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Introduction to Spiritual Formation

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*Applying the Message of Outrageous Love, Transforming Power*

In the book *Outrageous Love, Transforming Power*, Terry Wardle gives Christians a method for becoming mature in their religion. The premise of the book is that most Christians today are immature in their beliefs. This means that Christians confuse following the rules of the church with actually living the way Christ wanted us to. He refers to Paul's message to the Galatians (18). Paul tells the Galatians that "circumcision or uncircumcision" does not matter; what matters is that people become new in Christ. What Paul means is that following rules is not enough. What is important is that we are transformed.

To apply this to my own life, this means that going to church or praying every day or following the commandments is not enough. I must become more like Jesus. My spirit must be different. Wardle gives a list of eight characteristics of Jesus that we must adopt if we are to become mature Christians. One that stood out to me is "Jesus was committed to community as a context for growth and ministry." To me, this seemed to mean that in order to become mature in our faith, we have to decide to serve others. Serving others will help our spirits grow. Another one I thought about is "Jesus offered His wounds as a source of ministry to others." Of course I know that this refers to the fact that Jesus died for our sins and to give us eternal life. However, I also think this applies to the masks we wear. I think this means that we should be open about our suffering and use it to connect with others. Knowing that others suffer means we feel less alone in our suffering. Lastly, it says that Jesus "prioritized character over behavior." This fits in with

the idea that it is not enough to conform to the rules, we must also live our faith and act the way Jesus would want us to. The following chapters take the reader through all eight of Jesus' qualities and show how to apply them to our lives.

In chapter 2, Wardle discusses identity. He says that many people look for their identity, their way to be somebody, through material rewards like money or power or fame. He says that these are not satisfying because they can disappear at any time. He also says that we do not need to find a way to be somebody: we already have identities as God's beloved children. I definitely agree that in our world today many people look to owning things as a way to feel fulfilled. Things cannot make us feel good about ourselves. We have to feel confident that we are important even if we are not rich or powerful. Everyone is important to God.

Chapter 3 gives advice about how to develop a more intimate relationship with God. I was especially struck by a couple of suggestions that he makes about how to become closer to God. He says that we have to give time to God if we want to develop a closer relationship and that we have to be attentive to God's presence within every moment of the day. This last point reminded me of a sermon that my pastor gave a number of months ago. She discussed a book called *Liturgy of the Ordinary* by Tish Harrison Warren (my mother bought the book, so that's how I remember it). This book is about how to keep God in your life during the most ordinary moments of the day like washing dishes or making the bed. I think this idea goes along with what people call mindfulness, being present in the moment and perceiving God standing alongside you.

Chapter 4 is about community. In this chapter, the author talks about a time of great darkness for him which he was able to overcome with the support of a caring community of people who were committed to Christianity. He says that in order to grow into mature Christians,

we need to have a community of people who share our values and journey with us. I started to think about how this journey is impacted by Covid-19. We have all spent so much time in isolation these past few months. This chapter made me realize that this kind of isolation is damaging to our spirits. Finding a group to travel with on the Christian journey is not easy when everyone is locked in their houses.

Chapter 5 concerns character. The author notes that there is often a difference between what Christians say they believe and how they act. In order for us to grow as Christians, we have to have our beliefs match our actions. This made me think about how someone in my church (one of the most active members!) was arrested for sharing child pornography on the church's computer. This is an extreme case of beliefs not matching actions, but there are also less obvious examples like how people say they care about the poor but they don't do anything to help them. I personally have worked at soup kitchens, played concerts for homeless people, and contributed to the local food pantry. Even so, I know I could do more in order to really act out my beliefs.

All of us are to some extent broken. Wardle writes about some extreme examples in chapter 6. He suggests that the path to healing is for us to open up honestly to God to share the things that have caused us pain. He says that by allowing Jesus to touch the places of deep wounding in our lives, we can both heal and use this as a way to help others heal as well. The point is we should not disguise the fact that we have had suffering in our past. This honesty will heal us and also help us make connections to others. I know that there are painful things that happened to me that I don't like to talk about. (I shared this in my mask project.) But Wardle suggests that this is keeping me immature as a Christian. Opening up will help me become more mature.

Chapter 7 describes Christianity as being completely opposite of what the world thinks is important. The world values being powerful; Christianity is about service. People want to get things; Christianity is about giving. Weakness is strength. Victory comes through surrender. It seems like this is the hardest thing to grasp. Christianity is so out of step with what we are told to value by the media, that it is hard to imagine embracing this way of living. A person really has to break free of the messages around him to be able to live this way.

Wardle says that if we follow these steps, we can become empowered by the Holy Spirit. It really is possible for us to have the Holy Spirit dwell in us the way it did in Jesus. If we allow ourselves to become mature Christians, to live our lives the way Jesus did, we will be able to show others a path to this as well. Wardle uses the word “authority,” but he does not mean that we should boss people around. Instead he means that we can speak with confidence about our Christian journey and help others on their way to becoming mature Christians.

This book is a roadmap to how to progress on our faith journeys. The steps that Wardle outlines to becoming more Christ-like are not necessarily easy -- in fact, they are quite difficult. But, if we manage to follow them, we will lead more fulfilling lives. It certainly seems worth trying.