

In the Pathway of Grace

Luke 18:35-43

Introduction – Spiritual Disciplines: Burden or Blessing?

People come in all shapes and sizes. What can be said about our bodies is also true about our personalities. There are extroverts and introverts – outgoing and shy. Night owls come alive after dark and morning people are at their best when they get out of bed. Some people live in the world of ideas. Others relish handling and organizing data. Some personalities are oriented towards feelings while others process life logically. Some folks are spontaneous while others have to live within a plan. But when it comes to spiritual disciplines – the things we do that help us to mature in Christ – it seems that there are a few favored practices that everyone is supposed to do.

This has always been hard for me. Maybe I'm a rebel. I don't want to be pressed into someone else's mold. Aren't most of us like that? For much of my Christian life, I've read and been told that best Christians are those who rise early to spend time in Bible reading and prayer. And for most of that time, I've lived with a tremendous amount of guilt. I can count on my hand – going back to my earliest memories – the times I've woken up in the morning feeling alive and refreshed. I take that back. I can't count them on my hand. The number is actually "zero." Even today, it takes me about thirty minutes with at least four "snooze button" episodes to get out of bed. I'm just not all there in the morning until an hour or so after the alarm has gone off. My body just doesn't fit the pattern designed for spiritual growth, according to much of what I've been taught. And so I've felt guilty for much of my Christian life.

Don't raise your hand, but how many of you can relate to that guilt? Disciplines are essential to spiritual growth. It won't happen without them. But being loaded down with chronic guilt isn't going to make them happen and it isn't going to cultivate maturity either. It's more like hopelessness and resentment that God imposes standards on us that we are unable to fulfill.

In this morning's message and its follow-up in Sunday School next week, I want to show you a better way than the hopelessness of perennial guilt. At the same time, I hope to stimulate your

imagination and strengthen your intention to engage in spiritual disciplines that will match your make-up and help you to progress in your spiritual journey.

Our text is a bit different than usual this morning. Instead of a passage that offers specific teaching on our topic, we will use a New Testament story that illustrates an important truth about spiritual disciplines.

Scripture – The Blind Man on the Side of the Road – Luke 18:35-43

As [Jesus] drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” And he cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me recover my sight.” And Jesus said to him, “Recover your sight; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

Prayer

What Spiritual Disciplines Are Not

In a very profound way, we are all blind like the man in our story. Whether we know it or not, we all need Jesus. We all need to be healed. Sin has broken our soul – a soul made to live in close communion with our Maker – and we all need to be made whole. Disabled people in biblical times were dependent on the generous gifts of other people in order to survive. If you were lame or blind, you would park yourself near the well-traveled pathways of people in order to be noticed and ask for alms. But the blind man could have sat by the side of the Jericho road all his life without ever being healed. Sitting on the side of the road never gave anyone sight. His sight was a miraculous gift from Jesus.

In the same way, spiritual disciplines do not make us whole. Spiritual growth and maturity is a “grace” – a gift of God. We need to understand this or we will quickly turn the wonderful joy of spiritual disciplines into a legalistic burden which no one can bear. That’s what the Pharisees did. And Jesus told his followers that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees that they would not enter into the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5:20). Don’t just brush that off. In human terms, the “righteousness of the Pharisees” was impressive. They were very religious. They prayed regularly and every day. They were in the Temple. They gave their tithes. They never broke the Sabbath. They promoted a legalistic burden that even they could not fulfill, thus condemning everyone.

Spiritual disciplines are not heroic religious practices that turn us into super-Christians. We don’t earn “brownie-points” from God by doing them. Doing your devotions won’t make you more righteous any more than sitting by the side of the Jericho road every day can make a blind man see. His sight was a gift from Jesus. He didn’t earn it. He just made sure he was in the way when the Healer came by.

What Spiritual Disciplines Are

Spiritual disciplines are like that. They put us in the pathway of God’s transforming grace. It is God’s nature to be eternally giving. He is always pouring out his grace toward his creation. The issue is, are we receiving it. Spiritual disciplines put us in the place to receive.

When you are in your twenties, you end up going to a lot of weddings. One of the traditions at most wedding receptions is the throwing of the bouquet by the bride. In some weddings, the groom will throw the garter. I remember those. Of course, the tradition is that whoever catches the garter or bouquet, depending on your gender, will be the next one to get married. When I went to weddings, it was very uncool to catch the garter. So we usually stood there with our hands in our pockets and watched it fall to the ground. On the second or third attempt, some little eight-year-old kid who didn’t know any better would step in place and catch. But the women – now that was a different story. When the bouquet flew, there was pushing and shoving and posturing to see who would catch it. I don’t think I ever saw one hit the ground. I saw bridesmaids on the ground – but never the bouquet.

Spiritual disciplines are like that. You intentionally put yourself in place to “catch” the grace that God is pouring out toward you. The only difference is, there are an infinite number of bouquets that God is dispensing so that everyone can catch one.

