

Transformation the Goal

The word *Morphoo* means “the inward and real formation of the essential nature of a person.” Paul used this word in Galatians, “...until Christ is formed in you.” We are pregnant with the possibilities of spiritual growth and moral beauty so great that they cannot be adequately described as anything less than the formation of Christ in our very lives. When morphing happens, I don’t just do things Jesus would have done; I find myself wanting to do them. They appeal to me. I don’t just go around trying to do right things. I become the right sort of person.

Surprised by Change

Often we do not expect that certain people will change. We **do** expect that they will affirm certain religious beliefs, attend church, read the Bible, give money, pray, and avoid certain sins. But we don’t expect that they will progressively become the way Jesus would be if He were in their place ... every year more joyful, compassionate, gracious, winsome. Because of this we are not led to question whether perhaps the standard prescriptions for spiritual growth being given in the church are truly adequate to lead people into a transformed way of life. We may in fact end up changing in ways that leave us worse off than before.

The Danger of “Pseudo-Transformation”

The great danger that arises when we don’t experience authentic transformation is that we will settle for what might be called pseudo-transformation. We know we are called to “come out and be separate.” But if we are not marked by greater and greater amounts of love and joy we will look for substitute ways of distinguishing ourselves from non-Christians. If we do not become changed from the inside out- if we don’t morph- we will be tempted to find external methods to satisfy our need to feel that we’re different from those outside the faith. If we cannot be transformed, we will settle for being informed or conformed.

Groups tend to be exclusive. Insiders want to separate themselves from outsiders. So they adopt boundary markers. These are highly visible, relatively superficial practices- matters of vocabulary or dress or style- whose purpose is to distinguish between insiders and outsiders. The boundary markers of the first century Rabbis were circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath keeping. Jesus named a fundamentally different way of identifying who are the children of God: “*Do they love God, and do they love people who mean so much to Him?*” A boundary-oriented approach to spirituality focuses on people’s position: Are you in our out? But Jesus consistently focused on people’s center: Are they oriented and moving toward the center of spiritual life (love of God and people), or are they moving away from it? This was the great irony of His day: The “righteous” were more damaged by their righteousness than the sinners were by their sin.

The Distortion of Spirituality

Tragically, it is possible to think we are becoming more spiritual when in fact we are only becoming more smug and judgmental. So how do I know if I am settling for pseudo-transformation instead of the real thing? Jesus offers a list of warning signs in the gospel of Matthew. Here are a few I find helpful.

Am I spiritually “inauthentic”? (Matt. 23:25) Inauthenticity involves preoccupation with appearing to be spiritual. I have a hard time even talking about God without trying to convince people I’m “spiritual.” I try to hide my sin. I work harder at making people think I’m a loving person than I do at actually loving them.

Am I becoming judgmental or exclusive or proud? (Matt. 23:6) As soon as we start to pursue virtue, we wonder why others aren’t as virtuous as we are. “When beginners become aware of their own fervor and diligence in their spiritual works and devotional exercises ... they conceive a certain satisfaction in the contemplation of their works ... They condemn others in their heart when they see that they are not devout in their way.” – St. John of the Cross

Am I becoming more approachable, or less? (Matt. 23:7) The religious leaders in Jesus’ day had a kind of differentness that pushed people away. Jesus had a kind of differentness that drew people to Him. True spirituality is always that way.

Am I growing weary of pursuing spiritual growth? (Matt. 23:4) The pursuit of righteousness is always an exhausting pursuit when it seeks a distorted goal. Steven Mosley captures the dynamic of the boundary-marker quest: “*Conventional religious goodness manages to be both intimidating and unchallenging at the same time*” Intimidating because it may involve thirty-nine separate rules about Sabbath keeping alone. Unchallenging because we may devote our lives to observing all the rules and yet never open the heart to love or joy. Conforming to a religious subculture is simply not compelling enough to captivate the human spirit. It was not intended to be.

Am I measuring my spiritual life in superficial ways? (Matt. 23:24)

The real issue is what kind of people we are becoming. Practices such as reading the Bible and praying are important- not because they prove how spiritual we are- but because God can use them to lead us into life.