

Martin Institute for Christianity and Culture
Christian Formation Workshop (May 2026)

“Jesus’ Teaching Regarding Spiritual Practice and Virtue Formation”

Jonathan Pennington

ABSTRACT

Jesus’ teaching on spiritual practices is a call to live righteously. We are called to relational virtues that imitate God’s own character – being people who show mercy and love in practicing compassion and forgiveness toward each other with re-calibrated social sensibilities that devalue wealth, possessions, and power. The spiritually formed life looks like behaviors rooted in a transformed inner person.

Our understanding of Christian spiritual formation is also affected by the Gospels’ genre. As narrative biographies, we are invited to learn virtue through imitating others, especially Jesus. Stories effect transformation by engaging our whole persons. Part of this power is experiencing the *eucatastrophe* of Jesus’ suffering which has a cathartic effect on us.

The impact of these observations is threefold: (1) We should memorize and meditate on Jesus’ aphorisms as means of being conformed to his way; (2) We should embrace both sides of the paradox that our changed lives are a function of an interior transformation *and* that our habits of spiritual practice shape who we become; (3) We should receive God’s abiding presence through reading the stories about Jesus. Being in the presence of God, even through stories, is a mysterious and real means of spiritual transformation.

A Necessarily Two-Layered Answer

To answer the implicit question in my workshop-given paper title – *What is Jesus’ teaching regarding spiritual practice and virtue formation?* – I need to answer a related query. Organically tied to the original question is a second that is like it – What do *the Gospels* teach regarding spiritual practice and virtue formation? Following Jesus’ own lead when asked about the greatest commandment in Scripture, I want to offer a “buy one, get one free” answer.

I think we need to pull apart Jesus’ teaching and the Gospels themselves just a bit because recognizing a theological and intentional space between Jesus and the Evangelists (Gospel writers) enables us to see some things we would not otherwise. As we former youth pastors in the 90s used to say to the overly affectionate couples at youth group – “Leave a little room for the Holy Spirit.” So too, I think the Holy Spirit is teaching us about formation in the Holy Scriptures not only through Jesus’ teachings *per se* but also through the inspired work of the Evangelists themselves, including especially their choice of genre. That is, both Jesus and the Evangelists have something to teach us about spiritual formation. By demarcating Jesus’ teachings from the Gospels’ teaching, I am not pitting Jesus and the Gospels against each other.¹ Rather, I am offering two mutually beneficial but distinct layers of insight, both of which help us answer the question at hand.

So my plan for this essay is first to survey some of Jesus’ teachings about spiritual formation. Second, I will examine how the inspired Evangelists’ choice to write the story of Jesus in the form of dramatic Greco-Roman biographies itself is very instructive for formation and virtue. Finally, I will offer some practical suggestions for how to pursue formation in the Jesus way.

Jesus’ Teaching on Spiritual Practice and Virtue Formation

In examining Jesus’ teaching on spiritual practice and the formation of virtuous character, pride of place must go to the (canonical) First Gospel, including but not only the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Earliest Christianity was largely Matthean Christianity, meaning the testimony to the Risen Jesus as given in the Gospel of Matthew left a large footprint and clear path to follow.² And what comes to be called Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is the single-most influential portion of the New Testament throughout the Church’s history.³

¹ Note that by differentiating Jesus from the Evangelists I am *not* engaging in a microwaved reheating of the leftover, nutritionally suspect food of 18th, 19th, and 20th century Historical Jesus Studies. In that largely defunct (de-Funked?) mode of scholarship, the real Jesus is not to be found in the Gospels. For many in this approach Jesus was merely a rabble-rousing “shock-jock” sage, not the divine and patient disciple-making teacher we see in the Gospels. This is demonstrably not my view.

² For references concerning this assertion, one may consult my short introduction to Matthew, *Becoming a Disciple of the King* (Crossway, 2026).

³ See *inter alia* chapter one in Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2017).

In Matthew, Jesus repeatedly and explicitly connects his moral and formative teaching to that of the Jewish Scriptures/Elder Testament,⁴ utilizing the same vocabulary of “righteousness” to mean doing what is right, doing the will of God (e.g, Matt 12:50). Jesus makes clear, as do the Jewish Scriptures, that being righteous is both necessary and the only means to flourish or experience shalom/peace in relationship with God and others. He even makes a *qualitative* judgment that shows that religiously devoted, Mosaic-covenant-embedded Jewish people, even experts in Torah, can have a real-life righteousness that is deficient. “Unless your righteousness is greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20).

