doing so in an effort to corroborate my prior claim that we are some complex mess of both what we believe and what we love. We are a mix of what we know and what we love. Each is shaping the other, and both, in turn, are shaping us. Maybe put more simply, what we do does something to us. You are, at some level, the total of all of your actions and choices. There is a dialectical relationship between what we believe and what we do. As we believe things, they, in turn, shape our heart and our loves. What we do does something to us.

K.A. James wrote in his book, *You Are What You Love*,

"To be human is to have a heart. You can't not love. So the question isn't whether you will love something as ultimate; the question is what you will love as ultimate. And you are what you love...You can't not bet your life on something. You can't not be headed somewhere. We live leaning forward, bent on arriving at the place we long for."

We are continuing our series on spiritual formation, entitled, "Formed." In this series, we are exploring what it means to be formed into Christ-likeness. This all begins with our working definition of Spiritual Formation. "Spiritual Formation is the process of intentionally opening our lives up to the work of the Spirit to become more like Christ."

Last week, Dominic preached on the first ingredient of spiritual formation, which was worldview. The way in which we view the world and the influences we allow to shape our understanding of the world

has a profound effect on who we are becoming. I want us to look at the second ingredient for spiritual formation, practices. It is all about closing the gap between what we know and who we are. Because I'm sure I'm not the only one who has a gap between who I know I should be and who I am. We get there through practice and the slow reorientation of the things we do around opening our lives up to the work of the Spirit to become more like Christ.

The book of Timothy is a letter written by the Apostle Paul, and its recipient is to a young protege of Paul's named Timothy. Timothy is the pastor of the church in Ephesus, which is modern-day Turkey. The context into which Paul is writing to young Timothy is out of concern for false teachers that are threatening the stability and integrity of this new Jesus movement. Paul is writing to protect both Timothy and his work within the young church. Let's pick up with Paul's thoughts.

"If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales..." - 1 Timothy 4.6-7a

Notice a few things right at the start. Don't be turned off by Paul's direct address to Timothy as a "good minister of Christ Jesus." While he is, in fact, speaking directly to Timothy as a leader, the word used here can also be translated as servant. And all of us relate to this calling to being a servant. All of us are included in this call to be a "servant of Christ Jesus." This is part of our spiritual formation. The principles which are laid out by Paul here are transferable to all followers of Jesus.

Paul's admonishment here begins with instructing Timothy to steep himself in the truths of scripture. The imagery of "nourishment" is an important one. It speaks to the habitual nature of which the follower of Jesus must steep themselves in - the scriptures. The reality is that worldviews are not cultivated by one-time immersions into an idea. It takes time and saturation to bring our minds to be "nourished" by the truths of the faith. Why is this such an essential element of our spiritual formation?

As Dominic talked about last week, this nourishment on the truths of the faith is operative at the worldview level. We live in a world that is saturated with competing worldviews, or visions of the good life. To be human is to be dynamic and not static; it is to be constantly shaped into someone. We all operate from the place of narratives. Beneath all of our living, actions, and doings, we operate from a worldview of what we believe is "the good life."

So Paul is concerned that these competing worldviews will challenge and infiltrate this young church. To counter the powerful pull of other "godless myths and old wives tales," Paul tells Timothy to saturate himself within the Christian worldview that holds to the true worldview and true vision of the good life. In the language of Jesus, "Life and life abundant" (John 10:10). These godless myths are certainly the false teachers that Paul is describing throughout this letter.

Now, it is important to realize that in the modern world, these competing narratives come to us, not through explicit teachings (at times they may), but through the various stories, we believe about the world.

Individualism - You are what you feel is right.

Secular Progressivism - You are the eventual perfect representation of the world.

Consumerism - You are what you buy.

These competing stories hit us through the millions of images we see throughout our lives, the language we use to discuss the actions and habits of living in our world. And the effective sway of these narratives and stories is incredibly strong in our world.

So the question I hope you are asking is, how do we then get the nourishing truth of God's word into our lives at a level that saturates our entire being. This leads us to the rest of what Paul says.

"...rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." vv. 4:7b-8

Paul believed the way to counter the powerful influence of false narratives or "godless myths and old wives tales," one must enter into the process of training. Now, why training? It is because of what I said at the opening of this message that we are not simply the combination of what we know.

So, over the past month, I've been working at creating more of a rhythm of exercise into my routine. We are currently in an incredibly busy time in our lives, raising two girls, working full-time, and both going to school full-time as well. Exercise has simply slipped off the radar of my normal rhythm. Along with exercise, we have been tightening up our eating habits to combine both in an effort of slowing, making my health a greater priority. So the other night as a reward for my daughter getting some spacers put into her mouth for her upcoming braces, we bought some ice-cream to help her with some of the pain.

