

# HOW DOES A DISCIPLE'S CHARACTER CHANGE TO BECOME LIKE CHRIST?

"And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

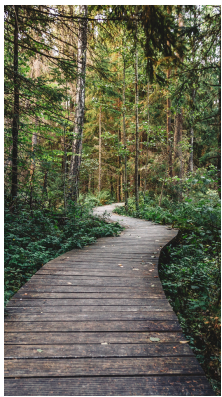


It is the character of the **inner person** that generates our outward responses and actions. "A good person brings good things out of the good stored up in her heart, and an evil person brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." (Luke 6:45).

Disciples become like Christ as His actions, thoughts and feelings become **the things we want** to do or have. We can't become like Him just through willpower – few people change significantly like this.

Character change happens in **two areas** (mind and heart), through the **practices** we live by, and in an environment of **community**.

## THE TWO AREAS OF CHARACTER CHANGE: THE RENEWING OF OUR MINDS



Jesus' first call was for people to **change their way of thinking** – to "**repent**". What we think about **shapes** us. The more we think about something, the more it becomes a **natural** part of the way we understand reality. Paul said, "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus".

(Philippians 2:5 "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Colossians 3:2)

The focus of Jesus' teaching was to help people **see the world as God sees it**. His teaching always helps people to be given a vision of the goodness of life God's way.

Our thought patterns are like the development of a footpath in a field. When people first start walking through an overgrown field it is hard work, and the path is barely visible. But over time, the more we walk that way, the easier and more visible the path becomes.

In the same way, **the more our minds are focussed on God's words, the more easily we are to experience ourselves and the world as He sees us.**

## THE TWO AREAS OF CHARACTER CHANGE: THE CHANGING OF OUR INNERMOST SELVES (HEARTS).

The biblical centre of where the deepest desires that shape us come from is the **heart**.

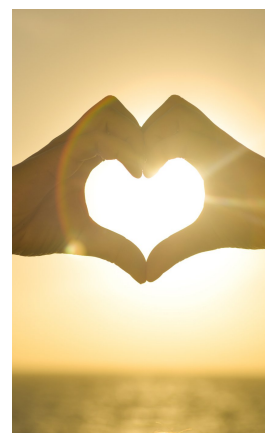
We might call it the "will" - **the part of us that wills things or controls us**.

There is an "automatic" and immediate aspect of our will, driven by appetites. (The New Testament calls this the "flesh").

But our "heart" is the deeper "reflective" will – the place where we sometimes "want to want" things. **It's where we want to do the right thing.**

While our "flesh" might want to eat that éclair, the deeper will of our heart wants to diet in order to be healthy. It's where our character is born.

To be a disciple is to **let the character of Jesus' will become our will**. But becoming like Christ in our will and character is much less about what we do, and much more about what God does in us. In fact, becoming like Christ always takes more than our own will power. Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)



## THE PRACTICES (OR HABITS) WE LIVE BY

Everyone is formed by the habits they live by – **your habits become your character**.

Just as long before a footballer takes a World Cup penalty, it is the hours and hours of repetitive practice that have made her into the kind of person who can naturally aim well, so it is the everyday habits which open us up to God over a long period which make us **into people who naturally want what God wants**.

It is things we do regularly which shape the two areas of character change - they focus the attention of our minds, and set the **direction** of what we love.

So, if we are tempted by something, what will count is whether, long before then, we have been shaped by in our mind and heart by habits through which we are **allowing God to change us into someone who wants to turn away from it**. Only then will we have the “soul reflex” to be able to say no to what we want in the moment, and yes to what we really want in our hearts.

God can change character instantly, but **most of us only grow in becoming Christlike over time** through the process of day-to-day life as we **make space for God**.

Lasting character grows **indirectly**. Habits or practices are “things we do regularly by effort in order to be able to do something by no effort.” We are **training**, not trying.



## WHAT IS MY PART?



God will only change us to the extent that we are willing to allow Him. In any kind of relationship, both parties have a part to play.

By adopting the practices of Christ, we are playing our part – creating the conditions for God’s Spirit to change us. We must do something, but we rely on God to provide what is needed to change us.

Sleep is an example of the combination of our habit and God’s work in us. We cannot make ourselves fall asleep. Sleep is an act of surrender. We can only create the conditions for sleep.

“Without Him we can’t, but without us He won’t.”

## THE ENVIRONMENT OF CHARACTER CHANGE: COMMUNITY

The offering of ourselves to others in a community in which our true characters can be **revealed**, but also **nurtured** through encouragement.

Community shows us **where we can change**. It will change us if relationships are genuine and close enough to reveal the parts of us which need to change, but which we **might be unconscious of when we are on our own**.

Community helps us grow and mature in Christ by being a place of encouragement and love, healing our wounds, celebrating our progress. Those who stay in community, grow in character.



"Jesus is a teacher who doesn't just inform our intellect but forms our very loves. He isn't content to simply deposit new ideas into your mind; he is after nothing less than your wants, your loves, your longings."

James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*

We all live by habits, whether good or bad. These habits are all life-giving, beautiful and character-changing ways to be with God, become like Christ, and join in with His Spirit. A set of practices for a fully human life which we look at throughout Way of Discipleship.

Some renew our minds as they focus our thought-life.

Some open up our “hearts” by giving God space to shape our desires.

Some take us away from others and our “automatic appetites” so we can focus on giving space for God, some take us towards others so we can draw close to Him together.”

Being with God: Prayer Meditation Worship Celebration Hearing God in the Bible Study Holy Communion Sabbath Stillness Solitude

Becoming like Christ: Having the balance of up-in-out relationships. Generosity Simple living Confession

Joining in with the Spirit: Hospitality Intercession Fasting Sharing faith

What practice might help me focus my mind on God’s thoughts?

What practice might give space for God’s Spirit to change my desires?

Who is helping me really see my character, and encouraging me on the journey?