

Spiritual Formation

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Lesson 2
The Building Blocks of Spiritual Formation
How the image of Christ is formed in us

Lesson 1 Review

Review the main points of lesson 1. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from lesson 1.

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, the student should be able to:

- (1) Understand and explain the three primary building blocks of spiritual formation
- (2) Appreciate the ministry of the Holy Spirit in spiritual formation.

Snapshots of Life

- ❖ While I was working on this course, a young man poured out his heart to me. He is a sincere Christian. He has a clear testimony of conversion and believes that he has fully surrendered his will to the Lordship of Christ. He studies the Scriptures, has a fairly consistent devotional life, and I see clear evidence that he knows and fears God. But this young man struggles to fully overcome a particular “besetting sin.” “Why hasn’t this temptation gone away!? I pray, I read the Bible, and yet total victory escapes me. Is there something wrong with me?!” he asked. “I feel so isolated, so alone in my struggle. I think of myself as a second-class Christian!”

As we shared together over some weeks, it became clear to me that my friend was a sincere believer; but he needed to renew his mind in some areas. His thinking about God and the Christian life were not completely aligned with the Word of God. My friend also seemed to believe that if his heart were holy, then purity and obedience should be more *effortless*. Because of some missing spiritual safeguards and some missing disciplines, my friend was not experiencing total victory.

◆ *How would you counsel my friend? How can a true believer overcome a besetting sin?*

While we know that the Holy Spirit can, and does, transform our hearts in instantaneous moments on our spiritual pilgrimage, we also know that he brings us to full maturity through processes – processes involving the renewing of the mind, spiritual discipline, and a healthy relationship with other believers.

To teach that spiritual formation is a process does not take away from those extraordinary moments of revival. Many devoted followers of Jesus have experienced “divine moments” beyond their new birth. These moments are often defined in various ways, such as: “the baptism of the Holy Spirit,” “entire sanctification,” “the rest of faith,” “perfect love,” “the infilling of the

Holy Spirit,” and so on. Just as miracles don’t destroy the normal laws of nature, these extraordinary moments or seasons in our journey, when spiritual growth accelerates more rapidly, don’t dismiss the normal processes of maturity God has put in place.

Spiritual growth is usually patterned after physical growth. Infants don’t become adults overnight but follow a God-ordained process of maturity. The same thing is true of our spiritual growth. Both physical and spiritual children have growth spurts.

The Big Idea

Formation into the image of Jesus Christ must be built upon a solid biblical foundation. In this lesson, we will seek to establish a solid foundation upon which to build a life that pleases God and a life, both inside and out, which bears the image of God. Not having this foundation, many are spiritually weak.

Introduction

A. Spiritual formation is more than superficial change.

So much of what we call transformation is merely superficial change, like putting a small bandage over a deep, infected wound. For periods of time we might be able to “act” right and suppress bad attitudes and behavior; but eventually someone or something bumps against that sore spot, temptation becomes too strong, and we show who we really are.

An Asian pastor once confessed how the Lord revealed this to him through one of his fiercest persecutors. Over the years a wicked tribesman had done everything he could to hinder the work of God. He had thrown rocks into their worship services, shot bullets through the parsonage walls, and ransacked the church. In the midst of this, my pastor friend and his congregation prayed for their tormentor and endured his persecution. “I thought I had genuine love and forgiveness,” this pastor told me, “until one day in a surprise encounter on a curvy mountain road my anger boiled over. I’m ashamed to say it, but I rammed his motorcycle with my truck and threatened him! That’s when I knew I didn’t have as much love as I thought I had. That’s when I knew that I was relying too much on my own strength, and that I had not yielded a part of my life to the Holy Spirit’s control. The Lord used this to humble me and to change me. When I humbled myself before my congregation and before my persecutor (even bought him a new motorcycle), the Lord filled my heart with real love and power.”

God wants to do more for us than put a bandage over our wounds. He has more for us than superficial change.

To be formed in the image of Jesus Christ is to have his character – his virtue – deeply engraved on our souls. Dennis Kinlaw reminds us, “To be formed into the image of Christ is not simply to learn how to imitate him, but to have his mind or attitude.”¹ God wants to so transform us that our natural response in any circumstance is his response.

¹ Dennis Kinlaw, *The Mind of Christ* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press), 14.

When Christ's love is fully formed in us, obedience won't be a burden. When his righteousness is fully formed in us, doing what we know to be right won't be a strain. When his peace and joy are formed in us, we will remain steadfast through the fiercest storms of life.

B. Lasting change is possible.

The good news is that change is always possible – not by simply wishing for it, but by using the process for change God has revealed to us. When we learn to think differently, adopt different practices, and learn to interact differently with people, spiritual change will come naturally.

The Lesson

The three building blocks for spiritual transformation into the image of Christ which we will learn in this course are:

Three Building Blocks of Spiritual Formation²

The first building block – A Renewed Mind (Philippians 2:5; Romans 12:1-2)

The second building block – Spiritual Training (2 Timothy 4:7; 1 Corinthians 9:27; Hebrews 12:11)

The third building block – Participation in Christian Community (Ephesians 4:13)

◆ *Read these passages and try to define the following phrases: “Let this mind be in you,” “Exercise yourself,” and “till we all come . . . to a perfect man.” What do these phrases mean?*

On the next page is a graphic that will help us visualize these building blocks for change.

² Adapted from James Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 24

The Building Blocks of Transformation



Explanation of the graphic (above) and chart (below): A renewed mind involves assurance of salvation, knowing God, knowing ourselves, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual training involves adversity, practicing the spiritual disciplines, and personal discipline. Christian community involves (at least) understanding who we are as the family of God and connecting with each other for edification, accepting one another, and accountability. All is by the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Renewed Mind Philippians 2:5; Romans 12:1-2	Spiritual Training 2 Timothy 4:7; 1 Corinthians 9:27	Christian Community Ephesians 4:13
Assurance of salvation	Suffering/Adversity	Understanding the nature of the church, and connecting with other members for edification
Knowing God	The spiritual disciplines	Acceptance
Knowing ourselves	Personal discipline	Accountability
By the Holy Spirit	By the Holy Spirit	By the Holy Spirit

1. The first building block of transformation is a renewed mind.

Spiritual formation must begin with a renewed mind, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.”³ Notice that the heart is where a man thinks. The mind and heart are one in the Scriptures. This is where transformation must begin. The mind is the control center of one’s entire life. Everything we are and become flows from the control room.⁴ Jesus said, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders.”⁵ He also said, “He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. But this he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in him would receive.”⁶ In the first section of this course, we’ll work on conforming our thoughts about salvation, God, and ourselves to the Word of God. This renewing of our mind is vital to the image of God.

“...and be *renewed* in the spirit of *your mind*.”⁷

“...and have put on the new man who is *renewed in knowledge according to the image of him who created him*.”⁸

Dr. Dennis Kinlaw teaches, “The three laws of Christian discipleship are: (1) Find out who Jesus is. Learn his adequacy for every human need. (2) Find out who you are. Realize your inadequacy for serving in God’s kingdom, no matter how earnestly you try. (3) Find the Holy Spirit’s power to displace your human weakness with the fullness of Christ. When we do these things, we begin to think differently; we have different emotions; our entire outlook is changed.”⁹

Romans 12:2 commands, “And be not conformed to this world, but be *transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (emphasis added). Everything we are and become flows from the control room.

A. Biblical knowledge is vital to transformation.

The Bible continually challenges us to pursue knowledge and to receive instruction. We must, “grow in the grace and *knowledge* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ This is why Paul prayed ceaselessly for the Ephesians that the “eyes of your *understanding*” would be enlightened.”¹¹

When I was in Bible school, our president, Dr. Robert Whitaker, spoke often to us students about developing a Christian mind. He admonished us often to “Think as a Christian!” He knew we were Christians, but he also knew that the minds of his students were still unconsciously shaped like the world in some areas.

³ Proverbs 23:7.

⁴ Matthew 15:19.

⁵ Mark 7:21.

⁶ John 7:38-39.

⁷ Ephesians 4:23, emphasis added.

⁸ Colossians 3:10, emphasis added.

⁹ Dennis Kinlaw, *The Mind of Christ* (Lexington: Francis Asbury Press), 68.

¹⁰ 2 Peter 3:18, emphasis added.

¹¹ Philippians 1:19, emphasis added.

In order for our minds to be properly formed, there are things we must *learn* and things we must *unlearn*. We must receive good information and dispel misinformation. This is almost always a process – a process of filling my mind with the truth. It is also a process of cleansing my mind of improper and destructive thoughts about God, myself, the world around me, and the Christian life. It is not easy to hear the voice of God and the voice of truth over the noise of the culture, sometimes even the church, or even the noise in my own heart. But every voice in my head and heart which is not speaking truth must be silenced.

The memorization of Scripture has been a spiritual discipline that God has used greatly in my life and the lives of my friends who are also practicing it, whether in exposing and renewing my thinking on certain matters, fighting temptation, or in preparation for future challenges. – Maricka Herrer, South Africa

Be careful! Deconstructing or dismantling an unhealthy understanding of God and ourselves can be a dangerous process unless it is thoroughly biblical and absolutely humble. In this process, arrogance will tempt us to form ideas about God of our own making. In pride, we may reject an image of God that is like something we despise, yet still not have the right image of God.

B. Humility is the key to understanding.

In our quest to think rightly about God, the people of God are our companions, the Scriptures are our authority, humility must be our attitude, and the Holy Spirit will be our helper. “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.”¹²

Humility means that I give up control and yield to God’s revelation no matter what it may cost me. This is really the only way to spiritual transformation. There are great temptations in our spiritual journey to reject truth because of what we might lose in the process. We are afraid of offending our family, culture, or traditions. We don’t want to be labeled, rejected, or ostracized. We are tempted to comply just to please people, rather than God. Remember, the Bible says, “The fear of man brings a snare.”¹³

C. Faith is the key to experiencing truth.

Appropriating (receiving) God’s Word by faith brings the Word of God to life in us. To really know something biblically will impact my whole life.

Biblical faith is more than knowledge; it is trust and commitment. At this very moment you are probably “trusting” a chair. That means you have learned enough about chairs in general and, perhaps, even “your” chair in particular, that you are willing commit the full weight of your body upon it. This is what the Bible means by faith. This is what the Gospel writers mean when they say things like: “When Jesus *saw their faith*,



¹² James 4:6.

¹³ Psalm 29:25.

he said to the paralytic, ‘your sins are forgiven you.’”¹⁴ What did Jesus see when he saw faith? What did faith look like? Jesus saw that the paralyzed man’s friends had enough trust in him to carry their friend to him with the expectation of healing. Jesus saw men who committed to what they knew to be true about Jesus. He saw their action and responded with forgiving, healing, transforming grace! This is the power of faith.

As we trust the Word of God, he changes us into the image of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We certainly can’t form ourselves into the image of Christ. Robert Mulholland Jr. states,

Scripture is also clear in its witness to the fact that only God can liberate us from our bondage, heal our brokenness, cleanse us from our uncleanness and bring life out of our deadness. We cannot do it by ourselves. Thus, spiritual formation is the experience of being shaped by God toward wholeness.... Self-reliance is deeply ingrained within us.... God is the initiator of our growth toward wholeness, and we are to be pliable clay in God’s hand.¹⁵

We are powerless to produce love, joy and peace in our own character. In order for the process of spiritual formation to happen in our lives, we must trust and commit to what God has promised and declared. This is the faith which pleases God (Hebrews 11:6). Faith opens the door to the blessings and privileges of the atonement of Jesus Christ and takes hold of them. Faith makes everything Jesus provided for us not only accessible to us but *real* in us. True faith responds to the truth one has received and thereby activates the promises of God. Through trust and commitment to God’s Word, the Holy Spirit begins to transform our character and to empower us to live as Christ.

But there’s more.

2. The second foundation stone of transformation is spiritual training.

Spiritual formation will absolutely involve spiritual training. As Paul challenges Timothy, “Exercise yourself toward godliness.”¹⁶ He himself said, “I discipline my body and bring it in subjection; lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”¹⁷

A. Spiritual training must be added to sound doctrine.

John Wesley believed that the goal of the Christian life was love for God and man, but that the way we grow in love is through spiritual discipline. He believed that the reason Christianity had “done so little good in the world,” or why it wasn’t having *maximum impact*, was due to three things:

- 1) Absence of sound doctrine
- 2) Lack of accountable discipline

¹⁴ Mark 2:5.

¹⁵ Mulholland, 16

¹⁶ 1 Timothy 4:7.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:27.

3) Neglect of self-denial¹⁸

❖ *Why are each of these – doctrine, discipline, and denial – necessary to an effective Christian life and testimony?*

Wesley divided the disciplines of the Christian life into two primary sections: **works of piety** and **works of mercy**.¹⁹ Here is an excerpt from one of Wesley's sermons:

“But what good works are those, the practice of which you affirm to be necessary to sanctification?” First, all works of (devotion) such as, public prayer, family prayer, and praying in our closet; receiving the supper of the Lord; searching the Scriptures, by hearing, reading, meditating; and using such a measure of fasting or abstinence as our bodily health allows.

