

# **CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

**by Pitcharan**

(First published in the *Indian Journal of Spirituality* 33(1), Jan – Mar 2020)

## **ABSTRACT**

Heaven and salvation imply the need for God-like perfectness which is also a divine exhortation. Imperfectness is due to the defilement wrought by original sin. God-like perfectness is spiritual excellence and God's own desire for humanity. 'Spiritual exercise' is human labour that is aided by God's grace to accomplish 'spiritual excellence'. 'Spiritual formation' is the combined process involving human election (will), human co-operation and God's grace and best understood as 'the formation of Christ in fallen humans'. It begins with saving faith which is accepting Christ as Lord and Saviour, to be freed from slavery to sin and rendered virtuous like Christ. Prayer is an essential element in all spiritual exercises and transformation is by grace. We bear the image of God and may approach perfection by seeking God's likeness that orients the faculties of our soul — mind, body and spirit to function in mutual harmony and align with God's Will; this in turn will bring about social transformation. Christian spiritual formation is the sincere pursuit of truth which also effectively fosters Christian unity.

## Preface

With the sole purpose of facilitating Christians in their spiritual journey, this piece of research is assembled by drawing insights and ideas from the Bible<sup>1</sup> and earlier Biblical works of the author<sup>2</sup>. Some additional thoughts are also taken from the works of medieval mystics and contemporary experts on the subject. In a special effort to render the thoughts holistically Christian, key ideas are drawn from two of the foremost exponents— Ignatius of Loyola, who is a Catholic and Dallas Willard, who is a Protestant. These are further enriched with fresh inspirations and a little experiential learning.

## Introduction

Human excellence inspires much awe in most of us and we are also able to make a distinction between the worldly and spiritual realms. But it seldom occurs to us that doing extraordinarily well, whether in the worldly or in the spiritual sense, is a matter of hard work. Many of us tend to believe that excellence is an inborn trait and saints are set apart by God, even before they are born. True, God does set apart some, but he doesn't waive hard work for them, as can be seen in the lives of prophets and saints. He sets some apart only to inspire and draw many more.

This is exactly God's will— that each and everyone of us does extraordinarily well in the heavenly or spiritual sense. (see Leviticus 19:2; Matthew 5:48; Ephesians 5:1 and 1 Timothy 2:3–4). If, doing extraordinarily well in the spiritual sense is God's plan and will for everyone, then it cannot be something that is impossible; nor can it be the privilege of a select few.

It is also very important to know that there is no such thing as extraordinary performance without hard work. All excellence is very much backed by hard work that is hardly noticeable, once it has become a natural habit. Consider all the wonderful things we read about Jesus in the Gospels; but how many of us have noticed the mention of the kind of hard works of discipline<sup>3</sup> that he practised?

Our labour that is complemented by God's grace to accomplish the ultimate, is called 'spiritual discipline' or 'spiritual exercise' and the combined process involving human election

---

1 Scripture quotations taken from The Jerusalem Bible, copyright © 1966 by Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd. and Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

2 <thenarrowway.in>

3 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the disciplines: Understanding how God changes lives* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), ePub, 138

(will), human co-operation and God's grace is called 'spiritual formation.' A rather comprehensive and apt description would be: the wonderfully liberating formation of Christ in the ordinary, weak and habitually sinful slaves that most of us are.

### **How Christ is formed in us – the beginning<sup>4</sup>**

Believing and not believing something to be true, are interior convictions that could be either right or wrong. Initially, Nathaniel couldn't just believe that his friends had found the Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. His conviction came from the way he had understood one prophesy (see John 1:43-51) while being ignorant of another prophesy (see Matthew 2:23c).

People on the side of truth, are drawn to Jesus at the chosen time by God the Father (read John 6:44 together with John 18:37). 'Saving faith' is an extraordinary interior vision that comes from God as a surprise offer at an appointed moment, to all those who love what is good and hate evil (see John 3:20). Nathaniel's 'u turn' to gladly follow Jesus is an example of 'saving faith'.