When many of us hear these words about the need for “greater righteousness,” our Reformed and especially Lutheran security systems installed 500 years ago begin to blare “Intruder Alert!” and they automatically notify the authorities. As a result, Jesus’ words here have often been reinterpreted by Protestants to refer to a judicial righteous standing that is granted or imputed; this has nothing to do with behavior. Whew, the coast is clear. But it’s a false alarm and the systems need a little recalibration so as to only pick up real thieves. Jesus’ sacrificial, atoning death is indeed foundational to the new covenant that Jesus the High Priest inaugurates with us. It is a new covenant given through no merit of our own, via his broken body and spilt blood. This is granted to us by faith. But the “greater righteousness” Jesus is talking about *here*, the one that is required to enter into the kingdom, *clearly refers to a way of inhabiting the world, to a disciple’s actual lived life*. Jesus is using “righteousness” here in the normal, nearly-universal way it is used throughout the Scriptures – to refer to doing what is right, doing God’s will.

Note that Jesus uses “righteous” not with the verb “impute” but with the actions of “practicing” or “doing” (6:1). The entirety of the body of the Sermon (5:17-7:12) sketches a detailed landscape of what this practiced righteousness looks like in real life on a variety of topics – applying the true sense of Torah to interpersonal relationships (5:21-48), relating to God as Father in acts of piety (6:1-21), and handling the goods of the world and other people in it with eschatological wisdom (6:19-7:12). Jesus concludes the Sermon by picturing this greater righteousness as hearing *and doing* Jesus’ commands as being the mark of a *phronimos* person – utilizing the Greek term for one who has learned practical wisdom over time – as opposed to the *mōros* person (fool) who only hears but *does not do* (7:24-27).⁵

⁴ The dilemma of how to refer to the older part of the two-testament Christian is age-old and there is no perfect solution. Chris Seitz’s expression “elder testament” is intriguing. See Christopher R. Seitz, *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity* (Baylor University Press, 2018).

⁵ Notice also the expression that easily falls from Jesus’ lips when describing his faithful forerunner John the Baptist – he came “in the way of righteousness” (ἐν ὁδῷ δικαιοσύνης), which is paralleled with “going into the kingdom of God” (21:31-32). One cannot help but recall the emphasis on “the pure way, the holy way” in Isaiah as well (35:8), in the LXX “ὁδὸς καθὰ καὶ ὁδὸς ἁγία”.

Lest we misunderstand this as mere behavioral change, however, Jesus makes clear that *at the heart of spiritual formation is the heart*. A close reading of the Sermon reveals that the “greater” in the required “greater righteousness” does not refer to doing *more* righteous things but to the posture and state and motive of the inner person when we do righteous things. The biblical metaphor for this is the “heart.” The “greater” refers to a righteousness *not only* in the realm of exterior action but also in the interior world of perception and the will. Hypocrisy, according to Jesus, is a righteousness that is limited only to the exterior without paying attention to the inner person, the heart. A hypocrite is one who cleans only the outside of their life-cup or to one who only white-washes the entrance to their life-tomb while inside they are dead bones (Matt 23:25-28).

Aware of the pendulum-swinging tendency of humanity, we should also not fly to the far side of the truth-path and dismiss the necessity of the exterior righteous life – moral actions. Jesus is not replacing behavioral righteousness with cardial (cordial) attitudes only, as if that would be better. Rather, the “greater righteousness” is one that is *both* exterior and interior. Jesus references plenty of spiritual practices that he assumes his disciples will be engaged in, such as almsgiving, prayer, and fasting (Matt 6:1-19). The call is to make sure we honestly attune to our hearts while doing these practices.

In this the Sermon is really another way of describing the Greatest Commandment. When Jesus is asked about what God’s greatest commandment is (read: enacted righteousness), he gives an answer that is both reasonably argued and shocking (Matt 22:34-40). He quotes the command-part of the Shema (Deut 6:5) that calls humanity to a whole-person love/devotion to the Lord.⁶ This is a solid answer not unique to Jesus. But then he offers an unexpected addition, that there is a second commandment and that on these two *together* “all the Law and the Prophets hang” – “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

In this profound double-love description of the spiritual life for humanity we see the same emphasis on wholeness that drives Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon. At a crucial moment in the Sermon (5:48) Jesus compels his followers to imitate the heavenly Father in being whole/consistent (*teleios*). In the Greatest Commandment we see this same emphasis on wholeness – devotion to God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (22:37). Throughout the Sermon we see that this whole-person, required “greater than the Pharisees” righteousness looks like mercy, care, and love for others (5:7, 9, 21-47; 6:2; 7:1-5),

⁶ “Love” and “hate” operate more in the realm of devotion and dedication than emotional experiences as the modern English connotations have it. See, for example, Matt 6:24 (NIV) – “No one can serve to masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” See further, Elizabeth Mehlman, “A Holistic Hermeneutical Approach to the ΜΙΣΕΩ Texts in the Gospel of Luke” (PhD Dissertation, SBTS).

even love for our enemies (5:43-47). The Greatest Commandment likewise elevates dedicated care for others as central to what the righteous life looks like.

