

“Why Spiritual Disciplines?”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in the fourth week of our series on discipleship, laying out some of what's been happening in the past few years as we've been laying a foundation for where we believe God is leading us, as well as inviting and challenging each of us to grow in our faith-walk with Christ.

Last week we said we'd be spending two weeks on the disciplines of the Christian life, on those habits or patterns or commitments that enable our lives to become what God intends for them to be. It doesn't just happen that we develop disciplines. It takes getting up each day and “putting on” (as Paul describes it) the clothing of Christ. Every morning, every evening, every moment of every day, being conscience of who we are as followers of Jesus and being committed to being shaped and molded (by God), in and through our lives, into the image of Christ.

Last week we spent most of our time talking about the foundation we have (in Jesus) upon which we need to build. We read the story of the wise and the foolish builders.

Everyone builds a house. Everyone constructs a life. If you're wise, you'll build your life upon Jesus. If you choose to build it upon anyone or anything else (our Lord tells us), you're a fool.

That was last week. There's only one solid foundation. It's Jesus. One lasting rock, it's Christ. Today I want to pick up on where we left off and do a little building (if you will) on what we said, particularly in relation to spiritual disciplines.

Let's start (today) with a definition. There are a number of ways to think about discipline. I want to make sure we're all on the same page. The dictionary says that it's the “training that produces obedience, self-control, or a particular skill.” It says it's a “controlled behavior produced by such training.”

In other words, if you're disciplined (in what you're doing), you're doing it to develop a habit or a pattern (or a way of doing things) that, with time, will not require the same amount of discipline. It'll become natural. It'll become habitual. It'll be a skill you've developed, something you don't have to think about (to make it happen), it'll just happen.

If you want to be a teacher, you discipline yourself to develop the skills that enable you to teach. If you're going to fly a plane, (I hope), before you actually fly it, you've been disciplined enough to (find out) and to know what you're doing. If you want to lose weight, you go on a disciplined diet. If you don't want lose weight, you just discipline yourself to keep on going back. (Trust me, it works!)

Now, do you know what's interesting about discipline and about developing disciplines? I think we've all (seen this), if not experienced it ourselves. As you're developing the disciplines, getting into the habits, it takes works. You have to keep on doing, (whatever you're doing), even when you don't feel like doing it.

But once you've gone through it and developed a pattern, (it becomes a habit), then it's good and you're glad you did. In fact, if it's a habit worth developing, you're much better off (when it's all over) and it's been developed, than before you started, even though (getting there) it might have been tough.

It's the same thing in the Christian life when it comes to spiritual disciplines. We don't just start doing the things that are going to be helpful because they're natural and easy. We need to work at them, because (more often than not) they're not. But once they've been developed (and they become part of who you are) and you're doing them, then not only are you better off (than before you started), but (now that you're doing them), you can't imagine not doing them.

Just think about what's happening (right here) in worship. Worship is one of the spiritual disciplines, one of the habits encouraged in the Bible. It's (even) one of commandments God gave us, to remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. Worship is one way to keep it holy. It's also one of those habits that (when it's developed) and becomes a habit, leaves (a person) better off than before it was.

When you develop the discipline of regular worship, you find yourself not only looking forward to it and enjoying it, but you don't like it and (don't enjoy it) when you miss. (Am I wrong?) Sunday is not Sunday

without worship, if it's a habit. The Sabbath is not the Sabbath, if (for whatever reason) you're not able to be in church.

Now, Jesus said "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath", so it's not a rule we have to follow. (Don't miss the point.) That's not the Christian life. If you're not here one Sunday, you're not here one Sunday. Don't let it cause you to get worked up. It's not a hard and fast rule.

At the same time, it is a commandment and it is encouraged, and we're better off if we keep it than if we don't. That's how spiritual disciplines work. (That's why God gave them.) They're not laws we have to keep. They are encouragements that help. They're not rules we're required to follow. They are opportunities and possibilities and vehicles, if you will, that will help us get to where we want and need to be.

Now, keep that in mind (for a moment) and let's take a step back. We're talking (in this series) about developing a discipling culture. Our vision is to create (and become) a community where following Jesus (and helping others) to follow Jesus is who we are and what we do. That's our vision.

