

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

SIX SESSIONS

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE LIFE
YOU'VE
ALWAYS
WANTED

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE

It's "Morphing" Time

SESSION ONE

The good news as Jesus preached it is that now it is possible for ordinary men and women to live in the presence and under the power of God . . . It is not about the minimal entrance requirements for getting into heaven when you die. It is about the glorious redemption of human life — your life. It's morphing time.

—John Ortberg

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. To be *transformed* means to be changed, and transformation is taking place all around us all the time. What examples of transformation — of any sort — come to mind?
2. What is required for transformations such as those you have mentioned to occur?
3. Although we use the term *spiritual transformation*, we often use it casually without giving it much thought. Describe what *spiritual transformation* means to you.
4. What do you consider to be the indicators of spiritual transformation? How can we tell if another person has experienced a spiritual transformation?

VIDEO OBSERVATIONS

Life: disappointment and hope

We shall "morph" indeed

Pseudo-transformation

Trying harder versus training wisely

VIDEO HIGHLIGHTS

1. What is the hope of the Christian gospel as John Ortberg describes it?
2. An important concept in *The Life You've Always Wanted* is that we are always being transformed; we are always changing for better or for worse. This happens physically and, although it's less obvious, spiritually. How might some of our daily practices cause us to be “formed” spiritually in one direction or another?
3. Why did Jesus so strongly challenge pseudo-transformation and the rabbis' “boundary markers” regarding dietary laws, the Sabbath, and circumcision?
4. In what ways does pseudo-transformation creep into churches today, and what are its damaging effects? Can you identify any “boundary markers” in your church?

LARGE GROUP EXPLORATION

Pseudo-Transformation vs. Morphing

When our lives are not marked by genuine, God-directed spiritual change, we tend to look for substitute ways to distinguish ourselves from those we consider to be less spiritual. We adopt boundary markers—highly visible, relatively superficial practices intended to quickly separate the “insiders” from the “outsiders.” These boundary markers may include conformity to specified forms of dress and speech, adherence to certain rules of behavior, participation in prescribed activities, and so on. They provide a false sense of security and superiority.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day focused a great deal of their attention on boundary markers. Many of their conflicts with Jesus occurred because Jesus took a radically different approach to assessing spirituality. Instead of focusing on visible indicators of spiritual transformation, Jesus focused on what was happening in the heart. His concern was whether or not people were being transformed and growing in their love of God and love of people. His concern was whether or not they were “morphing” into the masterpieces God created them to be.

Let's consider these opposing perspectives on spiritual transformation.

1. Read Matthew 12:1–2; 15:1–2; Luke 18:11–12. Note the types of spiritual behaviors the religious leaders of Jesus' day considered important. What was Jesus' assessment of their spirituality? (See Mark 7:5–8.)

2. What did Jesus say that no doubt shocked the religious leaders? (Read Matthew 21:28–32.)

3. Instead of focusing on external religious practices, what did Jesus emphasize? (Read Luke 10:25–28; John 13:34–35.)

4. What is the evidence of true spiritual transformation in our lives? (Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–7.)

5. Now let's consider "morphing." The word *morph* comes from the Greek word *morphoo*, which means "the inward and real formation of the essential nature of a person." The term was used to describe the formation and growth of an embryo in a mother's body.

The kind of spiritual transformation God wants each of us to experience is a complete "remaking" of our nature. He wants us to see, feel, think, and do what Jesus would if he were in our unique place. What makes such a transformation possible, and why is it important? (See Romans 6:3–14; 2 Corinthians 5:17–20; Ephesians 2:10.)

6. Another form of the word *morph* is used in the phrase “until Christ is formed in you” in Galatians 4:19. This word, *summorphizo*, means “to have the same form as another, to shape a thing into a durable likeness.”

