

Matt. 6:1-18

March 22, 2020

Psalm 119:1-8

Private Disciplines

Five Things God Uses to Grow Our Faith

Discipline: who likes that word? Some think of bad experiences like being punished for wrongdoing. Others think of drudgery and maybe parents or boss nagging you. Still others have come to understand discipline as the avenue to success. It's that last concept we'll be talking about today. Specifically, we'll be looking at Christian, spiritual disciplines that are the avenue for believers to become genuine disciples of Christ; those who are growing bigger faith in God.

This is the fourth in our series of messages on "The Five Things God Uses to Grow Your Faith." Our small groups have been watching the videos of Pastor Andy Stanley sharing his thoughts on these five things, and then discussing how they operate in their own lives. My hope is that through this Lenten study and focus all of us will be inspired and equipped to deepen, and broaden, and lengthen our faith in our Heavenly Father.

The first week I spoke about big faith. God is faithful – he keeps His promises. He wants us to be faithful also, trusting Him so that we have confidence to keep our promises. In all areas of life, our steadfast commitment to Christ actually undergirds and guides all other commitments. If we cannot be faithful to Him, we will find it very difficult to be faithful to our spouse, our business or workplace, our friends, our church, and so on. Yet when we turn to Him in honesty and reverence, He will provide. The Holy Spirit, whom we can call on, gives supernatural strength for us to be faithful people.

The second week I spoke about practical teaching. Teaching that makes the Bible meaningful, practical, and applicable to everyday life inspires and encourages disciples. When we see how the story of those in the Bible connects with our own, we can really respond with action in our own lives that brings us closer to God.

Last week I spoke about providential relationships. Relationships are powerful things, that intersect with our faith for good or ill. Proverbs 13:20 reminds us: *Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.* (When the Bible speaks of fools it means those who ignore God, and the wise are those who seek to follow His instructions). It is wise to seek out friends who can help and encourage you to grow bigger faith in God. Ask God for such people. Now we may think that providential relationships are being constrained by this virus that has caused us to limit social interactions. But don't forget that God isn't affected by this virus and He can use even this challenge to strengthen our faith and do it through people.

Now, today I'll be talking about:

Private Disciplines

In His infinite wisdom, God has given us certain helps for remaining faithful and fostering our trust in Him. Let's first take a look at that word discipline. It is related to another word we know: "disciple." A genuine disciple of Christ is one who disciplines him/herself so as to grow into that new man or woman remade in the image of Christ.

When we talk of Christian discipline we do not mean punishment or imposed control. Rather we mean instruction and self-control. Discipline is often inconvenient or painful in the short term, but it brings great satisfaction and sense of accomplishment, in the long-term. The one who disciplines him/herself by practicing a musical instrument or some athletic skill will find more satisfaction than getting a "participation trophy." Discipline brings progress, improvement, and eventually results in more freedom. When you set yourself to doing what you don't like now, you will find that in time you'll be able to do what you really like. Discipline is about delayed gratification; giving up something small and enticing for something much larger and satisfying.

[Things that begin as enforced disciplines can often become very gratifying good habits – like music or sports or writing or sculpting or painting, or just keeping our room tidy.] Without self-discipline people just bounce from one thing to the next in life and cannot serve God well. Without self-discipline some people become surrounded by bad influences and end up in trouble.

Private disciplines for spiritual growth have long been practiced by Christians as a way to encourage and strengthen their faith in God. These disciplines do not go out of style, even if they go out of use. God knows that we struggle each day to stay focused on becoming a new creation in Christ. Oh sure, we may show great faith on great occasions, but hour after hour, day after day, week after week? With so many distractions and temptations and time-consuming activities in our lives, we would easily by-pass faith in God, if we did not daily attend to Him. Regular practices – disciplines – open the door of minds and hearts for faith to grow. If we open them, He will come.

Develop Good Habits

It's been said that we are creatures of habit. It's true! We form our habits and then they form us. So, it's better to choose which habits to cultivate because some give life and some tear us down.

A faith journey that brings you to a bigger faith in God, will include personal habits or disciplines, that have been practiced by Christians For 2,000 years:

- 1. Scripture: reading, studying,**

meditating on, memorizing Scripture. Some may recall that our first all-church Lenten study was **Forty Days in the Word**, by Rick Warren. That study helped many of us get our lives on a firm foundation through Bible reading and study.