That night we had a fantastic salad for dinner. And afterward, I gave Madison some ice cream. Later in the evening, I'm washing the dishes until I get to the end of the pile, and then I wash the bowl that was used for the ice cream. My mind is instantly consumed with thoughts of cookies and cream ice cream. At that moment, I know in my head that I shouldn't eat the ice cream. I know it will discredit the exercise I did earlier in the day and the healthy eating choices I made earlier as well. So I resist for a bit. Fast-forward to about two hours later, and something brings my mind to the ice-cream that I know is in the freezer. I think, "I'll just have a bite." Well, the bite turned into a few bites, that turned into a bowl. What went wrong? The problem was that I knew I shouldn't eat ice cream, that it is bad for my overall health. But I still love ice cream.

Put differently, you can't think your way to deep transformative change, or for our purposes, you cannot think your way to Christlikeness. If we are to curate our loves and longings toward the things of God and open

our lives up to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, all of our teaching and worldview must work itself out in practice.

Teaching and action must be married together. Teaching and worldview are aimed at transforming your mind with a new vision of the true good life. Practice is aimed at your habits. Our habits give shape to our desire. The more we do something, the more we will want to do that thing. This is why Paul goes on to say, “train yourself to be godly.” He recognizes the reality that the way in which we are formed must move teaching into practice.

A few weeks ago, when we launched this series, Mark spoke about spiritual formation as being 100 percent God and 100 percent us, but God’s 100 percent is more than our 100 percent. This is the area that is our 100 percent.

For many of us that grew up in the church, we get really nervous about the idea of our faith and effort, primarily because we are fearful of a works-based righteousness. This is not what we are talking about. Nothing here is about earning salvation. That work has been accomplished by Jesus and our faith in Jesus. We are not earning our salvation or the love of God; rather, we are talking about growing in faith. As Dallas Willard said, “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.”

So how do we train for godliness, because I don’t think Paul is just using some sort of pithy cute example. I think he literally means that we train ourselves to constantly live in the awareness of and connection to the work of the Spirit in our lives. Paul does something really interesting here with the language and illustration. The word “train” in the Greek is the word where we derive the word gymnasium. This makes all sorts of sense then as to why Paul goes on to talk about physical training.

So what does this training look like? Over the centuries, the church has developed time tested practices, or if you prefer disciplines, as to how we open ourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit. And here is one way to breakdown and organize these disciplines.

Practices of Engagement: Prayer, Corporate Worship, Serving, Giving, Practices of Abstinence: Silence and Solitude, Study, Fasting, Sabbath

“For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things...” For Paul, he is contrasting and building upon the imagery of physical training. He is not down on physical training; in fact, I think he is drawing on that metaphor and building on the idea of physical training.

Years back, I used to coach High School basketball. It was right as Steph Curry was taking over the league. So I would show up for practice, and the first thing I see is all of these freshmen boys doing is running around throwing up three-pointers thinking this was the way in which they would become like Steph Curry. The problem is they were trying to do something that they were, in their present state, not capable of doing. As a freshman, you simply cannot, without strict training, start draining three-point shots with the consistency of Steph Curry. Steph Curry is

the kind of person who can make the shots he can make. This ability is the product of thousands and thousands of shots and hours of practice.

So what you do first to enter into training. You start, not from 30 feet away from the basket, but you start about one foot from the basket and work on form shooting. You slowly work from the ground up on making sure that your form and shooting are perfected from one foot, then you can start to move backward. But it is the slow, tedious, mundane form-shooting that gives way to the possibility of becoming the kind of person that could one day, potentially, shoot like Steph Curry.

In the same way, we seek to grow in the way of Jesus. We see him loving his enemy, or living generously, or anxious free, whatever it is we see in the way of Jesus, and we assume we can simply start doing that at the level of Jesus. As form-shooting is to basketball, so too are the spiritual practices to following Jesus. They prepare and open our lives up to the work of the Holy Spirit to transform us into greater Christlikeness. Is it easier to run a marathon tomorrow, or get up tomorrow and run just a few miles and slowly build? Is it easier to sit down at a piano tomorrow and play Mozart’s Requiem? Or sit down at a piano and slowly learn your scales?

It is about becoming the kind of person, for who playing Mozart’s requiem is hard, but well within your ability. “...holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” Notice the two-fold promise that is here. The disciplines are as much about life in the present as is the age to come.

“This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.” 1 Timothy 4:9-10

For Paul, the reason we labor and strive is because our hope is in the living God. And this hope is not a one-time thing, but rather the tense of the verb here indicates that our hope is firmly fixed on the living God. It is a continuous state of hope. It is this hope that is an active hope in the living God. And it is this story of the living God this is worthy of embedding ourselves in. Therefore, we take up the practices as a means of training to live into the reality of that story. And it is this story that we must direct the longing and love of our heart toward.