Our spiritual growth is to be a molding process, a process whereby we are shaped in the image of Christ. Notice what the following verses reveal about the process of spiritual growth God accomplishes within each Christian.

a. Galatians 4:19

b. Colossians 3:5–10

c. 2 Corinthians 3:18

7. In Romans 12:2, Paul used the word *metamorphoo*, from which we get the English word *metamorphosis*. The emphasis is that we don't simply learn to *do* things in a new way, we *become* the kind of people who *are* that way. How does this transformation come about?

The Impact of Pseudo-Transformation

We might be tempted to wonder if morphing makes any practical, daily-life differences as opposed to pseudo-transformation. Consider the perspective author Sheldon Vanauken offers in his critically acclaimed book *A Severe Mercy*: The strongest argument for Christianity is Christians, when they are drawing life from God. The strongest argument against Christianity? Also Christians, when they become exclusive, self-righteous, and complacent.

Consider, too, the warning signs of pseudo-transformation that appear in Matthew 23, where Jesus denounced the religious leaders of his day for their lack of true spiritual life. As you identify these warning signs, think about the ways these signs show up among Christians today.

Matthew 23 Warning Signs of Pseudo-Transformation

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| Verses 1–4 | Demanding obedience from others, but not practicing what they preach; burdening other people with the pursuit of exhaustive, external rules and practices yet not helping to bear the burden. |
| Verses 5–8 | Doing their spiritual duties so that other people will notice and honor them; expecting others to honor them; taking pride in their knowledge, position, and influence. |
| Verses 13–15 | Making it difficult for other people to enter (and in some cases preventing people from entering) God's kingdom; refusing to enter the kingdom of heaven themselves. |
| Verse 23 | Following the letter of the law but violating the spirit of the law such as by tithing every little thing to God, yet neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness. |
| Verses 24–29 | Preoccupied with <i>appearing</i> to be spiritual; cleaning up the outside, but doing nothing to clean the mess on the inside; being hypocritical. |

SMALL GROUP EXPLORATION

Training for Spiritual Growth

We all know that training is necessary if we want to succeed in physical competition. It is also true that training is necessary if we are serious about growing in our relationship with God. Learning to think, feel, and act like Jesus is at least as demanding as learning to run a marathon or play the piano. We can't succeed simply by trying hard. We can't succeed on willpower alone. We need to prepare ourselves to receive God's transforming work within us. We need to train wisely.

1. When the apostle Paul wrote about training to run a race (1 Corinthians 9:24–27), he and his readers knew exactly what he was talking about. Corinth was the site of the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympics in prominence in ancient Greece. Paul probably visited Corinth during the games of AD 51 and may have made tents for the visitors and contestants. What is the spiritual “prize” for which Paul ran, and why did he take spiritual training so seriously? (See 1 Corinthians 9:25–27.)
2. What did Paul encourage his young protégé, Timothy, to do? Why? (See 1 Timothy 4:7–8.)

3. We may think that following Jesus and growing spiritually come about automatically and easily rather than through dedicated training, but that is not what Jesus taught. Read Mark 8:34–35 and Luke 14:27–30, 33. Notice what Jesus told the crowds that followed him about the path of spiritual growth.

4. We need to train ourselves for spiritual growth, but there's a big difference between fist-clenching, teeth-gritting exertion to become “more spiritual” and the transformed life Jesus offers. The following passages are essential to our understanding of how training for authentic spiritual transformation works.
 - a. Read Matthew 11:28–30 and Romans 8:11. Notice how pursuing the life Jesus offers differs from the demands of pseudo-transformation.

 - b. What do we learn about our ability to pursue spiritual growth from 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 and Philippians 4:13?

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Let's talk a bit more about spiritual disciplines. How does John Ortberg's definition of spiritual disciplines differ from how you have thought of them? In what ways does this definition change your behavior or how you approach and what you expect from your spiritual life?

What Is a Spiritual Discipline?