God's offer and the crucial election are revealed through Moses (see Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). Anyone who is like Nathaniel having no love for darkness, must have surely elected 'life' rather than 'death', deep within. All those who truly elect 'life' deep within, are on the side of truth and there is no deceitfulness in them. God does not impute sin to such people when they err and do wrong, since there is no deceit in them and their sinful deeds are because of delusion.

*“There is an Israelite who deserves the name, incapable of deceit.” (John 1:47b JB)*

*“...; happy the man whom Yahweh accuses of no guilt, whose spirit is incapable of deceit! (Psalm 32:2 JB)*

Despite failures, shortcomings, weaknesses and grave offences, those who have elected 'life' deep within, are bound to receive mercy and God's offer will come so suddenly. Whenever this happens, it is the 'moment of truth' and an offer of the greatest gift – being reborn as God's own children. Another sparkling example of 'saving faith' is that of Paul, who had fanatically opposed the name of Jesus and also brutally persecuted his followers. We may easily know from this testimony if Paul had behaved that way out of sheer ignorance or out of love for evil:

*“... even though I used to be a blasphemer and did all I could to injure and discredit the faith. Mercy, however, was shown me, because until I became a believer I had been acting*

---

<sup>4</sup> Pitcharan, “John – an agent of human development par excellence,” *The New Leader* (1-15 July 2018): 31-32.

*in ignorance; and the grace of our Lord filled me with faith and with the love that is in Christ Jesus.*" (1 Timothy 1:13–14 JB).

Accepting God's offer and receiving the greatest gift, commences the process of liberation from sinful slavery and formation of Christ in the weak and sinful person.

### **How Christ is formed in us – the process**

While God's image with 'freewill' is an unconditional gift, his likeness is a matter of individual preference by exercising the 'freewill'. Our first parents were without blemish before the Fall; but then they were also deceived by Satan rather easily. They were gullible, only because they did not have God's likeness but merely his image, which means, their freewill was prone to manipulation (see Genesis 3:22). The privilege of having God's image is given for seeking God's likeness, exclusively to spirited beings who are able to choose between good and evil. God's likeness may be assimilated only by a firm choice that is backed by an earnest seeking.

Apparently, neither Adam nor Eve chose to eat from the Tree of Life though they were free to eat of its fruit. Instead, they fell for Satan's lie and ate the forbidden fruit. For all the love lavished on them by God, if only they had shown some sign of gratitude, then God would have showered them with grace. Ingratitude blocks God's grace and exposes people to delusion to be easily enslaved by all kinds of carnal cravings (see Psalm 106:19-22).<sup>5</sup>

The biggest step in the right direction is 'crossing over from death to life' by saying 'yes' to Jesus when we hear him gently beckon us interiorly. But, there is a bigger challenge of not losing this greatest gift but consolidating it and preventing a reversal, and an even bigger challenge to continue journeying forward on the narrow way.<sup>6</sup> Christ is gradually formed in us when we abide in his love.

How do we abide and preserve our greatest breakthrough of having 'crossed over from death to life'? Gratitude is emulating an example of love and it gains 'abiding grace'.

*"If you love me you will keep my commandments. Those who do not love me do not keep my words."* (John 14:15, 24a JB).

John astutely identifies at the very outset, that though Moses is the Lawgiver, it is Jesus who enlightens us about grace that is needed to fulfil the Law:

*... though the law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.* (John 1:17 JB).

---

<sup>5</sup> Pitcharan, *The Narrow Way: a common man's roadmap to Divinity* (Partridge India, 2015), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 25.

Moses kept the Love command (see Deuteronomy 6:5) and received 'abiding grace' needed for fulfilling God's Law, but the ungrateful ones stumbled badly (see Romans 1:21–23). Jesus expounds how gratitude is the source of 'abiding grace'— in the parable which he narrated only to explain 'who is our neighbour', we find that a priest and Levite are unmoved by human misery while a Samaritan responds with selfless love (see Luke 10:29–37). When someone is in a miserable and helpless state, it is God and neighbour who come to their aid. 'Abiding grace' is gained by those who experience such love when they 'do likewise'; this is true gratitude.