With time (and over time), we want to create a community that has developed the spiritual disciplines that have become (so natural) and normal, that it's just natural (and normal) that we'd want others to be doing the same. Again, not as laws to follow, but as tools to enable; not as rules we have to adhere to (to make us right with God), but as vehicles that help us become the people God wants us to be, because (in Jesus) we already are.

Spiritual disciplines are exactly that: they're vehicles that reflect what we value that enable our vision to become a victory! I hope that alliteration helps. (Does that make sense?) If our vision is to become a disciplining community, and if what we value is based upon what Jesus (has commanded and wants), and if a victory is that we actually become what God wants us to become, then developing spiritual disciplines is nothing more than putting into place a number of vehicles (in our lives) that enable it to happen.

Now, go back to (the discipline) of worship for a moment. If the goal is to become a community with a strong relationship with Christ, then worship is one of the tools (or vehicles) that helps us get there. Worship (in itself) is not the goal. Being here in church is not how we'd describe a victory or a win. The win (or the victory) is that we end up closer to Jesus. That's what we value. That's the vision we have. That's what God wants. Worship enables it to happen. It becomes the vehicle that enables our shared vision to become real.

Now, go down the list of the (spiritual disciplines) and it's the same thing with each one: reading your Bible, spending time (with God) in prayer, fasting, confessing your sin, giving gifts for the poor; the discipline of simplicity, of celebration, of serving? These are not the goals of the Christian life. Do these things and your life is what God wants? That's not it. That's not how it works.

Just look at the Pharisees. They had it all down and they were good at it. They knew these disciplines and did them all well. (What happened?) Jesus was after them all the time, because they never got it right. They never figured out how it works.

What they had done, they had taken what had been designed (as a tool) and turned it into a goal. They had used what had been given and (what was meant) to be a vehicle, and reshaped and redefined it into a victory. It was all backwards. Jesus was after them all the time.

Spiritual disciplines are not the goal. The goal is a life that's committed to Jesus. Developing these spiritual practices is not ultimately what God wants to find. What he wants to find are lives that are in a close and a daily and a life-changing walk with Christ.

Now, we could preach a series on the spiritual disciplines worth developing, the vehicles God has given that enable the things we value (reflected in our vision) to become victories in our lives. We could spend (at least a week) over several weeks with each one. We don't have time (here today) to do that. But let me say a word about three, because there are three that (I believe) are essential.

Three words I want you to remember; three disciplines I pray each of us (if we haven't already) will develop. "Worship, Word, and Prayer. Worship, Word, and Prayer." (Say it with me.) Worship, Word, and Prayer. (Say it again.) Worship, Word, and Prayer.

Now, why these three? What is it about (these three) that makes them so important? I'll tell you why they're important. Think about these three disciplines as the pillars around which you construct your life's house. Think about them as the framework that holds the spiritual house (you are trying to build) together. Every house has a framework. After the foundation is in place, you move on to building the frame; on to the beams or the pillars that hold it all together.

It's like this sanctuary. You see these big glue lams on the sides and going up to the top? They're not just here for decoration. They're here to hold this sanctuary in place.

There are six of them. The five we can see, and the one (in the back) we don't see. They're here for a reason. They're not just decorative. They serve a purpose. The purpose (they serve) is to hold this sanctuary together. Without them, this place would fall apart. Solid foundation (or not), if the structure is not well-built, (the pillars not there), if there's no framework for the house you're trying to construct, it's not going to last.

Now go back to the story from last week, about the wise and foolish builders. The wise build upon the rock. The foolish build upon the sand. I don't want to do more with that story than was intended, so I want to be careful.

But let's assume (for the moment) that we're all wise builders. Let's assume (here today) that we wouldn't (be here today) if we weren't (at least wanting) and trying to build upon the rock. Let's assume that we're all wise, that none of us are fools, and we're all, at least, wanting (and attempting) to build our lives upon Christ.

If that's the case (and if that's your case) then as you build your spiritual house, you're going to want it to have solid support. You're going to want it to become all of what God intended for it to be. (Right?)

Now, I don't care what it finally looks like, what you do with all of the decorations. Each of our homes will be different. We all have our own interests (and desires) and tastes. Your life's house will not be the same as mine. But if your house is going to be solid, then it needs to have good support, no matter what it finally looks like.