I want to give you a few additional thoughts on this idea of training. Maybe the most dangerous trap we can fall into as followers of Jesus is ignorance about the effect our daily habits and weekly rhythms have on our relationship with God. And because of this importance, I think it is worth noting that Sunday mornings are not the main event of following Jesus. One hour or so on a Sunday is simply not enough to counter the effect of the other six days. Because, remember, to be human is to be dynamic. And your heart is constantly seeking something to love. Therefore, in some sense, you are the cumulative effect of your daily habits and decisions that give shape to your heart. So as you go through your day, you are not simply shopping, podcasting, or binging Netflix; you are actually doing something to your heart.

The first thing I want to note about practice is that this takes repetition. There is no way around the fact that these are hard. But any sort of change is difficult. Don't expect these things to come naturally. About four or so years back, my wife and I decided to try taking the Sabbath seriously. We set out to set aside a 24 hour period where we disconnect from work, chores, phones, and social media. I can't tell you how difficult it was at first. I found myself constantly reaching for my phone, or constantly thinking about the upcoming deadlines for a work project. It forced us to plan ahead and organize our lives in advance in an effort to make space for us to take a day off for rest and worship in God. It was really tough, and you know what, it was still really hard a month in, and then a year in. But eventually, after a year or so, it became incredibly life-giving. And it began to transform the way we approached the other six days in our week. We weren't perfect about it, and we still aren't today, but it is now a habit, and it is a habit that has shaped our love for God in ways we would have never anticipated.

We love to make these into legalistic demands. But listen, they are invitations. The practices are not ends unto themselves, but rather they are a means to an end. And that end is the intentional opening up of our lives to the work of the Holy Spirit. There will be times you have to push past the desire not too, but it isn't about some sort of legalism. It is about the invitation of Jesus to live in a different reality.

It really is transformative. As we take on the slow work of transforming our heart, we will find that our minds and our hearts will take a different shape. As Jesus invites us to be transformed, it does, in fact, happen.

There is no transformation without repetition. This past week, I was talking with a friend of mine who has done a significant amount of studying and research around the brain and neuroscience. And I've always been fascinated by how our understanding of the brain is continually backing up what the church and God have known forever. As we were talking about spiritual practices and the need for training in godliness, he was noting that the brain is never static. Neurons are always in the process of connecting and reconnecting. Meaning that your brain is constantly in motion taking new form. And when you do something over and over, your brain is creating a stronger and stronger connection to that thing.

Which means this is really bad news for your addiction to sweets, but really good news for our relationship with Jesus. Because as our brain is constantly rewiring its loves and longings, we have a say in curating our loves and longings. We have a say in how our brain either is wired toward the things of God or is not. Our culture loves to think of love as something beyond our control, but this simply isn't the case.

We are not passive in our loves and longings. As we practice, our habits take a continual and repetitious form in opening our lives up to the work of the Holy Spirit. Think of Jesus' words,

"Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). We have a choice in shaping our hearts in the direction of God. Because our brains are wired to allow the Holy Spirit to work through the spiritual disciplines to transform our inward being. The more we do a thing, the more we want to do that thing. The more we eat ice-cream, the more we want to eat ice-cream. But also, the more one watches porn; the more one wants to watch porn. The more we gossip, the more we want to gossip. The more we pray, the more we want to pray. What we do does something to us.

The thing about spiritual practices is that in the moment, it feels like nothing is happening, but they are slowly doing the internal work of transformation. Real change is a long, slow incremental process, and you eventually wake up one day, and people say, "Wow, you've changed!" And we didn't even notice. One of the things that our modern world has conditioned in us is that if anything is boring, it is inherently wrong. But I am more and more convinced that following Jesus is far more about finding ways to organize the mundane, monotonous, Mondays through Tuesdays of our life around inviting Jesus into our lives. To train in godliness is to embark, not on an afternoon of seeking God, on decades upon decades journey of learning to follow Jesus through the daily practices of Jesus.

I'll be honest; there are plenty of times in which I find myself bored in prayer and scripture. There are other times when it is invigorating, exciting, and God seems to tear open the heavens and speak directly to me, but these are very few and far between. For most of us in the digital entertainment age, we chase God from spiritual high to spiritual high, when in reality, Joy in Jesus is found in the ordinary. But again, any sort of change has its moments. The task of learning scales is boring. Form-shooting is boring. Drills are boring. But eventually, they give way to a new ability and a new vitality in life because you have been transformed by them. Joy is found far more in the ordinary than the extraordinary. Joy is found in the mundane, ordinary ritual of following Jesus in our everyday

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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