How do we respond to Jesus' love of dying the way he did, for our salvation? The truth is, we can never ever repay the debt of God's unconditional and absolutely selfless love. Moreover, gratitude is not at all about repaying debts. The worldly idea of returning a favour is quite meaningless and unthinkable (see Luke 14:12). We have already seen that the deeper message in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, is all about being grateful by emulating a good example when we experience providential succour through a kind and selfless fellow human.

Gratitude is a powerful feeling that touches our heart when we experience someone's selfless love and the true response is spontaneous. It's a sense of strong belief in the person's value that grows into a desire to emulate the example of selfless love; it blossoms steadily into a freely taken firm decision, that is ready to face all odds to grow gradually in the chosen value of our Godsend neighbour.

Jesus tells the ones who would do well in gratefully emulating his example, that they are the light of the world (see Matthew 5:14–16). Later, he also promises to be with us forever as our guiding role model (see Matthew 28:20). We can easily infer that Jesus' promise is fulfilled interiorly when he speaks within, which is complemented exteriorly by those who live his teachings. St. Ignatius of Loyola's is a lived example that gratitude is the greatest sustaining power in the journey to God.<sup>7&8</sup>

Another subtle truth is the fact that our spiritual formation cannot be divorced from the virtue called 'religion', but for which no saint can journey together with the vast majority who lag far behind. Religion alone renders this collective 'journey of life' a reality and the lives of saints are an excellent proof.

The pastoral ministry of the Church is not limited to 'spiritual direction' but includes ministering the 'sacramental process'. There can be endless debates about the 'real presence' of our Lord in consecrated bread; but the truth is this: whether it is 'real presence' or 'thank offering' or 'sin offering' or 'circumcision' or 'baptism'— the spiritual power stems from the purity of our

---

7 Gerald M. Fagin, *Ignatius Loyola: A mysticism of Gratitude* (Loyola New Orleans, 1992), 2–17.

8 Wilkie Au, "An Ignatian Path to Gratitude," *The Way* 42(3), (July 2003): 65–79.

intention and contrition of our hearts. This truth can be inferred from Psalm 51:18–21, Isaiah 1:11–16, Amos 5:21–24, Acts 7:51 and Romans 2:29.

### **Liberation from sinful slavery**

Though we can never undo the damage caused by our sins (see Psalm 49:7–9), God may and does cancel the impossible burden of sin, for more than one good reason. Jesus' teachings endorse and further clarify how love, repentance and forgiving others, play an important part in the remission of our sins. (see Proverbs 10:12; 1 Peter 4:8; 1 Kings 8:47–49; Ezekiel 18:30–31; Luke 5:32; 2 Corinthians 7:10 and Matthew 6:14).

Remission of sins does not guarantee freedom from habitual tendencies to sin; they are two different things— sin is the effect while slavery to sinful habits is the cause. True, that forgiveness cancels the debt, but the habit remains.

How to stop committing sins? Jesus teaches us how to address some root causes of sin: We need to deal with anger before it bears the evil fruit called murder (see Matthew 5:21–22) and deter lust, instead of waiting till it ends up in adultery and rape (see Matthew 5:27–28). His enlightening *parables* inspire us to extend the philosophy as a general practical rule— preventing crime through education, employment and poverty alleviation— spreading awareness of the perilous potential of human laws that decriminalise foeticide and adultery, instead of taking extreme stances that polarize society. The process that frees us from slavery to sinfulness, is a kind of purge or cleansing. It is not accomplished by either punishing or lamenting the damaging effect called 'sin', but rather by understanding the cause behind it called 'vice' (see Matthew 5:29–30). Jesus' suggestions to dismember a hand or eye to avoid sin may sound like primitive ways of dealing with crimes. No, he is not speaking literally, but seriously exhorting us to strike at the 'causes' of sin instead of imposing penalties after the imminent 'effects' have happened.<sup>9</sup>

