

Formative Practices

Shaping Character

40% of our actions every day are not actual decisions, but habits.

40% of your life is habit.

When you put your shoes on this morning, which did you put on first: left or right? You probably don't know, but I can pretty much guarantee you do it in the same order every day.

At one point you knew, but a repeated decision eventually becomes a habit.

This applies to how you get places, where you sit in a room, what part of a menu you look at first...but our habits apply to so much more than getting dressed or finding a seat. We create habits in every aspect of life.

We have relational habits like staying in toxic relationships, financial habits like buying things we don't need with money we don't actually have, physical habits like the way we eat or whether we exercise or not, and spiritual habits like only praying when we need something from God.

All these habits—both good and bad—play a massive role in defining who we are. As Aristotle put it, “We are what we repeatedly do.”

We all have default settings. When someone calls us out, we get defensive. When we don't get our way, we get frustrated. When people are mean to us, we want to be mean to them. Growing in holiness requires that our default settings be changed. It's not just about doing more good and less bad; we need to change our inner dispositions over time.

The word that captures what we're talking about is character. Character is your inner disposition that leads you to act in certain ways. It's your default setting. It's not just what you do; it's what you're inclined to do, what comes naturally to you.

Good character traits, such as humility and loyalty, are called virtues. Bad character traits, such as pride and greed, are called vices.

Growing in character isn't just doing more good, it's about actually changing who you are over time by cultivating virtue. It's seeing your inner dispositions—what you are naturally inclined to do—change to align with godly character.

The process of character formation is similar to learning to play an instrument.

Now I'm a professional musician, but when I was a kid learning to play the violin, I had a teacher who was more interested in my posture and my form than he was with songs I played. I only cared about playing the songs, but he knew that if I had the form down, I'd be able to move in and out of different spaces.

All skills are like this. Things like typing, riding a bicycle, or dribbling with your non-dominant hand require immense concentration at the beginning. But through practice and repetition, what felt unnatural at first eventually becomes second nature. We can do it without even thinking about it.

Character is formed the same way. We practice virtuous habits over and over again, and they start feeling like second nature to us, gradually changing our inner dispositions.

As we grow in virtues and character, though, we need to remember our hearts' sinful tendency toward self-rule and that we will be tempted to rely on and trust in our own virtue and character rather than on God.

When we become Christians, we learn that our default setting of selfishly looking out for ourselves before considering the interests of others is the wrong setting. Christ did not come to be served, but to serve others. Still a "me-first" attitude remains our default setting.

So when we start trying to be unselfish, it's awkward and difficult at first. But as we develop habits like consistent rhythms of serving, giving, and praying for others, it gradually becomes more natural to put others before ourselves.

Of course, good will doesn't necessarily mean a good heart. We can pursue change from mixed or selfish motives. But what makes the process of being transformed by the gospel different from any other approach to self-improvement is that it does not rely on us.

If we think the power to change depends on us, then we're trying to cure our self-centeredness by focusing on ourselves.

But Galatians 5 tells us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are actually fruit of the Holy Spirit. By God's grace, it's the Holy Spirit who forms new habits of godliness in our lives, and over time these can even become our new default settings.

We tend to assume our lives are shaped most significantly by the dramatic, out-of-the-norm experiences and decisions we make. But think again of how athletic skill or musical ability is developed. Is it the result of one good practice? No, it's the result of repeated discipline and commitment over time, driven by passion and desire.

Character development is similar. It's primarily the result of mundane, repeated, daily decisions and rhythms.

So what are the repeated practices that should shape our lives day-in and day-out? We need practices that bring our spiritual growth into conversation with our everyday experience. We need virtue-producing habits like choosing people over technology, eating meals together, and exercising and caring for our bodies.

Let's break it down like this: A practice is any repeated action in the process of becoming a habit. A formative practice is one that shapes who we are.

But before we go any further, I need to remind you that you're not a blank slate. None of us are. Our character and understanding of God have already been deeply formed by our cultural background, our family of origin, our education, our history with the church, our wounds, our successes, our choices in entertainment, our shopping habits, our social media feeds, and so much more.

What are the top five ways you spend your time? Your attention? Your money? Whatever your answers, they are forming your character in lasting ways. And if you're like most people, there's probably a gap between your answers and the things you value most in life, or want to value most in life.

Because all of us are already formed the work of Christian formation is therefore a work of counter-formation.

Reflect

List the top five ways you spend your time, attention, and money. What patterns do you notice? How might these impact your relational habits or spiritual life? In other words, how are these habits forming your character?

Spirit-empowered Practice

We've already talked about how the gospel changes our hearts, which in turn impacts all of our life. But now we also need to understand how our habits also shape our hearts.