John Ortberg defines a spiritual discipline as any activity that can help us gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it. Spiritual disciplines are a means of appropriating or growing toward the life God graciously offers. They allow us to do what we cannot do by will-power alone. So practices such as reading Scripture and praying are important not because they prove how spiritual we are but because God can use them to lead us into the kingdom life he offers.

2. Søren Kierkegaard once said, "Now, with God's help, I shall become myself." In what ways is this an accurate representation of authentic spiritual transformation?

3. Why do you think we are prone to substitute pseudo-transformation for authentic transformation? Why is it so easy to fall into the trap of saying or doing things we think spiritual people are supposed to say or do? Of hiding our sin? Of working hard to make people think we're loving instead of actually loving them?

PERSONAL JOURNEY: To Do Now

1. *We aren't who we want to be; our hope is to be transformed.* God created us to be his masterpieces, yet we fall short, loving God too little and sin too much. Caught between disappointment and hope, we long for the life he appointed us to live. Our hope is that our fallen state isn't all there is and that the transformation promised in the Christian gospel really is possible.

In *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg mentioned Popeye the Sailor Man, who said, "I yam what I yam." Popeye seemed sad, aware of his shortcomings and not anticipating much growth or change. Think about your disappointments honestly. In what way(s) have you struggled between disappointment and hope?

We all face disappointment in ourselves, such as not being the parents we want to be or "loving sin too much and God too little." Which disappointments are most painful to you?

Describe the spiritual hope to which you look forward.

2. *The primary goal of spiritual life is human transformation—real change in the essential nature of the person.*

God is in the business of transforming ordinary people like us so that we express his character and goodness in our whole being. This is real transformation from the inside out—learning to think as Jesus would think, to feel what he'd feel, to perceive what he'd perceive, and therefore to do what he would do. It is a far cry from pseudo-transformation, the adherence to external rules or behaviors intended to identify us to others as "transformed" people.

If someone asked you, "How is your spiritual life going?" how would you respond? What would you say about yourself that would be impressive? What would you hesitate to reveal?

What standard do you use to evaluate your spiritual condition?

3. *If we are serious about spiritual transformation, we must not merely "try harder," we must "train wisely."*

Growth in our relationship with God results from training in the spiritual disciplines. It happens whenever we become intensely serious about learning from Jesus how to arrange our lives. Spiritual disciplines are the practices we live by that enable us to do what we cannot do by will-

power alone. These practices help us grow in the ability to love God and people — the true indicators of spiritual well-being.

Would you say that you are *training* to become more like Christ, or *trying* to be more like Christ? Why?

John Ortberg emphasizes that we can't transform ourselves; God transforms us. How would you describe the difference between spiritual training and self-transformation? In what way(s) have you attempted self-transformation?

You will have the opportunity to further develop a personal spiritual training plan as this series progresses. For now, write down a few ideas of what spiritual training might involve for you.

PERSONAL JOURNEY: TO DO ON YOUR OWN

Set aside some time to reflect on the following questions:

1. In *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg wrote, "Your story is the story of transformation. You will not always be as you are now; the day is coming when you will be something incomparably better—or worse."

In which direction are you presently being transformed?

Is this where you want to go? Why or why not?

2. It is not always easy to know when we are settling for pseudo-transformation rather than real transformation, but the burden of trying to satisfy the demands of a superficial, boundary-marker oriented spirituality will exhaust us. The following questions can help you identify signs of an inauthentic spirituality. This self-assessment is for your eyes only. Be as honest as possible so you can clear the slate and open yourself up to God's transforming work in your life.

In what way(s) am I preoccupied with *appearing* to be spiritual?

In which area(s) am I becoming judgmental, exclusive, or proud?

To what degree am I becoming less approachable to other people?

In what way(s) am I becoming weary of pursuing spiritual growth?

In what way(s) do I measure my spiritual life by superficial standards?

Which "boundary markers" do I use to set myself apart from other people?

Now pray that God will guide you as you think about your life today and the life you've always wanted. Ask him to speak to your heart and begin transforming you through the remaining sessions of this study.