Our Lord's teachings on freedom from sin, are further expounded in Luke's gospel. In Luke 17:1–2, our Lord is not proposing 'drowning with a millstone round the neck' as a suitable penalty for those who teach innocent people to commit sins; rather it is a stern warning of the inescapable consequence which is even worse than being drowned with a millstone round the neck. Behaving like Satan is the most degenerate stage, and obviously beyond pardon as the capacity to repent is already dead by then. Punishment is correction and not penalty; timely correction alone can prevent the above futile stage (see Luke 17:3). Neither correction nor tolerance can put an abrupt end to a deep rooted sinful habit. To stop sinning, is a long drawn

---

<sup>9</sup> Pitcharan, *The Narrow Way*, 25–26.

process and it is impractical to place a limit on how many times we pardon a repentant repeat offender (see Luke 17:4).<sup>10</sup>

Change of heart and repentance are a great beginning but the slightest complacency can ruin the progress and push us to a state which is worse than ever before (see Matthew 24:13, 25:13 and Luke 11:24–26).

However, if our pursuit is genuine then our free choice too will be firm; tribulations cannot scare us only because we love God's likeness and are willing to pay any price for shedding sinfulness. Persevering by grace will teach us how our frailty is defeated by God's power (see 2 Corinthians 12:7–9) and those who surrender their freedom to God can completely depend on him to be disciplined and corrected promptly (see Revelation 3:19a).<sup>11</sup>

### **Bearing fruits**<sup>12</sup>

The formation of Christ in us is signified by growing in virtues that render us Christ-like, as we start bearing fruits. 'Good fruits' are generous actions to alleviate an other's misery and the early sign of selflessness, when compassion is limited to sharing what is abundant (see Luke 3:9–11).

Jesus teaches us that freedom from vice must grow into fruitfulness, otherwise it serves no real purpose. (see Luke 13:6–7). Later, he would make this idea seep deeply into our hearts with a powerful metaphor: Jesus is like a vine whose branches are the disciples; no disciple can be fruitful without abiding in Jesus and the ones who fail to abide are bound to wither and fall away like dry branches that are picked up and thrown in the fire. (see John 15:4–6).

Sharing from our abundance with those who are in need is indeed good but rather insufficient like seasonal fruits (see Mark 11:12–13). Reaching out to serve the needy even at the cost of denying one's own interests, is the true form of fully developed love. It is a divine norm described metaphorically as 'everlasting fruits' that are demanded suddenly and must therefore be available at all times (see John 15: 8, 16ab, Ezekiel 47:12 and Revelation 22:2bc).

Fruitfulness is the God-ordained index of true love (see Luke 6:43–45); it is not only proven but also grows, by pains borne patiently and Godsend tribulations even to the extent of death endured with love (see Mark 4:13–20; John 15:2b, 13 and John 12:24).

The big picture of fruitfulness is expounded by Dallas Willard in a profound way that will stir our souls to surrender to the transforming love of Jesus Christ. To Willard, *life* is the power to

---

<sup>10</sup> Pitcharan, "A reflection on Luke's Gospel," *Indian Journal of Spirituality* 30(3), (Jul–Sep 2017): 252–253.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 30–31.

relate and assimilate, and through the *grain of wheat* allegory, Jesus teaches us how, by perishing to create space for what lies beyond, living things actually flourish.<sup>13</sup>

### **Spiritual exercises**

Again, Willard convinces us most beautifully, that trying to be Christ-like apart from the *narrow way*, amounts to treating the 'end' as the 'means' which can only lead to frustration or pretension. On the other hand, Christ's *Way of life* (discipline) becomes an *easy yoke* when adopted as the *means* to the *end* which is Christlikeness; Willard calls this *the secret of the easy yoke*.<sup>14</sup>

To be precise, the process of Christ forming in us is not painful but a regular 'foretaste of heavenly joy' that sustains us like 'a salve that soothes every kind of inescapable pain'. Paul's joyful exclamation, that it is not his own life that he was then living, but a life with Christ indwelling in him (see Galatians 2:20b), reveals the heavenly joy experienced in this process.