Indeed, throughout the First Gospel, this heart-driven, whole-person way of righteousness is deeply relational, focusing on “mercy.” Showing mercy is the primary moral trait throughout the First Gospel. Mercy in Matthew is a double-sided coin that trades in showing compassion for those in need *and* forgiving those who have wronged us. This is exemplified foremost in the first person we meet in Matthew, Joseph the Just.⁷ He, rare among biblical characters, is described as “righteous” (1:19), and this righteousness is narratively shown in how he treats his betrothed, Mary, who by all appearances has been immoral. Even before the angel appears and explains the true situation, he acts righteously in showing mercy – forgiving rather than condemning her publicly and compassionately planning to provide for Mary in her distressing plight.

Joseph’s example in the first story of the New Testament becomes central to his own (adopted) Son’s teaching ministry. Jesus repeatedly emphasizes that faithful righteousness looks like showing mercy (compassion for those in need and forgiving those who have wronged us) in relationships.⁸ Jesus himself models this compassion (9:13, 36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34) and casts a vision for this kind of life for his disciples (e.g., 5:7; 12:7; 25:31-46; with counter examples that include 15:3-9; 23:4, 23).

This is seen most pointedly in the rich concatenation of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 18-20. This series of instructions is very much a *Haustafel* or *Gemeindordnung* in the ancient philosophical sense – a set of moral and relational instructions for how to live with each other in a particular community.⁹ When one sits with these three chapters Jesus’ vision of relational virtue is challenging and formative. Life together in Christ’s new covenant community looks like intentionally adopting the lowly position of a child, seeking out and caring for the “little ones,” forgiving those who have wronged us (even up to seventy-times-seven times), valuing the commitment of marriage rather than operating from a hardness of heart (*sklērokardia*), devaluing riches, and resisting the temptation to view others with envy, which is begrudging God’s sovereign generosity toward others. As Jesus will go on to say a few chapters later, the “greater righteousness” is one that properly weighs the relative importance of God’s righteous instructions

⁷ See fuller discussion in my “Joseph the Just and Matthew’s Matrix of Mercy: The Redefinition of Righteousness,” *Journal of Moral Theology*, Vol. 10, Special Issue 1 (2021): 40-50.

⁸ As Dale C. Allison points out, this emphasis on mercy shows Jesus as standing in the biblical and Jewish tradition which places mercy “near the center of the moral life.” The assumption that Jesus’ disciples, like other faithful Jews, will be engaged in almsgiving (ποιῆς ἐλεημοσύνην, “doing mercy-giving”) is found in Matt 6:2-4. The particular point Jesus is making, in accord with the rest of the Sermon, is that this should be done with the heart-motive of honoring God and caring for others, not for show to receive the praise of others (6:1).

⁹ See fuller discussion in chapter 7 of my *Becoming a Disciple of the King*. Other examples of “household codes” in the NT and early Christianity include Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; Titus 2:2-10; 1 Clem. 1.3; Didache 4.9-11.

in relation to each other – justice, mercy, and faithfulness – without neglecting any of his words (23:23).

I have been speaking so far of Jesus’ formative teachings as found in the Gospel of Matthew, but we can easily see the same emphases in Luke and John.¹⁰ In Luke, the biography of Jesus is set against the backdrop of the mighty Roman Empire, showing Jesus to be the true *kurios*/caesar of a different empire, God’s own.¹¹ It turns out the fulcrum point that shifts the world is not in Rome but Jerusalem.

Jesus’ teachings throughout the Third Gospel clearly focus on spiritual and virtue formation in dialogue with and contrast to the values of Greco-Roman society. For example, the songs in Luke 1-2 form an overture to the libretto of the whole story, emphasizing that God values the “humble estate” of his people, inviting us to lean into this space with faith in his future setting of the world to right. Related, a dominant formation theme in Luke is the danger of wealth and position. The “third soil” kind of hearers – maybe the most perilous position to be in – are ones upon whom the seed-message has fallen but whose fruitfulness is choked out by the cares and prosperity and pleasures of this life (Luke 8:14). Likewise, the “deceitfulness of riches” are warned against repeatedly in direct and parabolic teachings. For example, Jesus’ beatitudes and woes in Luke focus exclusively on the dangerous trap of wealth and the reversal to come (6:20-26). Rich people who give to God merely out of overflow pale in comparison to the poor widow who can only give two *lepta* (21:1-4). Jesus’ parables in Luke, many of which are unique to this Gospel, repeatedly paint pictures of the foolishness of relying on wealth, such as the rich fool (12:13-21) and the dishonest manager and its paired parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:1-31). Counter examples show people who are formed in the Jesus way by getting free from the power of wealth. A prime model is the Tony Soprano character of shifty Zacchaeus who forsakes his tax cartel to become a child of Abraham (19:1-10). In short, in Luke Jesus focuses his message on the formation of disciples into virtue through recalibrating our values in sharp contrast to our surrounding culture, particularly regarding status, power, and wealth. We should embrace lowly seats at the table of life as a means of being disciplined into Jesus’ way as we await the new empire where those exalted in this life will be brought low and those low will be lifted up.

¹⁰ I am not excluding Mark as if his testimony lacks such ideas completely, though his purpose is somewhat different. Mark is stark and his more singular purpose is to show Jesus’ mystagogic and uncontainable power that is wedded with a shocking willingness to suffer, to take up his cross. Mark’s vision of discipleship focuses on this pointed idea, inviting followers to be pierced with the same point – finding glory only through suffering. Matthew, Luke, and John, which I believe to be written subsequently to Mark, provide a fuller and more multi-faceted vision for the ongoing life of discipleship to Jesus.

¹¹ C. Kevin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford University Press, 2010). See also the exploration of Luke-Acts in the Roman Empire in Christopher S. Chen, *Evil Empire? Government Officials as Proponents of the Gospel in Luke-Acts and Beyond* (Wipf and Stock, 2026).

In the Gospel of John we can see the same emphasis on virtue formation as in Matthew but transposed into a different key. The primary relational virtue of “mercy” toward others is now described as “love.”¹² There is little formative teaching in the first half of John’s biography of Jesus, but “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father” (13:1), he provided a concentrated set of instructions about what the life of a disciple will look like (chapters 13-17). The clear and singular point is that being S/spiritually formed looks like following Jesus’ own example of love for one another. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35). Unlike in Matthew, where spiritual formation is primarily described in terms of growth in wisdom, in John it is the empowering work of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the ascended Son as the abiding presence of God with Jesus’ disciples.

In sum, Jesus’ call of discipleship is a call to living righteously, which primarily focuses on relational virtues that model God’s own character – being people who show mercy and love in practicing compassion and forgiveness toward each other with re-calibrated social sensibilities that devalue wealth, possessions, and power. The spiritually formed life looks like behaviors rooted in a transformed inner person. God sees and cares about the “heart” not religion that is heart-less. And at the same time, what we do, especially in relation to each other, really matters.

The Gospels’ Teaching on Spiritual Practice and Virtue Formation

In the earliest decades of the Church, the sayings and teachings of Jesus were the focus of formation, understandably so because at the very core of the Christian movement and what distinguished the first Christians from their Jewish brethren was *dedication to the person of Jesus*. The belief that God became a human who reveals fully what God and his kingdom are like (cf. Heb 1:1-3; John 1:1-18) is the central difference between Christianity and the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds. Therefore, what Jesus said, what he did, and what kind of person he was were dominant and principal for Christians. To be a believer is to follow the way of the incarnate, revelatory Son of God.¹³ As a result, when the final form of the Gospels as we know them began to circulate, they were quickly adopted as the primary documents of the Church – the Mayflower

¹² This taking up and transposing of key ideas in the Synoptics is characteristic of the Fourth Gospel, which in many ways can be seen as a commentary upon the Synoptic tradition, highlighting certain themes and filling in some gaps. In this case, I surmise that John took the story of Jesus’ “greatest commandment” teaching and chose to highlight this as the primary formative virtue, weaving it through all of Jesus’ teachings.

¹³ The magisterial Reformers’ re-centering of the map of the biblical universe to Romans (and a particular reading of it) and away from the historic center of the Gospels is a function of their justified concern to address serious missteps in doctrine and practice of many 16th-century European Roman Catholics. But this narrowing focus of the Christian faith to the message of justification was not universally followed by Protestants, as can be seen in Reformers like Martin Bucer and in the Anabaptist and later Wesleyan traditions.

Compact, the Aeneid, and the Constitution all wrapped up in one four-fold book.¹⁴ If you're going to follow a person, you need what he or she was like.

All literature exists in a cultural context. Different styles and types of literature (genres) communicate effectively because of a shared awareness of how this kind of story or report or poem or legal document or eulogy is to be understood and interpreted. The earliest Christians who read the Gospels (more accurately, heard them read aloud) immediately knew what kind of Greek literature they were encountering – *bioi*, or Greco-Roman biographies.¹⁵ The Gospels were clearly intended to be understood as culturally-comparable, alternative biographies about a man who was at once both king and philosopher, a heavenly caesar and sage. This was the universal understanding of the Gospels by both average readers and scholars up until the 20th century.¹⁶ Over the last thirty to forty years in New Testament scholarship there has been a rediscovery of this important framework for understanding the Gospels and extensive exploration for how this helps us interpret them as intended.¹⁷

As I noted above, recognizing the Gospels' genre contributes greatly to our understanding of Christian spiritual formation and virtue development. In addition to and alongside Jesus' own teaching about formation, the Evangelists' choice to present Jesus' life and teachings in the form of Greco-Roman biographies provides meaningful insight into how Christian disciples are formed.