Change is ultimately a deep work of God, but he draws us into that work through Spirit-led practices.

The desire to change is a good start, but it's not enough. We see in 2 Thessalonians that it is ultimately God who fills our good resolve. Paul says that he is praying that our good resolve will be fulfilled by God's power, not our own.

“Spirit-led” is the key. See, anything God commands in obedience, he provides for with his power.

Shortly before he was crucified, Jesus said to his disciples, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”

After Jesus rose from the grave, he ascended into heaven to the right hand of the Father and sent the Holy Spirit to empower his disciples for the life and mission to which he had called them.

When we talk about following Jesus and applying the gospel to all of life we need to be clear how this happens. It's the Holy Spirit who applies the gospel to our hearts and produces fruit in our lives.

The Spirit makes us aware of our true identity in Christ.

The Spirit takes what we know in our heads and makes it real in our hearts. The Spirit convicts us of sin, challenges our assumptions, and exposes our wounds in order to heal them—never in a way that condemns, but always in a way that invites us into growth and healing. The Spirit opens our eyes to the beauty of the gospel, and that vision of God's beauty is what empowers us to live to the glory of God.

Oftentimes people teach about the fruit of the Spirit as if they were commands to obey. Be kind! Be loving! Be patient! But teaching the fruit of the Spirit apart from the power of the Spirit basically trains people to fake it.

Ignatius Hazim of Syria put it beautifully:

“Without the Holy Spirit, God is distant,
Christ is in the past,
the Gospel is a dead letter,
the Church is simple organization,
authority is domination,
mission is propaganda,
worship is the summoning of spirits,
and Christian action is the morality of slaves.”

Now it's true that good character can be formed outside of God. We call this idea “common grace.” But only the gospel can renew our hearts and only the Holy Spirit can make the gospel alive in us. With the Holy Spirit, we have all we need to do all that God has commanded us to do.

Without the Spirit, we will be exhausted from trying to do something on our own power that we can only truly do with God's power. A follower of Jesus without the power of the Spirit would be like a car without gas, a cell phone without power, or coffee without caffeine.

Relying on the Holy Spirit doesn't mean we get to go on autopilot. We still engage our will to apply certain behaviors, but we do it with open hearts, being honest with God about our motivations for change, and inviting him to do the work in a true and lasting way.

With the power of the Spirit, we can experience the change and holiness in our lives that we long for and that Christ promises, a lifelong process of healing, growth, sanctification, and living into who we already are in Christ.

Rest and Meditation

We are busy people living in a crazy culture. We are addicted to hurry, starved for time, over-scheduled, and exhausted. Ask anyone, “How are you?” and one of the most common replies you’ll get is a sigh followed by “Busy.”

This stands in stark contrast to the wisdom of scripture which boldly proclaims, “It is vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.” — Psalm 127:2

We’ve turned busyness into a virtue. We make ourselves busy because it makes us feel important. It proves our value and worth in a performance-driven culture. So we never stop working.

But God invites us to rest and our ability to rest is directly related to our faith in God’s ability to reign. We can take a break from our work because we trust that while we rest, he still reigns. If we stop working, the world keeps going.

True rest is not just doing nothing; it is deliberately slowing down to refocus on what matters most. It reinforces that our identity is received, not achieved. Our value is not determined by how much we accomplish. We are deeply loved by God not for what we do but for who we are.

Are you tired? Stressed? Overwhelmed? Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Our rest, therefore, is not ultimately in a day of the week, but in a person—Jesus—who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. In Christ we have rest that is not dependent on the circumstances of life.

This inner rest then manifests itself outwardly in rhythms of rest and in habits that cultivate peace and perspective in our lives. It affects both our souls and our schedules.

It’s so easy to get burnt out. A good recommendation could be setting one day per week and one week per year aside for rest and refreshment. For that day or week, intentionally let go of the things that stress you out. Let the difficult conversations happen another day. Instead of engaging your to-do list, actively engage instead in activities that bring you ease and restoration.

Regularly unplugging from technology is also important. It trains us to be present in the moment and it prevents a helpful instrument from becoming a replacement for real and personal relationships.

But before resting becomes another job, let's focus on what's important here.

Remember the entire purpose of a day of rest is simply this: to spend time with the one who *is* our rest.

Another important practice is meditation. Now, maybe you get uncomfortable at the mention of the word "meditation." Or when you hear it, maybe you think of mystical navel-gazing, or transcending the physical world, or either being more mindful or emptying your mind.

But meditation is a biblical discipline and is beneficial for all Christians.

Joshua 1 says, "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it."