Shaped from dust and infused with God's spirit to 'govern the earth', we may freely choose to oppose God or stand with God. Our body is the vehicle through which we may receive the transforming power to truly reflect the image and likeness of God.<sup>15</sup>

Ignatius of Loyola as well as mystics like John of the Cross, found 'spiritual exercises' as the means to experience 'union with God'.<sup>16</sup> That these are indeed priceless, can only be appreciated when we are honest enough to realize the extent of our defilement and proneness to sensual misbehavior. Without this realization, the 'doctrine of original sin' will hardly make any spiritual sense. Paul had no hesitation in confessing the undeniable fact that we are indeed slaves to a sinful nature that dwells within us, inhibiting us from doing the good things that we will while causing us to stumble against our will (see Romans 7:14b–17).

As a result of our interior distortion from original sin, we suffer from pride which causes mental confusion and wavering as well as corruption of our hearts with sensuous cravings. The confused mind is often faced with this dilemma— decide based on the advice of 'the willing pure spirit' or 'the rebellious sensuous heart'? (see Matthew 26:41b). Satan plays on our senses to manipulate the corrupt heart to rebel and the spirit's good counsel is many a time ignored because of the heart's boisterous urge with desperation. Knowing these things is of little help as we are really powerless to liberate our own selves (see Romans 7:18cd).<sup>17</sup>

---

13 Willard, *The Spirit of the disciplines*, 56–58

14 Willard, *The Spirit of the disciplines*, 3–4, 6

15 Ibid, 48.

16 Brian O'Leary, "The Mysticism of Ignatius of Loyola" in *The Review of Ignatian Spirituality* No. 116 (2007), <bit.ly/2IvL3m3>

17 Pitcharan, *The Narrow Way*, 10.



After much struggle without result, the interior disharmony is somewhat understood as a problem of reigning in the senses. A common fundamentalist approach that is rather foolish, is a self-willed suppression of sensual appetite. Suppressed desires build interior tension that can manifest in ways that are worse than offences of frailty. Such people are 'saints in their own eyes' who observe the Law fanatically in 'letter', while being self-righteously critical of others. A sincere and humble approach that is truly wise, is acknowledging the Law as something good and trying hard to abide and after repeatedly failing, turning to God for mercy, in helpless desperation.<sup>18</sup>

The best known way that is testified by the lives of renowned saints, is through 'spiritual exercises', that empower growing in spiritual pursuits while systematically mortifying the carnal tendencies of the heart. Unlike other ordinary exercises, prayer is an integral element in a 'spiritual exercise'. Through prayer God's grace is sought and helps fallen humans to gradually break-free from sensual slavery and be transformed into truly spiritual children.<sup>19</sup>

Dallas Willard calls them *spiritual disciplines* and laments that Protestantism saw self-mortifying exercises as meaningless atoning works and missed the big picture of transformative disciplines.<sup>20</sup> He observes:

*When we look at the exemplars of Hebrew religion such as Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, John the Baptist, Jesus, and St. Paul, we are looking at people who fast, pray, seek solitude, and give themselves up to humankind and God in ways that are readily recognizable as ascetic. They all serve as models for these practices.*<sup>21</sup>

He describes two broad classes— *abstaining disciplines*: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice; and *engaging disciplines*: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, submission.<sup>22</sup>

*The perfect victory is to triumph over self. For he who holds himself in such subjection that sensuality obeys reason and reason obeys Me in all matters, is truly his own conqueror and master of the world.*<sup>23</sup>

## Prayer

---

18 Ibid, 13.

19 James Walsh, "Continual Mortification," *The Way* Supplement 19, (1973): 126–37.

20 Willard, *The Spirit*, 145–147.

21 Ibid, 136.

22 Ibid, 157–190.

23 Thomas A. Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (Milwaukee: The Bruce, 1940), ePub, 29.

Considering the fact that 'prayer' is not only a 'spiritual exercise' but also the most important element in all other 'spiritual exercises', an exclusive and elaborate treatment is accorded here.