How so? Today's modern biographies lean more toward personal interest or exposé, but ancient Greek and Roman Lives were regularly more specifically geared toward moral formation through providing exemplars of both virtue and vice to emulate or avoid. Biographies of philosophers such as Pythagoras or Socrates or Jesus were put together by their disciples to provide a compendium of the teacher's sayings but more than that – to show their character (*ethos*) by how the philosopher lived and died. As Richard Burridge points out, like other ancient Lives, the intention of the Gospels is to portray the subject's moral character “to encourage others to develop their own moral character by imitating their virtues and avoiding their vices.” They function in the realm of ancient *mimesis* or imitation.¹⁸

¹⁴ Elsewhere I have given argumentation for how and why the Gospels were central, calling them the archway into the canon of Holy Scripture. See chapter 12 in Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2012).

¹⁵ Space doesn't allow an exploration of the profound Hellenization of Jewish culture in the three centuries before Christ, but suffice it to say that the category of Greco-Roman biography is found in usage among Jewish people as well, many of whom read Greek (cf. the LXX) and some of whom were educated enough to compose Jewish stories in the same style, such as Philo's *Life of Moses*.

¹⁶ See the excellent history of this question in Helen Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel* (Eerdmans, 2024).

¹⁷ Charles H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Mercer Univ Press, 1986). Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Baylor Univ Press, 2020). Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2019).

¹⁸ Richard Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2007), 28-29.

Thus, the Gospels exist not merely as the necessary historical background about Jesus' death and resurrection for the "real" theology and formation found in the Epistles. Rather, they paint a picture of who Jesus was as the God-Human so that humans can learn to imitate God.¹⁹ "Be *teleios* as your heavenly Father is *teleios*" (Matt 5:48). As Dallas Willard notes, a follower or disciple of Jesus is "anyone who has decided that the most important thing in their life is to learn how to do what Jesus said to do. . . . A disciple is someone whose goal is to live their life as Jesus would live it if he were in their place."²⁰

Recognizing the Gospels as biographies also helps us attend to their story-telling nature.²¹ The Gospels' genre invites us to read them as narratives, and narratives have a unique and profound formative power. Narratives engage the whole person in formation because they engage our imagination which in turn affects our whole bodies.²² Slowing down and paying attention to the nooks and crannies and plot-tension development of a Gospel story forms us in lasting, whole-person ways. We learn what God values and learn to adopt these same sensibilities. One formation tradition that has emphasized this in a significant way is the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, which invite retreatants into the transforming experience of imagining oneself in Gospels scenes, attentive to the gamut of sensory experiences.²³ Meditating on sacred art likewise has this same formative effect.

There is also a specific but oft-overlooked way in which the Gospels' formative power is effected through their genre – seeing the Gospels as a kind of Greco-Roman tragedy. Some years ago Ben Witherington suggested that while the Gospel of John is a *bios*, its mode of presentation has much in common with ancient dramas, particularly tragedies, which helps explain some of the

¹⁹ Or to say it in the way of Irenaeus, "Christ became what we are in order to enable us to become what he is."

²⁰ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (Harper San Francisco, 1998), 285.

²¹ Helpful books in this regard include Jeannine K. Brown, *The Gospels as Stories: A Narrative Approach to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* (Baker Academic, 2020); James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2005). This also motivates my text, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2012).

²² Within the field of neurology, studies suggest that imagined experiences, such as when reading a story, affect the brain in the same way as experiencing the events in real life. For example, Marianne Cumella Reddan, Tor Dessart Wager, and Daniela Schiller, "Attenuating Neural Threat Expression with Imagination," *Neuron: A Cell Press Journal* 100(4):994-1005.E4 (2018); Pia Tikka, Mauri Kaipainen, Juha Salmi, "Narrative Simulation of Social Experiences in Naturalistic Context – A Neurocinematic Experience," *Neuropsychologia* 188 (2023) (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2023.108654>); Aroma Dabas, Rasmus Bruckner, Heidrun Schultz, Frederick Bermann, and Roland G. Benoit, "Learning from Imagined Experiences via an Endogenous Prediction Error," *Nature Communications* 16 (2025).

²³ A couple of good introductions are George W. Traub, ed., *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader: Contemporary Writings on St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Spiritual Exercises, Discernment, and More* (Loyola Press, 2008); George A. Aschenbrenner, *Stretched for Greater Glory: What to Expect from the Spiritual Exercises* (Loyola Press, 2004).

major differences between John and the Synoptics.²⁴ More broadly, I would suggest that all four of the Gospels seek to shape their readers through what we may call *Katharsis Christou*.