Secondly, all works of mercy, whether they relate to the bodies or souls of men; such as, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted; such as, the endeavoring to instruct the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner, to quicken the lukewarm, to confirm the wavering, to comfort the feeble-minded, to encourage the tempted, or contribute in any manner to the saving of souls from death. This is the repentance, and these the “fruits meet for repentance,” which are necessary to full sanctification. This is the way wherein God hath appointed his children to wait for complete salvation.

The Word of God is clear that we need more than a conversion experience to be formed into Christ's image. In following lessons, we will show that apart from ongoing training, our mistaken thoughts about God and ourselves, our untrained attitudes and appetites, and our damaged emotions will defeat our best intentions to become Christ-like. In this section of this course, we'll discuss the key role that training and spiritual discipline plays in our formation into the image of Christ. I believe you will find this a most practical section.

B. Spiritual training comes in a number of forms.

God has many different means by which to train us. *Adversity*, or suffering, is one of God's most powerful tools to shape us into his image. Also, the classic *spiritual disciplines* – including prayer, meditation, solitude, fasting, simplicity, sacrifice, worship, fellowship, confession, and submission; as well as *personal disciplines* – gaining control of the tongue, taking thoughts captive, controlling our appetite, managing time, and establishing personal convictions – are God's means of shaping our character. These will be explored in later lessons.

Through spiritual training, thinking and behaving like Christ in every circumstance of life gradually become easier and more habitual. Through disciplined training, Christ's image in us becomes natural and permanently etched in our character.

When my wife, Becky, and I were in Bible school, we lived in a little apartment next to an elderly Christian couple, Mr. and Mrs. Foust. What a testimony of patience and joy they were to us! Mrs.

¹⁸ Matt Friedman, *Discipleship* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 2017), 40.

¹⁹ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” *John Wesley's 52 Standard Sermons*, paragraphs 9,10.

Foust was a complete invalid whose health had been declining for ten years, but her husband cared for her day after day with tenderness, affection, and radiant joy. In those days, I compared myself to men like Mr. Foust and many of my seasoned professors. Their character seemed so high and out of reach for me. Would I ever possess their quality of love, courage, and patience? What I didn't realize was how many years, even decades, these men had practiced the Christian life. They had traveled further because they had been in training so much longer.

Spiritual discipline is vital to success in the Christian life, and without it we should not be surprised when we fail in a moment of temptation. This is why Paul admonished Timothy to "exercise yourself toward godliness." Peter also urges us, "Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁰ What he is saying is that the virtues of Christ will not be fastened to our character except through diligent effort.

C. Spiritual training brings freedom and delight begins.

When, by the Holy Spirit, we've trained ourselves to be completely satisfied with God, we are truly free. When we're free from simply following the impulses of our bodies – if we've learned to submit every natural appetite to God, for a greater enjoyment of him – we are free. When we are without material things, or even suffer, but are still contented with Jesus, we are free. Paul's self-discipline had produced this kind of freedom. He writes:

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.²¹

Through the soul training of adversity, the disciplines, and personal discipline, our souls will be set free to be and to do what pleases God. An artist's brush strokes become free and easy through training. The athlete competes with skillful motions because of countless hours spent in physical conditioning, practice, and constant repetition. The teacher speaks with ease and confidence because of time spent in prayer and in the mastery of his topic. The musician performs as freely and beautifully as her years of practice have prepared her for. And the mature Christian manifests the life of Christ in the most challenging circumstances of life because day after day, month after month, and year after year, he trains himself toward it, by the grace of God.

What happens when discipline is missing?

When discipline is missing, the artist becomes less skilled, mistakes are more common, and his art is less satisfying; the athlete becomes less agile, moves less freely, stumbles more often and under-achieves. When discipline is missing in the Christian life, we are unskilled in our Christian

²⁰ 2 Peter 1:5-8.

²¹ Philippians 4:11-13.

walk. We stumble more often. Our relationship with the Spirit is sporadic. Mistakes are more common, life less satisfying, relationships less grace-full, and our walk with God is less fruitful.