The word "meditation" occurs almost 20 times in the book of Psalms. Psalm 1 says, "Blessed is the one...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night."

So what is meditation?

Meditation is not emptying your mind. It is filling your mind with God's word.

Meditation is allowing God's word to marinate in your soul, it is a sustained reflection on a spiritual truth or reality as revealed in Scripture.

Meditation can act as a bridge between Bible reading and prayer. You can pray Scripture's own words and allow that to lead into a time of prayer.

A simple place to start is, as you read Scripture, to focus on a single phrase or a word that stands out to you. Read it over and over. Memorize it. Turn it into a prayer. If you find yourself being distracted, gently return to your passage and express to God your desire to pay attention.

As we've seen, reading Scripture is a crucial formative practice. But meditation is when Scripture reads us.

Reflect

How might the hurry of our city be shaping your mind and soul? What are some reasons you have difficulty resting?

Fasting and Feasting

Fasting is another foundational formative practice. In fact, when Jesus taught about fasting, he began with “*When* you fast...”, not “*If* you fast.”

Fasting involves giving up a daily activity to focus on an eternal reality. It’s usually giving up food, but can be something else like social media, podcasts, or TV. There are various lengths and reasons to fast, but the overarching goal is to seek spiritual nourishment and focus.

Fasting is more about replacing than abstaining—taking a daily activity and spending that time on something of eternal significance, like using the time we would normally use to prepare and enjoy a meal to instead feast on God’s word.

Or to pray—in Scripture, fasting and prayer are often coupled together because fasting enables an intensification of prayer.

Or to act on behalf of the needy—Isaiah 58 says, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free...to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

Fasting strengthens self-control in body and spirit. Each time you do it you get stronger. If you’ve ever trained at something, you know how this works.

Fasting is not some magical way of twisting God’s arm into doing our will. Rather, in a world that teaches us to follow our desires, fasting is one of God’s ways of training us to say “no” to weaker desires in order to say “yes” to more godly ones. We are not slaves to our passions, but rather servants of our Lord.

Finally, fasting is not about lack, but about abundance. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are not defined by what you lack but by the abundance of what you have in Christ.

You may feel defined by not having a spouse or a job or money, but you have Christ and in him you have been given all things. You are not defined by lack, but by abundance. This truth works its way deep into our souls through the discipline of fasting.

Fasting cultivates dependency on God, reminding us we need Christ as much as we need food and driving us to seek him as our sustenance and strength.

Related to the practice of fasting is the practice of feasting. Isaiah 55 says, “Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.”

In the Old Testament, God’s people had an intense festival schedule. They took feasting seriously, sometimes weeks at a time and almost always involving food. Most of them were initiated or called for by God.

God celebrates! God invented delight, joy, and celebration and knows they enlarge our capacity to take pleasure in and serve him, and they orient our hearts toward worship, praise, and thanksgiving. To feast is to experience the occasion of consuming food as a foretaste of the eternal banquet of the kingdom of God.

Christians should be people who know how to practice joy!

Now, joy is not dependent on your personality type or your situation, as if you have to be an extrovert and have everything going well all the time. No, we’re talking about a joy in Christ that goes beyond circumstances, a joy that doesn’t minimize trials.

James 1 says that our trials can be counted as joy because they’re producing maturity and perseverance.

So let me ask you a question: Do you have joy in Christ?

If not, then don’t feel guilty. That’s not what I’m going for. Guilt has never produced joy. The answer is not to try harder to be more joyful.

The answer is to look to Jesus. He came and pursued the lowly with his love. He’s pursuing you in good and bad times. Whatever your situation, you can have joy right now.

Every meal becomes an opportunity to give thanks and connect with others and every small experience of Jesus with us is a taste of the joy to come.

We’ve discussed just a few of the most important formative practices, but there are so many more! For instance, we just mentioned giving thanks, which is a formative practice in its own right. Then there’s worship, waiting, lament, generosity, serving others, befriending others...and that’s just scratching the surface!

The Grand Canyon is astounding in scale, but it became the canyon we see today through a long process. It took thousands of years of the Colorado River slowly

carving a path through the rock, deeper and deeper into the desert. It's a beautiful picture of how God transforms our character over time.

The practices of the Christian life are less like boxes to be checked and more like a river that slowly carves a path in your soul. These channels in our heart guide the flow of our loves and our desires, producing contentment and gratitude for all that God has done for us in Christ.

Through God-given practices, the Holy Spirit forms us from within and gradually makes us more and more who we already are in Christ: a new person in a new family with a new mission.

Reflect

When you feel empty and restless, what do you do? How do you “fill” yourself?
When has self-denial brought you something good?