In noted Spanish scholar Laín Entralgo's erudite and fascinating book, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, he is asking the question of what role *logos* played in the ancient philosophical and medical views of healing.²⁵ In the final chapter he provides an extensive discussion of Aristotle's notion of *katharsis* (purgation, cleansing) that occurs through experiencing tragic poetry, being a spectator of a tragic hero's story told in the theatre. Observing a hero's tragic story produces a particular kind of purging pleasure that is both dianoetic and somatic (pertaining to thought and to body). Tragic catharsis was at once religious and educative and medical.²⁶ The *logos* has a threefold power: when used in dialectical reasoning, it convinces; when used in rhetorical discourse, it persuades; when used in a tragic poem it purges and purifies.²⁷

Much more can be said about these ideas, but we will simply note here that the Gospels share much in common with ancient Greek narrative tragedies in showing a hero who is (in the words of Entralgo) "in this world but not of this world" whose suffering and death educate us morally on a profound plane through showing what a person can do in a difficult situation. There is a mysterious morally formative power that comes through observing the noble, undeserved tragedy of another. The Apostle Peter makes much of this in his first letter, using Jesus' suffering as the example for how Christians are to live and grow in the world (1 Peter 2:13-4:6). "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps... Since, therefore, Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live no longer for human passions but for the will of God." (1 Peter 2:21; 4:1-2) We are formed morally by experiencing Jesus' suffering by reflecting on its *eucatastrophe* (to use Tolkien's term), providing us with a *Katharsis Christou*.

How Then Shall We Live?

To the question of how we should now live, the direct answer from Jesus and the Evangelists is clear – to enter into and be a part of God's kingdom looks like a life of following the Sage-King,

²⁴ The dramatic mode in John is seen *inter alia* through the opening hymn of homage, the use of two-level irony throughout, the stress of the stupendousness of Jesus' miracles, the almost self-contained nature of the scenes, as in a play, etc. Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Westminster John Knox, 1995), 4-5.

²⁵ Pedro Laín Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, edited and translated by L.J. Rather and John M. Sharp (Yale Univ Press, 1970), based on the original 1958 book, *La Curación por la Palabra en la Antigüedad Clásica*. In Walter Ong's Foreword, he notes that the classical world was strongly "verbomotor" and as somatic medicine developed there was hearty debate over the problem of sorting out what was truly therapeutic "in the welter of verbal activities generated by a culture where both mores and academic education were dominantly rhetorical." (p.x).

²⁶ Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word*, 210-211.

²⁷ Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word*, 239.

trusting him enough (read: having faith) to do what he teaches and to imitate his model. This means being people who live in relational virtues that accord with God's own nature – love, mercy, and caring for those in need rather than reliance on riches in this life. When we stumble and fail and only have the faith of a mustard seed, there is grace and forgiveness and restoration, modeled extremely by the lead disciple, Simon Peter. But it is clear that to be a Christian is to be a disciple, one who takes Jesus' yoke upon his or her life and learns from him the way of inhabiting the world (Matt 11:28-30).

But what is not as clear is how we humans actually change, by what means we become more like Jesus in following his ways. The typical and not wrong Christian answer emphasizes the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit: we are changed and empowered by God's Spirit moving in us, writing God's commands on the tablet of our hearts, bearing the fruit of righteousness in our lives.

This is a good and beautiful Pauline answer. But closely observing the Gospels we find that this role of the Spirit is rarely discussed. The Holy Spirit certainly appears and is active in the Gospels, but the moral transformative work of the Spirit is not the emphasis. In Matthew, whose pneumatology is limited, the Spirit's work is primarily described as empowering Jesus for ministry, and on the rare occasion it is applied to the disciples, it is for understanding and boldness in witnessing (Matt 10:20).²⁸ Mark is the same, with most of the uses of Greek *pneuma* actually referring to unclean spirits, not God's Spirit. In Luke, in addition to empowering Jesus, the Spirit is somewhat more frequently observed as coming upon people, but almost always for the purpose of empowering bold witness. The closing exhortation to await the full emboldening of the Spirit at Pentecost (Luke 24:49) is the prime example. The Gospel of John comes closest to familiar Pauline descriptions of the Spirit, but the Spirit's work is still primarily for the purpose of granting revelation and empowering worship and witness (e.g. John 14:26; 15:26) and granting the church the power to offer forgiveness (20:22-23). In sum, the typical way that Christians think of the Spirit's work in our formation is not evidenced clearly in Jesus' own teaching nor the Gospels.

So according to Jesus and the Gospels, how are we transformed? Paying attention to Jesus' teachings and the Gospels' philosophical biographical genre, we can note three means of moral formation, given here in the form of imperative invitations to us today.

(1) Meditate on Jesus' aphorisms.

The influential scholar of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot has shown that the clear goal of the ancient philosophers was not abstract thinking but providing people with a way to pursue a new and better way of being in the world.²⁹ "In Antiquity the philosopher regards himself as a

²⁸ I provide a fuller exploration of the pneumatology of Matthew in "The Trinity and Matthew," in Brandon D. Smith, ed., *The Trinity and the Bible* (B&H, 2023).