2. **Prayer:** Regular prayer is absolutely necessary for nurturing faith. When do you pray? When you face a crisis? It is good to pray then, but you most need to pray when you don't feel like it. It is always in those moments that our faith slips sideways. Make prayer a daily habit. Practice fasting and prayer more often. Fast from food, social media, TV, or something, and pray more.

3. **Generosity with money:** Learning to practice financial generosity is probably our greatest point of growth in our faith. When you learn to be generous, to actually tithe your earnings to God, you will discover a freedom you never knew; even though this step is often taken in fear and trembling, even with a gut-wrenching anxiety. The discipline of giving gets at the issue of trust. God is teaching us that we can relinquish our grip on our finances, and He will care for us and free us from greed and selfishness. If we really believed what Jesus says about money, we wouldn't hesitate to be generous givers.

4. **Service:** We do not live for ourselves alone. *For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.* 1 Cor. 3:9. During this virus threat we have opportunity to check on our neighbors, friends, church family to see if they need help. We may well be called upon in coming weeks to help others in our wider community.

5. **Gathering to worship and share the Lord's Supper:** *... not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* Hebrews 10:25.

I know it sounds silly for me to be saying such this morning, as we live-stream this worship into the homes of our congregation. Such are the circumstances we face. But let us be aware that we are together through our digital connections and when we pray, we are praying together in the Lord.

A Daily Time

Do you give God “the time of day” in your busy day? A daily time alone with God is what brings us closer to Him. Jesus would go off by himself to a “lonely place” to pray, to commune with His heavenly Father (Mark 1:35). So should we.

Practicing these private disciplines is a bit like going to the gym, or jogging, or running, or whatever other physical exercise you might do ... or know you ought to do. Some people just don't like to exercise, just like most of us don't really want to practice these spiritual disciplines. But if we don't practice our physical or spiritual disciplines, we pay the price in diminished health in both realms. If you don't exercise your body and your spirit both become **flabby and weak**.

In Matt. 6 Jesus talks about giving to the poor, praying and fasting. He emphasizes doing these things in private, so as not to call attention to oneself – “See everybody what a good Christian I am. See God, I’m doing good things for You.” Jesus reminds us that our Heavenly Father “sees what is done in secret” and will reward us. Those who must flaunt their religiosity already have their reward in the attention they get from others ... but that’s the only reward they’ll get.

When it comes to having a private time with God each day the issue becomes trusting God with our time – which is really our most valuable asset. To some extent, you can make more money. But you can’t add time to your day, or your life. God wants us to devote our most valuable asset to Him through a regular time of prayer and He will reward us with His presence: He will be there for us.

Most of us trust God for what happens to us after we die. That’s probably because we don’t have any other options. Our eternal destiny is entirely in God’s hands. But when it comes to our money and our time the choices are in our hands. Our faith in God grows bigger when we place our time and money in His hands.

Methodical

John & Charles Wesley, and those with them, were very intentional about these spiritual disciplines. They were methodical in their spiritual disciplines and soon called “Methodists” because of it. These disciplines help to grow big faith in any age. And big faith in God carries us through times like we’re in right now, when fear can so easily get the best of people. In the center of this virus disruption we can stay steady by steadily attending to the disciplines that bring us into God’s presence. Then we can be a steady presence for those around us.

One last thing: meeting people more disciplined than we are can cause us to be either inspired or to become disheartened. It’s like the difference between the magician and the clown. Everyone enjoys the magician and is amazed at what he or she does. But everyone loves the clown because we can all identify with the one who flubs up. Listen, we all fall down on keeping our time with God. But this spiritual feeding is just like the feeding of our stomachs. You miss a meal you don’t give up on eating and say, “I’m just no good at eating!” No, you make up for it at the next meal. The same with these spiritual disciplines: keep at them. If you miss a time with God, double up the next time. Ask the HS to give you focus and strength to attend to Bible reading, prayer, generosity, worship, and service.

The wise person makes disciplined, regular deposits into his savings account. If he doesn’t, he’ll have nothing to draw on when the car breaks down, or some other unexpected expense lands on his doorstep. The same applies with our “spiritual account.” Through our regular time with God we are making

deposits in our “spiritual bank.” Spiritual deposits are actions to trust God, learning to count on God, and to grow a bigger faith.

Our normal schedules have been disrupted, many of our usual activities put on hold. Yet his is a great opportunity to give more time to the private disciplines that grow faith.

Your spiritual journey must include private disciplines to foster a bigger faith in God.

... pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.
Eph. 6:18.