Spiritual disciplines will not make you righteous but they are not optional, either. God is always dispensing his grace, but we have to respond in order to receive it. It is the eternal equation: God reveals; we must respond. Spiritual disciplines are one of the most profound ways in which we respond to God and receive his ready grace. Richard Foster, who in 1977 wrote the modern classic, *Celebration of Discipline*, describes spiritual disciplines as a pathway on a steep ridge. On one side is legalism where we make certain practices an unbearable burden and futile effort to change our life. That’s what the Pharisees did. On the other side is what is called “cheap grace.” It is the attitude that God has granted me salvation through Jesus Christ alone and there is nothing whatsoever that I need to do. Its roots are in a rightful aversion to “works righteousness” but it is a distortion of the New Testament gospel. “Cheap grace” is “fire insurance” to escape hell, but lacks repentance and isn’t interested in following Jesus at all. It is not Christian faith, for, as James said, “faith without works is dead.” Neither side - either legalism on the one or “cheap grace” on the other - is biblical Christianity and the pathway to spiritual growth.

Spiritual disciplines are that blessed pathway on the top of the ridge. Like the bridesmaid at the reception or the blind man on the road, the person engaging in spiritual disciplines puts himself or herself in the pathway to receive the transforming grace that God is pouring out.

Examples of the Variety of Spiritual Disciplines

Getting out of bed and spending an hour in Bible reading and prayer is a wonderful, powerful spiritual discipline. It is great way to start the day; and it can determine how you will approach the rest of your day. I can clearly see the value of such a practice but I have always struggled to do it. I know many of you probably are able to do morning devotions. About the best I can do in the morning is read a psalm before I get out of bed. And I currently do that and find it helpful. But morning devotions are not the only approved spiritual discipline. There are many things that

we do that could be considered a spiritual discipline – as long as it is a regular habit that we develop.

In his helpful book, Foster puts spiritual disciplines in three categories: inward, outward, and corporate. It's not the only way to categorize practices that put us in the pathway of grace, but it is helpful. So often, our imagination regarding spiritual disciplines has been limited to prayer and disciplines regarding Scripture. I think those are probably the most important, but there are many more practices that we can do that will promote the activity of God's grace in our lives.

This list is not exhaustive, but some of them include:

- Private prayer: There are many forms of prayer: set prayers, praying Scripture, journaling, and improvised prayer. (Matt. 5:6)
- Meditation: Meditation is focus on something – very often a Scripture passage or an attribute of God. (Psalm 119:97)
- Fasting: Allowing God to fill a purposeful vacuum in your life. (Esther 4:16)
- Study: Stewarding our intellect. “Take my intellect and use every power as Thou shalt choose” Frances R. Havergal. (II Tim. 2:15)
- Simplicity: Downward mobility in an acquisitive world. (Matt. 6:33)
- Solitude: Required for a number of the other disciplines. “Filling the infinite void with the infinite fullness of God.” (Luke 6:12-13)
- Service: Downward mobility in an upwardly mobile world. (John 13:14-15)
- Confession: Humbly opening our lives to one another: (James 5:16)
- Public prayer: Opening our lives together before the throne of grace. (Acts 12:12)
- Worship: “Doing God's Story” with others. (Psalm 95:1)

There are other regular practices that we can do that will put us in a head-on collision with God's grace not listed here. For years, I walked my dog in solitude in the desert during high school – often for hours. It was a time of reflection, prayer, and worship. I needed it. I was in high school and life was very confusing. I had no idea that I was engaged in a spiritual discipline that would deeply shape my life. I used to sing and play the piano for hours in worship. It wasn't a burden. I didn't know it was a spiritual discipline, but it was.

Spiritual disciplines should not be drudgery. They should match up with your personality and gifts. They may last for a season and then wane. But they do take intentionality and effort. But as they become a habitual rhythm in your life, you will find them to be refreshing and life-giving. You won't want to live without them.

The Imperative of Spiritual Growth

Friends, spiritual growth is not optional. If you are not growing you are dead. Our purpose and mission as a church is to help people find and follow Jesus. We've always agreed that evangelism – helping people find Jesus – is critical. As Don Craig made clear two weeks ago, we need to keep that passion alive – and we will. But we are not done after we've introduced others to Jesus. We have to follow him to. The joy of these practices – these spiritual disciplines – is essential because they put us in the pathway of God's transforming grace. The blind man on the Jericho road was intentional. He made sure he was there when Jesus came by and he cried out to him. We've got to put ourselves in a position to receive God's grace through these practices.

There once was a wealthy businessman from Chicago who got fed up with the grind of city life and decided to move to the country to become farmers. He took his money and bought a good-sized farm – say 2,000 acres and set out to enjoy a more laid-back life. He went out to the field every day to watch it grow. He traced the ups and downs of the market. As summer drew to a close his anticipation grew, but when harvest time finally came all he had was goldenrod, wildflowers, and my favorite, Canadian thistle.

If you want a harvest you have to plant something. Spiritual disciplines – these habitual practices that put us in the pathway of grace – are necessary if we want to grow in Christ. Disciplines sow the seeds of the Spirit for a harvest of spiritual maturity. Next Sunday, I want to explore the joy of spiritual disciplines with you during the Sunday School hour. I want to show you how they can become a natural part of the rhythm of your life. I want to show you how to get past the guilt that so many of us feel. If you have access to the internet, you will be best prepared for the message if you will go to www.humanmetrics.com and take the “Jung Typology Test” in the upper left hand corner of the page. Bring your results next week.

Spiritual growth not about self-improvement; it's about being made brand new – inside out. It is putting away our old self and becoming new in Christ.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:1-4

That is the goal of salvation: that we would be changed into the image of Christ's character. When you truly follow Jesus, you will become like him. Like the blind man on Jericho's road, put yourself in the pathway of transforming grace. Discover the healing joy of spiritual disciplines.