These three (Worship, Word and Prayer) are the pillars that need to be in place, if the house you are building on the rock is going to be strong. These three are the beams (or the glue lams) or the support that enables the house (built on the foundation of Christ) to become all that God wants it to be.

Now, everybody look up here for moment, because I want you to hear this. If these three are not the pillars holding in place your life's spiritual house, then your life's spiritual house is not what God wants it to be. It's not.

No matter what else you are doing, (even if it's all good), if these three are not a regular and an ongoing part of your life, (if you want your life to be what God wants), then it needs to change. It has to.

These three: Worship, Word, and Prayer are the pillars of the Christian life. They are the framework (or the structure) or the support around which everything else gets built. Everything else!

Our relationship with the world (how we deal with others) grows out of the relationship we have with God (how God has dealt with us). That's why we worship. The church is the Bride of Christ. He wants you here.

Our calling in the world (what we're to do) comes directly from what God has said to us in his Word. That's why we read our Bibles. That's why (every day) and not just when we're together, we need to listen to what he has to say. It's too easy to stray, if you're not.

How we hear his voice and how we decide (what's next and what's most important) in our own spiritual walk comes directly from the time we spend with God in prayer. You simply cannot be in a day-to-day relationship with God, if you're not (day-to-day) spending time. Prayer makes it happen. He wants to hear your voice.

These are the pillars of the Christian life. These are the three spiritual disciplines that each of us here today (if we haven't already) need to develop. Go after the others, as well; they're all important. But these three are the ones (around which) everything else is built.

Now, we're going to be talking about these three quite a bit over the next few months. In fact, starting in January, we're going to be giving you a structure around which these disciplines can be built: Worship, Word, and Prayer. We're going to be rolling out a year-long focus (in 2016) that will help us stay focused as we work, individually (and together) to individually and together become what God wants us to be. We'll be saying more in the next few months.

For now, until we formalize a structure that (we hope) will unite our efforts, make every effort to work on developing these disciplines (worship, word, and prayer) on your own. Set aside ten minutes each day, five for reading and five for prayer; be here on Sundays. Make it a habit. They're that important. They're too important. Don't fool yourself into thinking they're not.

Let me close today with this. Today's message has been more "thematic" than most. We haven't been talking about a specific Bible text as much as we have about an over-arching biblical theme: spiritual disciplines. But we did read a text, a number of texts that are all supportive of what we've said.

Do you remember what Jesus said about spiritual disciplines? Do you remember how he framed it, what he almost assumed (was the case) when he said what he did? In his Sermon on the Mount, do you remember what Jesus said, what he assumed?

He said, "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' (your spiritual disciplines) before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." (And now listen carefully.) "So when you give to the needy" he says, (in verse two), and "when you pray" he says, (in verse five), and "when you fast" he says, (in verse 16), make sure (what you're doing) is being done for the right reasons.

Did you hear what he says? Did you catch what's being assumed? Jesus assumes that these basic disciplines (in the Christian life) are important. Too many Christians (think about them and consider them), but assume they're not. Jesus assumes (as followers of his) that these basic disciplines are a natural part of what we do. Too many (would-be-followers) read through the list of what's being expected and wonder why?

These spiritual disciplines are not about being or becoming right with God, establishing a relationship. The vision is not to become Pharisees; not at all. It is (however) about responding to and reclaiming the relationship we already have.

Don't turn the vehicle into the vision. Don't claim a victory, because you're going after something we value. The vision is to be disciples (individually and together) who want nothing more (nor less) than to become all that God wants.

It all starts with the pillars, placed on the one foundation that's going to last. Let's pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for the foundation you have given to us in Jesus and for the calling we have to build our lives upon him. We thank you for the work you have done in us and for the work you promise to do through us, as we commit ourselves to following Christ.

We ask for your Spirit to help us (and to lead us) and to guide us as we seek to develop the disciplines we need. Enable us to set aside any distractions that might get in the way. Empower us to be faithful in doing what we know we need to do. Give us the will to accept the challenge; that your invitation might lead to a closer relationship (for each of us) with you. We pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen.