





[WEEK 1]

[WEEK 1] RENOVATING THE HEART RECOVERS YOUR GOD-GIVEN IDENTITY

“Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”

—Proverbs 4:23 (NASB)

WE LIVE FROM OUR HEARTS.

The part of us that drives and organizes our lives is not the physical. This remains true even if we deny it. You have a spirit within you and it has been formed. It has taken on a specific character. I have a spirit and it has been formed. This is true of everyone. The human spirit is an inescapable, fundamental aspect of every human being, and it takes on whichever character it has from the experiences and the choices that we have lived through or made in our past. That is what it means for it to be “formed.” Our lives and how we find the world, now and in the future, are, almost totally, a simple result of what we have become in the depths of our being—in our spirits, will, or hearts. From there we see our world and interpret reality. From there we make our choices, break forth into action, try to change our world. We live from our depths—most of which we do not understand.

A carefully cultivated heart will, assisted by the grace of God, foresee, forestall, or transform most of the painful situations before which others stand like helpless children saying, “Why?”

The greatest need you and I have is the renovation of our hearts. That spiritual place within us from which outlook, choices, and actions have been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed.

The revolution of Jesus is a revolution of character which proceeds by changing us from the inside out through ongoing personal relationship and intimacy with God in Christ and with one another.

Those divinely renovated depths of the person, social structures will naturally be transformed so that “justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24, ESV). Such streams cannot flow through corrupted souls. Conversely, a renovated “within” will not cooperate with public streams of unrighteousness. It will block them—or die trying.

Two unavoidable questions:

1. What makes our life go?
2. What could make our life go as it ought?

What matters most for how your life goes and how it ought to go is what you are on the inside. Circumstance happens to us, but what are you *within*? This is spiritual formation and can become transformation. What is in our heart matters more than anything else for who we become and for what becomes of us.

The hidden dimension of each human life is not visible to others, nor is it fully graspable even by ourselves. We usually know very little about the things that move in our own souls, the deepest level of our lives, or what is driving us. Our “within” is astonishingly complex and subtle—even devious. It takes on a life of its own. Only God knows our depths, who we are, and what we would do. Thus the psalmist cried out for God’s help in dealing with—himself! “Search me, O God” (Psalm 139:23, ESV). “Let the . . . meditations of my heart be acceptable to you” (Psalm 19:14, NRSV). “Renew in me a right spirit” (Psalm 51:10, PAR).

The spiritual side of your life

In the sense of “spiritual,” which means only “nonphysical,” the hidden or inner world of the human self is indeed spiritual.

**“Man shall not live by bread alone.”
—Matthew 4:4 (ESV)**

If we would walk with him, we must walk with him at that interior level. There are very few who really do not understand this about him. He saves us by realistic restoration of our hearts to God and then by dwelling there with his Father through the distinctively divine Spirit. The heart, thus renovated and inhabited, is the only real hope of humanity on earth.

It was also given new and profound meaning by his death and resurrection. Through them he established a radically new order of life on earth within the kingdom of God. It was free of any specific ethnic or cultural form. All human beings

can now live the life of the renovated heart by nourishing constantly on his personal presence. Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself. The outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus.

**“That Christ be formed in you.”
—Galatians 4:19 (WYC)**

The primary learning here is not about how to act, just as the primary wrongness or problem in human life is not what we do. Often what human beings do is so horrible that we can be excused, perhaps, for thinking all that matters is stopping it. But this is an evasion of the real horror: the heart from which the terrible actions come. In both cases, it is who we are in our thoughts, feelings, dispositions, and choices—in the inner life—that counts. Profound transformation there is the only thing that can definitively conquer outward evil.

Suppose you decide it is important to be loving and to exhibit patience and kindness. (1 Corinthians 13:4) Then we mistakenly try to be loving by acting patiently and kindly—and quickly fail. We should always do the best we can in action, of course; but little progress is to be made in that arena until we advance in love itself—the genuine inner readiness and longing to secure the good of others. Until we make significant progress there, our patience and kindness will be shallow and short-lived at best.

Merely trying to act lovingly will lead to despair and to the defeat of love. It will make us angry and hopeless. But taking love itself—God’s kind of love—into the depths of our being through spiritual formation will, by contrast, enable us to act lovingly to an extent that will be surprising even to ourselves, at first. And this love will then become a constant source of joy and refreshment to ourselves and others.