²⁹ Essential reading for understanding the ancient philosophical world and its background to the NT world are Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson; trans.

philosopher, not because he develops a philosophical discourse, but because he lives philosophically.”³⁰ Hadot describes the work of philosophy as “spiritual exercises” because the goal was enabling the individual to transcend oneself and make an attempt at “spiritual progress and a means of inner transformation.”³¹

Philosophy understood as the attempt to fashion one’s life according to some ideal saw regimented practices, or spiritual exercises, as its formative instruments for becoming someone new.³² This view was not limited to the ancient philosophical schools, however, but can also be found in the Jewish tradition beyond the Jewish Scriptures such as in Philo of Alexandria, the book of Sirach (what Daniel Harrington has called “a handbook for personal and spiritual formation”), the Qumran *Hodayot*, and ancient forms of rabbinic Judaism. The early church fathers speak the same way.³³ This is the world of the New Testament as well, and can be seen explicitly in many places, including the Gospels.

The most fundamental of these spiritual exercises or disciplines is “meditating on key principles expressed briefly and memorably.”³⁴ Through memorization of short sayings of the Teacher, a disciple can continually meditate on the key principles and exhortations of a particular philosophy (way of life) and so by, learn to live according to the sage’s wisdom. These pithy aphorisms or gnomic sayings were collected together by the disciples of a philosopher and disseminated for the purpose of moral formation. The Sermon on the Mount is one such example of a collection of aphoristic sayings.

From a Christian perspective, the mere memorization of aphorisms – even Jesus’ – is not sufficient for transformation. The Spirit must be at work to reveal the wisdom of Jesus to blind eyes and cold hearts and to bring about transformation into Christlikeness. But a primary means by which the Spirit forms believers is through this same universally human mode of memorizing and meditating on nuggets of wisdom.³⁵ One does not have to look very far to note how often Jesus teaches with such aphorisms. Without even turning to the Gospels, these pop into my mind immediately:

- “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.”
- “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Michael Chase (Blackwell, 1995); *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Belknap/Harvard Univ Press, 2004).

³⁰ Hadot, translated in the Introduction to *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 27.

³¹ Pierre Hadot, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” 60-61; quoted in George Branch-Trevathan, *The Sermon on the Mount and Spiritual Exercises: The Making of the Matthean Self* (Brill, 2020), 7.

³² Branch-Trevathan, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 9.

³³ Branch-Trevathan, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 10-12.

³⁴ Branch-Trevathan, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 12.

³⁵ Of course, this is a primary mode of wisdom literature, as seen in Proverbs, as well as ubiquitously through the philosophical traditions such as Stoicism. It continues today through bumper stickers, (sometimes cheesy) distressed-wood plaques from Hobby Lobby, and (depending on your algorithm) self-help memes.

- “Do not treasure up treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy but lay them up in heaven...”
- “You will know a tree by its fruit.”

Along with millions of others, I can testify to the transformative effect of having such aphorisms ready to hand and how meditation on them enables a different way of inhabiting the world. This is transformative wisdom and crucial to character formation.

(2) Embrace the paradox that we do as we are and we become as we do.

One of Jesus’ oft-repeated aphorisms utilizes the horticultural image of trees and fruit. John the Baptist’s message is summed up as exhorting people to bear fruit that accords with (the tree of) repentance (Matt 3:8). Jesus speaks about trees being of different kinds and being either healthy or diseased, and that trees always produce matching fruit. Thus, we can evaluate the tree by the fruit (Matt 7:16-20). Paul picks up on this with his own important description of the Christian life as bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:16-26).³⁶

As we transplant this metaphor into the garden of moral formation, we understand that godly behavior or righteous deeds are a *product* (or *the produce*, to extend the metaphor) of a transformed inner person. Good fruit in our lives is just that – the natural result of an inner life that has gone from diseased to healthy. This has been especially emphasized within Protestantism as part of the Reformation’s strong arguments against any kind of legalism or activities, such as purchasing indulgences, that must be done to acquire favor with God and reprieve from punishment for sin. Our sanctification / behavioral change is a *function* of being changed on the inside.

This is all well and good. Yet the Scriptures, millennia of reflection on human experience, and modern neurology all note that something else is also true – that what we do affects our perception, that how we live changes our thinking, that our habituation transforms our attitudes. We not only bear the fruit of the Spirit’s work in us, we are repeatedly told to walk by the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 25); we are not only given a “new self,” but we are exhorted to put off the old and put on the new self (Eph 4:17-24).

We not only do as we are, we become as we do. This may seem obvious, but my experience within Protestant circles is that this part of the complex equation of being human is often ignored or even met with resistance as if the transformative power of habituation were somehow in competition with “grace.” After carefully surveying biblical texts and theologians’ reflections, Zoltán Dörnyei

³⁶ For a robust and thoughtful exploration of the fruit of the Spirit in relation to spiritual formation and psychology, see Zoltán Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Fruit of the Spirit: The Biblical Portrayal of the Christlike Character and Its Development* (Zondervan Academic, 2022).

observes that “setting up an either/or contrast between divine and human agency may constitute a false choice.”³⁷ We can note that for each of the fruit-virtues that the Spirit produces in us, we find clear biblical exhortations to pursue those virtues as part of our growth in holiness. The mysterious secret of holiness is keeping the balance between God as the true agent of our sanctification “while faithfully discharging one’s *personal* responsibility.”³⁸

