INTRODUCTION

Let me tell you about a scene in Tolkien’s beautiful novel, The Hobbit. At the end of the book, Thorin, the King of the Dwarves under the Mountain is dying. He’s talking to Bilbo, the Hobbit, and he says: “Farewell...I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers, until the world is renewed.”

Now that’s the biblical view of life after death! “Rest” during the time in between human death and resurrection. But “rest” is not the final state. Just look at Revelation 6:11. But then, something happens, and what Thorin said is just what the Bible says will happen: Renewal.

Turn to Revelation 21. And let’s look together at the breathtaking, radical vision of this earth, this universe completely renewed and flooded with the joy of the creator God.

Revelation 21:1–8

- vv4, 8 — God will remove everything that destroys and defaces human life. In other words, God will put everything right at last.
- That’s the first characteristic of the renewed creation that we are given at the end of the Bible.

For the second characteristic of the renewed creation, let’s read Revelation 21:11–21.
- The second characteristic is beauty. The new heavens and the new earth will be a place of exquisite beauty. This image is an embarrassment of riches — jewels and other adornments of the new heavens and the new earth.

So God will put everything right and the beauty will be breathtaking. If you think the Rocky Mountains are beautiful now, you just wait until the new heavens and the new earth!

Transition: But what about you and me? Thorin said rest and wait for the renewal of creation. After we’ve rested and had a time of refreshment in the presence of Jesus himself,” what then? What will we do in this renewed creation? Sit around on little clouds, wearing togas, strumming gold harps, and singing “Kumbaya”? Is that our role?

THE GOAL OF DISCIPLESHIP IS TO BECOME TRULY HUMAN & TRULY YOURSELF

Well, the good news is, we don’t have to speculate. Take a look at the next chapter in the Bible. As I read Revelation 22:3–5 listen closely for the two jobs we will have in the new heavens and the new earth.

Did you get it? We will have two jobs, two vocations in the renewed creation. What are they? What will we do when God has renewed all things? worship and reign

This comes up throughout the Bible. But just jump back to Revelation 5:9–10.

Astonishing! This is our hope! “When God redeems the whole creation, redeemed humans will play the key role.” We will rule “over God’s world, while being...the adoring subjects of God himself and the Lamb.” In the New Heavens and the New Earth we will resume “the wise, healing sovereignty over the whole world for which God made...[us] in the first place.” We will experience “fresh, vibrant life, celebration, and fruitful work.”

Aubrey Spears

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We’ll not turn there, but I hope you heard what I just said. This was our original created purpose. The role of humans in Genesis 1–2 are to be Priests and Rulers. So God saves us to restore us to our original purpose.

Now this frame
- The beginning and the end.
- Genesis (the first book of the Bible) and Revelation (the last book of the Bible).
- It frames the Bible.
- Or think of it like bookends, holding the Bible together.

This idea that humans were created to be priest and rulers: worshipping God and reigning over creation for God.

This is our purpose as humans. And THIS is the KEY to understanding the spiritual disciplines. You see the spiritual disciplines are a critical component in discipleship.

Look at it this way. In between the time when a person becomes a Christian and that moment in the future when all things are made new and we worship and reign and rule in the joyful, beautiful, just creation we need to be changed. Because we need the genuine transformation of our character in which we become the kind of people who CAN reign and rule and worship with wisdom and justice and kindness.

So THE GOAL of the Christian life between conversion and ultimate salvation is to have that deep character—transformation that is necessary so that you and I look like, act like, feel like, react like true bearer’s of God’s image here and now. People whose character is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And this process of deep heart and habit and character level transformation, it’s called discipleship. And as you focus on spiritual disciplines over the course of this year, this is the context in which you should approach the spiritual disciplines.

Discipleship is about “the reclamation of the human race.” It’s about the holy and mysterious process of becoming the person God made you to be; to become truly human and truly yourself.

**DISCIPLESHIP IS DIFFICULT**

And it’s a difficult journey. Becoming truly human and truly yourself. Have you read The Voyage of the Dawn Treader? Eustace’s journey in this book is not easy, but it’s a beautiful image of the journey to true humanity.