The intricately intertwined interrelation between faith, humility and prayer is revealed profoundly in Luke's Gospel. The centurion's humility and Jesus' amazement at his faith (see Luke 7:1–10), suggest that faith and humility are interlinked. The continued coverage and sequence in subsequent chapters, reveal a systematic expounding of the entire inter-relationship.<sup>24</sup>

Many or rather most of us, sporadically experience 'providential succour' in amazingly miraculous ways, after an SOS to God during a desperate situation (with or without the use of words). If we would succeed in carefully reconstructing in our minds, how exactly we prayed, then we will discover from within our own selves, the 'spiritual exercise' called 'prayer' and that 'humility alone makes a prayer heard'. Since we are known to become humbled only during trouble, why not use troubles as golden opportunities to learn to communicate with God—the humble way? In fact it is a common privilege from God who never spurns 'a humbled, contrite heart' (see Psalm 51:17b).

The discovery and comprehension, will not automatically translate into the ability to replicate; but sincere practice will, for sure. Without practice and perfection, it can't be called an 'exercise' and remains just a rare experience.

All that we need is a brief reprieve from our usual routine on a regular, practical basis. Though the Church provides us with such a space, adherents to 'popular devotions' ruin it with their noisy pharisaic pretensions. The recent move by the Church to create exclusive spaces for 'silent prayer' greatly alleviates the menace from loud and pretentious behaviour.

While Moses made the 'tent of meeting' precisely for this purpose (see Exodus 33:7–11), Jesus regularly withdrew into some quiet and lonely place to pray (see Matthew 14:23 or Mark 1:35 or Luke 5:16) and strongly advocated solitary prayer (see Matthew 6:6).

Such a peaceful space is always there for our asking, far more than our requirement and we only need to learn the art of utilising those random situations when we may quietly withdraw for a while to be alone with God.

*He who learns to live the interior life and to take little account of outward things, does not seek special places or times to perform devout exercises.*<sup>25</sup>

Being alone with God, conversing, being transformed and strengthened is an amazing reality that is freely offered to everyone who seeks. We may learn how practicable it is and yet so true, from none other than Mother Teresa.<sup>26</sup>

---

24 Pitcharan, "A reflection," : 252–253.

25 Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 29.

26 Mother Teresa's letter to her spiritual family, 25th March 1993. <[bit.ly/3a3jrAj](http://bit.ly/3a3jrAj)>.

Thomas Kempis presents the most versatile variety of apt prayers for almost every type of 'spiritual exercise'. One such example is a prayer for a truly free mind that does not succumb to carnal urges.<sup>27</sup>

Henri Nouwen's narration of how he sought divine consolation in a broken state, vividly describes the twin 'spiritual exercises' of 'prayer' and 'silence'.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

On the perils of prideful selfishness, Dallas Willard movingly laments the ever growing 'rat race' which is neither constructive nor sustainable; this is equally true for the family, nation and world — as resentment, hatred, and violence result from one-upmanship. For Willard, the ancient prophetic vision of a heavenly world was derailed by God's trustees who perverted it toward nationalistic and cultural ends. Through his Christ experience, Paul envisions it again as *a kingdom of truth and love conducted by those indwelt by Christ*. It could replace the human government *which relies on force and the threat of death, invariably controlled by certain social or cultural groups within the society*.<sup>29</sup>

God reveals himself as three distinct persons functioning in tandem, accomplishing all good together (see 1 John 5:8b) and we are called to be perfect like him (see Matthew 5:48).

*“To become a master at any skill, it takes the total effort of your: heart, mind, and soul working together in tandem.”*  
— Maurice Young<sup>30</sup>

Christian Spiritual Formation is indeed the sincere pursuit of truth, which can also effortlessly demolish our preconceived notions and straighten much of our deep rooted prejudices and false ideas about other Christian denominations.

---

27 Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 100.

28 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 62–63.

29 Willard, *The Spirit*, 127.

30 <[www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1784959.Maurice\\_Young](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1784959.Maurice_Young)>