

Why Self-Optimization Is Sabotaging Your Soul

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[0 : 0 0] I'll sleep when I'm dead. I have so many plates spinning. I'm working myself to the bone. Each of these phrases reflects the myth of self-optimization! or the relentless pursuit of becoming our best selves.

Just like a computer constantly needs upgrading or a new iPhone comes out every year, we can be pressured to constantly level up and become the optimal version of ourselves.

Ads encourage us to adopt the latest fitness trend or diet fad. An endless assortment of products promise to clear our skin or improve our physical appearance.

And new productivity tools pledge to increase our output with reduced effort. And in this city, hustle culture rewards exhaustion as a status symbol and prioritizes climbing the political or corporate ladder over rest and margin.

It's always that next promotion or that next title change that will mean we finally arrived. And we are also taught to self-optimize our faith. There are so many shoulds that we encounter on a daily basis.

[1 : 1 4] We should read our Bible more. We should pray more. We should go to church more. And letting something slip through the cracks creates this persistent sense that we are never enough for God.

And I struggle with this drive toward self-optimization every day. Don't know if that's something I can do here. Okay. I just wanted to double check.

Yeah. I get locked up with believing that my worth is tied up with my ability to produce. And I love the dopamine hit of crossing an item off my to-do list.

Yeah. It feels really good, especially when everything on my list for the day is crossed off. And I love accolades for a job well done. But I beat myself up whenever I make a mistake.

And in my spiritual life, I feel guilty whenever I fall behind on my Bible reading or I don't pray as much as I think I should. And there is nothing wrong with this desire to improve or grow.

[2 : 2 1] That is part of being human. The issue is that self-optimization addresses the 10% of our lives that is focused on doing and leaves the remaining 90% of our being untouched.

And spiritual formation offers an antidote for this drive toward self-optimization. According to Christian mystic Henry Nowen, spiritual formation is the gradual development of the heart of God in the life of a human being.

The end goal of spiritual formation has never been about what we do or becoming perfect in God's sight. But it's about who we are becoming in Christ.

So during this sermon series, we will unmask the illusion that our worth is tied up in doing all the right things. And we'll dispel the darkness of shame and anxiety by gazing upon Jesus and discovering who God really is.

And when we create space in our lives to contemplate the character of God, we can recognize our own identity in Christ. And we begin to walk in the light of a faith that is rooted in discernment, margin, rest, and limits.

[3 : 36] And this is the path to true union with God. Embracing who God is and allowing God to transform us slowly from the inside out. So I want to explore these ideas through the lens of the transfiguration.

You can turn in your Bibles if you have a phone or a physical one to Luke chapter 9 verses 28 through 36. And the words will also be on the screen. About eight days after Jesus said these things, he took Peter, John, and James and went up on a mountain to pray.

And as he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes flashed white like lightning. And two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him.

Peter and those with him were almost overcome by sleep.

But they managed to stay awake and saw his glory as well as the two men with him. And as the two men were about to leave Jesus, Peter said to him, Master, it's good that we're here.

[4 : 51] We should construct three shrines for you. One for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. But he didn't know what he was saying. Peter was still speaking when a cloud overshadowed them.

As they entered the cloud, they were overcome with awe. And then a voice from the cloud said, This is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him.

Even as the voice spoke, Jesus was found alone. They were speechless and at the time told no one what they had seen. The transfiguration of Jesus is the perfect foundation for our sermon series.

At the peak of Jesus' ministry, Jesus invited his disciples into a divine encounter where the cloud became clear. And this story provides a powerful counterpoint to the myth of self-optimization and beckons us toward transformation.

In the transfiguration, I want to point out five insights about spiritual formation. And these insights roughly align with an ancient spiritual pathway that has been traveled by Christian mystics for centuries.

[6 : 04] The path of purgation, illumination, and union. And in this sermon series, we will break down these ideas in more detail and discover how God doesn't want us to only bring the right behavior to God, but our whole beings.

So first, spiritual formation begins when we create space for God's renewal. Right before we meet Jesus in this passage, he'd been going nonstop, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, proclaiming God's mercy.

But Jesus doesn't get seduced by this persistent allure to keep doing more for God. Instead, he prioritizes being with God. The mention of eight days here is intentional.

Historically, the eighth day has been considered a day of new creation. And it also comes directly after the Sabbath, the day of rest. New creation is only possible when you create the space and the time to rest.

Jesus decides to go up a mountain. And for Jesus, as a Jew from first century Palestine, mountains were sites of profound spiritual transformation. But climbing the mountain meant that Jesus needed to take a step back from his hectic life.

[7 : 23] For Christian mystics of the centuries, this step is known as purgation. Or the practice of saying no to certain habits, practices, and activities so that we can say yes to a deeper union with God.

This requires us to take inventory of our lives and discover how we can create space for a true encounter with God. And slowing down and creating margin is not about neglecting our responsibilities, but about prioritizing our relationship with God in the midst of our daily lives.

Maybe. And like Jesus, you can't drop everything, climb a mountain. But we can all find moments of rest in the middle of things. And this looks different for each of us.