Look with me at Jeremiah 17:9–10. Many who have been Christians for a very long time still snap in anger at people in our own families or strangers on the road who drift into your lane or stop suddenly in front of you on the road. We are filled with worry or lust or insecurity. We have an inordinate focus on money and material things. We’re controlling and fearful. So proud we can’t ask forgiveness or receive help. So unthoughtful that we do the thing over and over that our spouse asks us not to do. We’re impatient and jealous. The list goes on and on.
But at the heart of Christianity is the call to change and the promise that you can change. You can become a person who is truly kind. You can become the kind of person
  • who responds to malice with forgiveness
  • the kind of person who responds to frustration with patience
  • and when you are mistreated and treated pridefully you respond with genuine humility.
  • who is marked by greater and greater amounts of love and joy.

True, deep down, heart-level, character transformation on this side of death – this is the promise of Christianity. And while it is not easy...

**THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT IT’S NOT ALL UP TO YOU**

Look with me at Colossians 1:29.

So, you’re not on your own. If you’re a Christian. You’re not bringing a knife to a gun fight. You’ve got the Holy Spirit. You can have the deep confidence and optimism of knowing that God is powerfully working in you giving you:

  • a new identity
  • and a new capacity for good works, holiness, and righteousness.

Look at 2 Peter 1:3–4. You can change. This is an assumption of the passage. Each year that goes by we can become more compassionate, joyful, gracious, and winsome. I know there are many people in our churches who are unchanged, but don’t overstate the evidence or ignore the obvious...History is filled with some incredibly Christ-like people.

Now turn with me to Romans 12:2.

There is something in this verse that is quite important to see. If we are not changed from the inside–out, we will be changed from the outside–in. In this context I mean, if we are not transformed into the image of Christ, we will be transformed into the image of the world. And tying this in with what I’ve said earlier. If we do not become more truly human and more truly ourselves, we’ll become less human and less ourselves. If you do not make the definite decision to engage in the journey of discipleship then you will become “unscrupulous, treacherous, ruthless, arrogant, disrespectful wraiths.

But remember, again, the good news is that we can change. You can become a person who lives as Jesus would if he were in your shoes. But I don’t mean that you will simply do the things Jesus would do; I also mean that you will want to do the things that Jesus would do if he were in your shoes.

**Transition:** So the goal of discipleship is to become truly human and truly yourself. This requires a difficult transformation. But the good news is, it’s not all up to you. And yet...

**YOU DO HAVE TO WORK AT IT**

Turn to 2 Peter 1:5. This is tough, life long work. And it’s not sexy.
We will not grow as disciples automatically. We work at it, over and over, until certain choices becomes habits, and those habits eventually shape the desires of our hearts and thus transform our character. Things like forgiveness will become second nature to you. But, be warned — to get to your second nature, you’ll need to continually deny your current nature. This is a hard road of self-denial. It’s what Jesus was getting at when he spoke of people taking up their cross to follow him.

Different than deliverance — which I believe in. Demon possession. But deliverance doesn’t grow the fruit of the Spirit in your life. It gives you the freedom to grow the fruit...Initial conversion and deliverance often yields initial fruit (more loving, joyful, patient,) but really those are blossoms...not full-fledged fruit. Often people, a couple of years later, back to old self. Why? because haven’t walked the road of discipleship.

**Transition:** Now, in the book you’ve been encouraged to read (John Orthberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*) there’s a wonderful quotation from Søren Kierkegaard: “Now, with God’s help, I shall become myself.”

You see, you can become truly human and truly yourself. But you need God’s grace, God’s help. And he offers that to us in several ways.

First, as I’ve already said, he gives us his Holy Spirit which results in a new identity and a new capacity for transformation.

But a second critical way God helps us is that he has given us a tried and true path of transformation.

**HERE’S HOW WE ARE TRANSFORMED**

The long, slow change of deep, heart-level habits occurs when we engage in a set of actions that become habits that eventually shape the desires of our hearts and thus transform our character into the image of Christ.

Actions —› become Habits —› shape Desires —› transform Character

Now what are the actions? Well, when we look at Scripture and church history, many people have found it helpful to think about the (actions that become habits that shape desires that lead to the transformation of character) in terms of five categories, five elements.8


Now I’m going to briefly walk through each of these, but first two disclaimers.