After 288 pages of my study of Jesus’ message from Matthew 5-7, I felt compelled to conclude my book with a sketch of how I see the Sermon on the Mount relating to a theology of human flourishing and growth.³⁹ I will offer only a sketch of that sketch here. I argue that Jesus’ teachings should be understood as a “revelatory virtue ethic,” seeking to shape us to inhabit the world (habituate ourselves) in ways that accord with the will of God revealed in the person of Jesus. Salvation is entailed with such transformation. Dialoguing with multiple theologians including the important work of John Barclay who notes that “grace” means “gift” and that gifts always entail reciprocity (even if greatly unequal), I argue that grace and virtue are friends, not enemies. Protestantism has particularly struggled with this tension, preferring to eliminate the discomfort that comes from this profound paradox. As Oliver O’Donovan observes, “the improper divorce of sanctification from justification has bequeathed to Protestant churches their characteristic tension between a gospel with no concern for life in the world and a concern for life in the world which has lost touch with the gospel.”⁴⁰

Tom Wright is right in acknowledging a key difference between Aristotle and the New Testament in that Christian morality is not simply a matter of a human being “deciding to adopt a particular set of characteristics and discovering in herself or himself the capability and energy to get on and reform one’s life in that way.”⁴¹ Rather, this is a work of the Spirit in us. And at the same time, the virtue approach to ethics (which focuses on habits that shape us to become someone new), built on God’s grace and through the power of the Spirit, “directs us toward the habitual patterns of the Christian life”⁴² that shape us to be disciples and thereby experience true human flourishing.

The call to us today is to embrace this antinomy, not squashing either side of the paradox that our spiritual formation is simultaneously the product of something outside of us and that our choices of habituation matter, and all of this is grace. This vision of sanctification has a place in the

³⁷ Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Fruit of the Spirit*, 183. See the whole chapter for further exploration.

³⁸ Walter Elwell and Philip Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Tyndale, 2001), 1164, quoted in Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Fruit of the Spirit*, 187.

³⁹ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, chapter 12.

⁴⁰ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order* (Eerdmans, 1994), 254, quoted and discussed in Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 302, n.38.

⁴¹ N.T. Wright, *After You Believe* (HarperOne, 2010), 137.

⁴² Jonathan R. Wilson, *Gospel Virtues: Practicing Faith, Hope, and Love in Uncertain Times* (Wipf and Stock, 2004), 34-35, quoted and discussed in Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 306.

Protestant heritage, even if the downstream, broader versions today have lost this paradoxical balance.

(3) Receive the abiding presence of Jesus through his stories.

Closely related to the preceding discussion, New Testament scholar Charles Talbert reflected deeply on the nature of the Gospels and how the Sermon on the Mount is meant to affect our character formation.⁴³ He wrestles with how grace relates to both the indicatives and the imperatives in Matthew under the chapter title, “Is Matthew a Legalist?”

In explicating his “No” answer, Talbert explores the ancient understanding that being *with* a great teacher is itself a transformative power, mysterious as the mechanism is. He first notes how important the language of God being “with us/you” and “in your midst” is throughout the Old Testament (more than 100x). This language is used to emphasize the empowerment of God’s people, deeply connected with the work of the Spirit. The connection to God being “with us” in Jesus (Matt 1:23; 28:20) is not accidental.

Talbert goes on to note how the ancient philosophers regularly spoke of the power of *being with* virtuous men and teachers as the means of transformation. In these cases, they were not only referring to imitation of the teacher, which is also at play, but rather to being enabled to change through their close association with the philosopher. “This is a philosophic variation on the general Mediterranean belief that one’s being in the presence of a deity causes transformation of the self.”⁴⁴ This is human transformation through vision. One cannot help but recall Paul’s reference to the same in 2 Cor 3:18 – Christians who behold the face of the Lord are being changed from one degree of glory to another.

Disciples being with their teacher was viewed as an important means to personal transformation. As Plutarch, notes, when one is in the presence of a good person, “great is his craving all but to merge his own identity in that of the good man” (*Virt. prof.* 84D) So too with Jesus and his disciples. Jesus is certainly presented as such a virtuous man who affects those around him. He is also understood as a king and “it was likewise believed in Mediterranean antiquity that through being exposed to a virtuous ruler one may be transformed ethically and personally, just as when one viewed a deity... The vision of a king, like that of a philosopher or a deity, effected change in the personhood of the one who gazed upon him.”⁴⁵

What the Gospels provide to Christians is the ability to see Jesus as a person present to us even now. By the work of the Spirit who continually reveals and abides, we too get to be in the presence

⁴³ Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Baker Academic, 2006).

⁴⁴ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon*, 39.

⁴⁵ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon*, 41.

of the resurrected Jesus. Through pondering the stories about him and the stories he told himself, we can experience the transformative effect of being with God. We experience growth in virtuous formation by having our social imaginaries reshaped in kingdom ways through the spiritual presence of the King.