We don't hear much talk about a disciplined Christian life in this generation. Why? Because we want our spirituality easily and quickly. Some Christians want *spiritual magic*! We want to wave our hands in the air and have all the spirituality we need. Like spoiled children, we have very little appetite for anything hard – anything too demanding, rigorous, or painful. We forget Jesus' call to his disciples: "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me."²²

Disappointment with the Christian life is not the fault of the Christian life but our own faulty expectations. Too often we wait for God to instantly transform us into godliness! However, God is not interested in spiritual magic but in raising up conditioned spiritual soldiers, conditioned spiritual workmen, and conditioned spiritual athletes – men and women who can win the fight, complete their God-given assignments, and win the race. Later in this course, you will be instructed in both classic and personal disciplines and encouraged to implement them in your daily life, all for the sake of becoming more like Christ.

3. The third building block of transformation is participation in Christian community.

Spiritual formation must involve the Christian community (engagement in a local church fellowship). It is impossible to overestimate the key role the body of Christ – his church – plays in our spiritual formation. It is impossible to overestimate how spiritually impoverished and deformed Christians become who are not enriched and beautified by the body of Christ.

Through participation in the family of God, our character is formed. Through the life of the church, I gain the practice I need to become skillful in living the life of Jesus Christ. No man is an island; anyone who isolates himself from the nurture, fellowship, ministry, protection, and discipline of the people of God cannot fully share in the joyful union with God. God is Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and has dwelt together in perfect harmony and fellowship for all eternity. As people made in his image, we were made for one another. We were made for relationships. We were not made to isolate ourselves from one another, but to nurture one another toward the image of Christ.

I read about a pastor who visited a farmer who hadn't attended Sunday services for several weeks. As they sat together in front of a fireplace, the man told the pastor that he didn't feel like he needed church. "I can talk to God better out in the field," he said. The pastor said nothing; but while the farmer continued to talk about how he didn't need the fellowship of other Christians, the pastor rolled a burning log out of the fire, away from the other burning logs, and let it sit alone on the hearth. Very soon the log began to cool, and then the fire went out! The farmer understood the unspoken message and came to church the next Sunday!

²² Luke 9:23.

We will never become what God wants us to be alone. The example, spiritual fellowship, counsel, and gifts of the body of Christ are vital to healthy spiritual formation. Christian community helps to form me in at least these ways:

- A. Christian community provides me with a spiritual family, without which I have no place to belong or true acceptance, no care, and no encouragement.**
- B. Christian community provides me with biblical instruction, without which I cannot be nourished in God's Word.**
- C. Christian community often provides the pressure I need to seek change.**
- D. Christian community provides me with spiritual accountability.**
- E. Christian community provides the support and strength I need to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil.**
- F. Christian community provides me with practical opportunities to serve, to exercise my spiritual gifts.**
- G. Through Christian community, the Great Commission is carried out.**

4. The building blocks of transformation are set in place by the Holy Spirit.

Formation into the image of Jesus Christ is only possible by the aid of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

A. The Spirit convicts.

“And when he has come, he will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16:8).

B. The Spirit cleanses and empowers.

“And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

C. The Spirit confirms our faith in Christ.

“Now he who keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us” (1 John 3:24).

“In him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians 1:13).

D. The Spirit conforms us to Christ's image.

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

E. The Spirit crucifies the deeds of the body.

“For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13).

“This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16).

F. The Spirit communicates.

“So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law” (Luke 2:27; see also 4:1).

G. The Spirit controls.

“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18).

H. The Spirit makes us aware of our adoption by God.

“And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6).

I. The Spirit makes us charitable.

We can't even love on our own but need the love “poured out” by the Holy Spirit (Rom.5:5).

As we seek to be formed into the image of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is to us what the ocean is to the fish! To a fish, the ocean is essential for life. To a fish, the ocean is everything – his breath, his food, his drink, his home! The ocean is where a fish plays and hunts and spawns. If the fish were to decide that he'd rather be on the beach, he wouldn't last long.

To be “in the Spirit” simply means that he has been sent by Jesus to be our indwelling source of life and power and illumination and wisdom, and outside of him we are dead – just as the fish is dead who dwells outside the ocean! Without the Holy Spirit, the image of Christ will never be formed in us.

Conclusion

When fitted together these building blocks will enable us to be formed into the image of Christ.

Lesson Assignments for Next Class Meeting

1. Study the diagram and chart thoroughly and be ready to explain it to the class.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the Scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.

Test on Lesson 2

1. Draw and explain the spiritual formation diagram and chart presented in lesson 2, complete with Scripture references.
2. Be prepared to give an oral presentation of this diagram to the rest of the class.

6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.