**#1:** None of these elements, none of these actions, by itself, is sufficient to generate or sustain deep transformation. Too many people and too many organizations make the mistake of reducing their “tools for spiritual growth” to a few favorite actions such as Scripture Memory or Accountability Partners or Christian Community or a Daily Quiet Time. But, the fact is, none of these elements by themselves are sufficient to progressively transform us into a true human, truly ourselves. Several of these together may well have an effect. All of them together will probably work.
#2: When it comes to changing your character into the image of Christ you *can no more force it or rush it* than you can force a tree to produce fruit when it isn’t ready to do so. You have to choose, again and again, to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. And as you do this, you’ll develop the moral muscles and skills which will shape and form your nature into a fully flourishing human being. “Just like a long, steady program of physical training will enable you to do all kinds of things—run in a marathon, walk thirty miles in a day, lift heavy objects—which you would previously never have thought possible.”

Okay, with those disclaimers on the table, I’m going to briefly unpack each of the five actions that you must practice until they become habits which will then shape your desires and thus transform your character.

1. Scripture
Scripture first, because in Jesus’ teachings and elsewhere (e.g., Psalm 1), we see that engaging with Scripture is of preeminent importance in discipleship. Reading Scripture, studying Scripture, acting Scripture, singing Scripture, soaking in Scripture — as an individual and as a community — from the earliest days of Christianity, this has been central to your character being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Scripture is that field in which is hid the pearl of great price — Christ. Over and over, day after day you’ve got to return to Scripture, soaking in it and sitting in silence before the Father, listening, chewing on the Word, being still.

Discipleship requires that everyone of us, regularly dedicate, every day, appropriate times to enter deeply into silent conversation with Christ, who loves us. Time every day to share our lives with Him and to receive nourishment from Him to continue on our daily journey. This requires immense labor, because we are constantly bombarded by a culture of busyness and demands on our time. Faithfulness to a personal life of prayerful Scripture soaking requires a true effort to not allow yourself to be swallowed up by frenetic activity.

2. Stories
Stories shape our lives and give us our identities. Our understanding of our self and our understanding of the world comes from the stories that fill our minds.

The stories we experience and that get into our brain are clearly very powerful in shaping us. The good news is that Scripture is a story. And it is a story that helps us to understand and interpret all the other stories. So “Scripture trains us to listen to and learn from stories.” And furthermore, discipleship is learning to telling the story of my life in a new way. (“Before, but now!” “I used to think like that, but now I think differently!”

3. Examples
*Hebrews 12:1–2*. After running through the heroes of the OT, we are told there’s so much to be said about Jesus...including the fact that he is a great example. A role model. A hero. (More than that, yes. But no less.)
And not just Jesus, plenty of heroes in the Bible. Look over at chapter 13:7, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." And the same for us today. Finding mentors, heroes, examples. This is a critical and fundamental element in discipleship. Read autobiographies of great Christians.

4. Community
To become a genuine God-reflecting human being, you must be in a local church community. I learn to trust you as you learn to trust me, and together we learn to act with hope and love. It’s in the context of a Christian community where the Holy Spirit reigns that we develop the habits of Christian friendship, praying together, sharing one another’s lives and sorrows and frustrations and excitements.

5. Spiritual Disciplines
Spiritual disciplines are the fifth and final element in discipleship. Now, this year, Cory is leading you to focus on spiritual disciplines as a critical part of your journey into true humanity and to become truly yourself. What a wonderful opportunity you have.

CONCLUSION
So the long, slow change of deep, heart-level habits occurs when we practice these activities until they become habits. And as time goes by, these habits will eventually shape the desires of our hearts and thus transform our character.

As you immerse yourself in this way of life, your desires will begin to change, and you will begin to see that Christ is being formed at the center of your life. He will become your foundation. The foundation of your existence. The beginning and the end of your whole being. And you will slowly, inch by inch, be transformed into his image.

And why do we want to do this? So that we can play the unique role God made each of us to play in his creation as worshippers and a rulers in the new heavens and the new earth. This is the vision that capture Thorin Oakenshield as he lay dying. It’s the vision that captured Paul, the Apostle, and so many other saints who have gone before us. May this vision capture our imaginations and our hearts and our minds as we live our our lives the Christ and His Kingdom.

Let’s pray.
Becoming Truly Human and Truly Yourself Takes Time

5 Wright, After You Believe, 91.
6 Wright, Scripture and the Authority of God, 164.
8 For this section of the message, see especially Wright, After You Believe, chp 8, “The Virtuous Circle.”
9 Wright, After You Believe, 35.
10 Craig Bartholomew, “Carrying the Christ-Light into His World,” 10.
11 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment of the Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium (Catholic Truth Society, 2002), 49.
12 Wright, After You Believe, 264.