For me, I often find those moments of rest when I am walking to work and listening to music. Or when I am in the shower and letting my mind lie fallow and letting the thoughts just percolate.

Or when I am listening to the words of my favorite worship songs. But for you, it might be taking a few deep breaths in the car or on your metro commute home before you go inside to cook dinner for your family.

[8 : 36] Or it's stretching at your desk after a long meeting that could have been an email. Or it's wandering through the park without your phone on a sunny day and hearing the birds instead of the relentless pings of your phone.

These moments open up new ways of being with God. And throughout this sermon series, we will explore how practices like Sabbath, sacred self-care, and boundaries enable us not just to do, but to be.

And that leads me to my second insight. Spiritual formation enables us to see more clearly into the true nature of reality.

When Jesus began to pray, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes flashed white like lightning. This moment hailed Moses' encounter on Mount Sinai, where he too radiated God's presence.

The ancient Israelites could not look at Moses when he descended the mountain. But the disciples were able to look at Jesus face to face. For most of Jesus' ministry, people debated his identity.

[9 : 46] Was he the second Moses? Was he Elijah? The resurrected John the Baptist? And the transfiguration revealed Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, fully human and fully divine, the one they had been waiting for.

And this is known as illumination, or the process where the clouds part, and the reality shines through. And this revelation was about who Jesus is, but it was also about God's ongoing plan for a restored relationship with God's people and all creation.

The pioneers of their faith, Moses and Elijah, appeared to speak with Jesus. And they realized that Jesus was in fact the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.

In this moment of communion, they learned about Jesus' mission, where he would be crucified, die, and rise again on the third day. But the transfiguration reveals yet more than that.

Second Corinthians chapter 3 verse 18 talks about how we are called to a similar transformation. All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of God as if we were looking in a mirror.

[11 : 05] We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory. This comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. There is no mention in this passage about all the right behavior or crossing everything off on a spiritual checklist.

Instead, when we discover the glory of God and we gaze upon his presence, we are subtly transformed. But this power doesn't come from our own ability to perform for God, but from God working through us.

When we learn to abide in God's presence, we enter the final phase of the spiritual pathway, union, where we become more like Christ living within us.

And a key practice that guides us toward that union is this idea of discernment. And the way I like to think about discernment is learning to see how God sees.

I know that each of us in this room, watching online, people who will be at the evening service, we're all facing huge questions about our lives. Should we stay in D.C.?

[12 : 17] Should we start a family? What job should I have? Should I stay with this person? How do I respond when the world seems to fall apart around us? None of these questions have easy answers.

But in this sermon series, we will discover how gazing at Jesus, learning to see how he sees, can help us discern the path forward. Like Elijah on the mountain, maybe God is speaking to us in a still, small voice.

And like the ancient Israelites wandering in the wilderness, maybe we can see God in the cloud, in what is opaque at first. We will dive into this topic of discernment and discuss the conundrum of calling through the stories of Joseph and others.

But learning how to listen to God's voice is easier said than done when we're constantly barraged with pings on our phones and a 24-7 news cycle. And this leads me to my third insight.

Spiritual formation keeps us awake in a world that wants us asleep. The reaction to the disciples, of the disciples in this passage, it cracks me up.

[13 : 37] Here Jesus is. He's just casually yapping about God's plan for all humanity with Moses and Elijah, two prophets of immense significance. And the disciples can't even keep their eyes open.

But this response is too relatable. In our society, we're constantly barraged with endless stimulation.

We are facing a moment of intense political turmoil at the same time that we are dealing with the daily stressors of life. And this is tiring. It is so hard to be on all the time.

And I definitely feel that after the week that we've had. But the problem is that when we numb ourselves to the stress and the grind of daily life, we can also numb ourselves to the reality of what God might be doing in our midst.

Imagine if the disciples had stayed asleep. They would have missed their hopes being realized. Staying awake in such a broken world is a serious thing.

[14 : 44] There have been so many moments over the last few months where I have gotten home from work so exhausted that I just collapse on the couch and I can't do anything for the rest of the evening.

But in a city that is fueled by hustle, when we distract, numb, or crash out instead of experiencing true rest, that is a recipe for burnout that traps us in the very cycle that we are trying to escape.

But when we take a step back and allow ourselves to see what God is working in our midst, that allows us to see those tiny glimmers of hope.

And there are small ways for us to stay awake. Maybe we turn our phones off for half an hour and enjoy a dinner with a friend. Or we can turn to our neighbors when they're going through a tough time and offer comfort.

we can pay attention to the people we pass on the sidewalk. In this sermon series, we will explore how we can resist this temptation to fall asleep or numb out by adopting a slowed-down spirituality.

[15 : 52] And we'll discuss how paying attention opens ourselves up to what God is doing around us. And again, this isn't about doing more, but about being present enough to see the tiny shoots of God's plan bursting forth around us.

The fourth insight, spiritual formation resists the pressure to enshrine or memorialize our own revelation. Peter's response to the transfiguration highlights the alter-human tendency to try to preserve those moments of illumination, those moments of insight, so they can't be taken away.