If we as Christ's people genuinely enter Christ's way of the heart, individuals will find a sure path toward becoming the persons they were meant to be: thoroughly good and godly persons, yet purged of arrogance, insensitivity, and self-sufficiency.

If we as Christ's people genuinely enter Christ's way of the heart, individuals will find a sure path toward becoming the persons they were meant to be: thoroughly good and godly persons, yet purged of arrogance, insensitivity, and self-sufficiency. The God-ordained order of the soul under grace must be discovered, respected, and cooperated with, if its God-intended results for spiritual growth are to be attained. Spiritual formation is something we human beings can and must undertake—as individuals and in fellowship with other apprentices of Jesus.

“Simply stated, the master key for U-turning away from negative outcomes in your life brought on by poor choices is a lifestyle of repentance.”

—Tony Evans

Repentance can be defined as the internal resolve and determination to turn from sin. Repentance is God's way of sewing back together the rupture with Him. Once that rupture is rejoined, the potential for reversing negative consequences exists. Yet none of this can occur without the personal, internal resolve and determination to acknowledge sin, turn away from sin, and move toward God. When you seek to repair your relationship with God through this internal resolve to deal with your sin, you have set the stage for your U-turn.

Confession: 1 John 1:9 tells us that repentance involves confession. It says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (NASB). The Greek word for “confess” means “to say in agreement.” It refers to saying the same thing as the other. You must say about your sin what God says about your sin.

Godly sorrow: Accompanying your confession of sin is what the Bible calls in 2 Corinthians 7:10–11 “godly sorrow” (NIV). Godly sorrow differs from being sorry that you got caught. That, Paul says, is “worldly sorrow.” Godly sorrow isn't just being upset about your consequences; it's recognizing that you've hurt the heart of God. As David said in Psalm 51:4, “Against you—you alone—I have sinned . . .” (CSB). Godly sorrow leads to change, to a U-turn of your heart's direction.

Fruit consistent with repentance: According to Matthew 3:8, fruit is never invisible. You will see the change of direction from the inside out—thoughts, words, and actions. You confess to someone else. You ask for help. You create boundaries. You can always take a repentance step even if you have not yet reached the repentance goal. A repentance step is the fruit of a repentant heart.

“Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts.”

—Malachi 3:7 (ESV)

Why is change so important?

“As a disciple of Jesus . . .

I am learning from Jesus to live my life as He would live my life if He were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything He did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner that He did all that He did.”

—Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*

“Embracing the cross with Jesus is to be our salvation. It is to release ourselves into the realm of God, into God's care, and to stop trying to work the human system of power and desire to get what we want.”

—Dallas Willard, “The Craftiness of Christ”

What would it look like for you to live like Christ? If Jesus were living your life, what would it look like?

If we can't see in our mind's eye what that would look like, to live in our new identity free from the power of sin and death, how can we ever hope to become like Christ? What are we aiming for if it's not the image of Christ?

I'm convinced that visualizing our inclusion into Christ was everything for the Apostle Paul. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:3-5, NIV)

[SPIRITUAL EXERCISES, WEEK 1]

Day 1. Confess any attempts to become like Jesus by simply trying hard to do so. Reflect on the results (or lack of, especially sins that never seem to go away). Consider the energy you have used and the results you've experienced. Then, feast for a moment on this idea: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27, NIV). Dwell on that thought. If you wish, ask God to do this work within you. Then ask him to show you the next small step (or two or three) you need to make to cooperate in bringing this about in your life. If you're not yet convinced he'll show you, ask him for that faith.

Day 2. *And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:46-52, ESV)*

Focus on this loving thing Jesus did and picture his face as he did it. Maybe even put yourself in the place of Bartimaeus receiving Jesus' love for a moment and absorb that love. And then hold on to that loving look on Jesus' face as you go to sleep tonight.

Day 3. *As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.*

Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:12-19, NIV)

Focus on this loving thing Jesus did and picture his face as he did it. Maybe even put yourself in the place of the nine who received healing, and then of the only one who returned in gratitude.

Experience Jesus' love for a moment and absorb that love. Hold on to that loving look on Jesus' face as you go to sleep tonight.

Day 4. Spend a few minutes with the most loving person you know, thanking God the entire time for such a window into the heart of God standing right there next to you.

Day 5. Do some small act of service for someone you love who is feeling overwhelmed: make his bed, clean her toilet, or make that difficult telephone call he has been dreading.