He suggests that they build a shrine for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. And Peter is very relatable here. Who would want to leave a moment that is literally shining with God's presence?

Our pursuit of God can so often look like trying to collect those mountaintop experiences. I remember when I used to go on college retreats and I soaked in God's presence all weekend and by Sunday afternoon I never wanted to leave.

But most of our lives are not on the mountain. We inevitably have to descend into the valley of our regular lives. And the come down can be brutal. When I returned home from those mountaintop experiences, trying to manufacture that feeling of being on fire for God never worked.

[17 : 30] That is because our spiritual lives can't be enshrined or memorialized. The mountaintop experiences are merely the vista where we can see how God is showing up in the valley of our lives all along.

And this connects back to the idea of purgation. one dimension of it is saying no consciously to things so that we can say yes to God. But another dimension is what happens when we encounter traumatic experiences of deep loss.

Sometimes life forces us into a dark place where everything, even God, seems absent. And this is known as the dark night of the soul. And these moments cannot be optimized or Instagrammed.

Underneath the surface of our lives, we all have those events that have shaken up our faith in God. We all have hidden insecurities, fears, anxieties, tensions, griefs, that make the world seem dark and opaque.

And sharing those moments can be hard when we live in a society that tries to get us to look on the bright side or realize that God has a plan for everything. In those moments, sometimes our only prayer is, I don't know what's next, God, but I am still here.

[18 : 57] Part of spiritual formation is learning how to simply sit with God in those moments without trying to fix it, whitewash it, or optimize it for a shiny testimonial about God's goodness.

And when we recognize God's presence in those moments, that leads us into profound intimacy with God. And we will start to unpack these ideas next week when Pastor Anthony preaches about Moses in the dark night of the soul.

We will also explore later on in this series how we can bring the messy parts of our past, our trauma, our baggage, our ugly truths, into a spirituality that embraces our whole self and reveals God's character in affliction.

And I want to leave us with one final insight. Spiritual formation invites us into the slow work of listening and waiting for God.

After Peter offers to build trines for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, God declares, this is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him. And what happens after this is very fascinating to me.

[20 : 15] After witnessing the transfiguration, after literally hearing from God, they are speechless. They don't say anything to anyone.

And their actions after this moment makes me wonder if they were even listening in the first place. right after they descend the mountain, the disciples fail to heal a boy with an unclean spirit.

And then they bicker about who is the greatest. So, talk about missing the point. How could they experience a profound moment of revelation and not be changed by it?

As I was preparing for this sermon, I knew intellectually that self-optimization is a trap that leads us to thinking all of our worth is based on our usefulness.

But, I'll be very honest here that this week has been one of the busiest weeks I've had in a long time. I pulled several 12-hour days and there were times when I got so blinkered and so focused on accomplishing the next task that I didn't look up from my computer for hours.

[21 : 27] And when I surfaced to prepare for this sermon, I wondered, okay, here I am preaching about how self-optimization is bad, but I am in my life trying to optimize every single second that I have so I can complete everything on my to-do list.

So, talk about missing the point of my own sermon. But, I want to push back a little bit on that. When we have a moment of profound insight revelation, it can be tempting to try to optimize that moment immediately to turn our lives around and become a completely different person, to become the new, shiny, upgraded version of ourselves.

But this is, again, the trap of self-optimization. Our spiritual formation is not about being perfect in front of God. It is about moving toward God every single day.

the disciples still didn't get it when they denied Jesus and abandoned him at the cross. But after the resurrection, Peter leaped out of the boat and swam toward Jesus.

And then at Pentecost, they received the Holy Spirit and dedicated the rest of their lives to proclaiming God's more beautiful gospel. The transfiguration planted a seed, but it took the rest of their lives to taste the fruit of that moment.

[22 : 56] And our spiritual lives, yours and mine, are the same. If you fall straight into the trap of self-optimization or bite off more than you can chew, if you get sucked into the vortex of busyness, that is just human.

And I invite you in those moments to just lovingly turn your attention back toward God where you are already fully loved regardless of anything that you do or you don't do.

There is no rush to your spiritual formation. God is always inviting you into a deeper union, regardless of your struggles. So whether you're overwhelmed by your to-do list, facing big decisions about jobs or relationships, or wrestling with the trauma of your past, God invites you to simply sit and abide in their presence.

this is not about a single mountaintop experience, but about communing with God in every aspect of our lives. So as we move through this sermon series, please don't try to change everything all at once.

This is the myth of self-optimization. Instead, start small. Start by considering how God might be showing up in the daily reality of your life.

[24 : 16] maybe union from God looks like a moment on your metro commute where you settle into your body and take a few deep breaths. Or it's laughter with friends that bubbles over during happy hour.

Or it's that moment when you play with your cat or cuddle with your dog or you go on a long walk in nature. I invite you to discover how God is communing with you this week.

And as we embark on this 11-week journey, I just want to leave us with Jesus' promise to his disciples and to us. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Amen.