

**“The Dynamics of Discipleship:  
Developing Spiritual Disciplines”  
Luke 11:1-11**

**March 18, 2001  
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On New Year's Day in the middle of the Rose Bowl parade, a beautiful float suddenly sputtered and stopped. It was out of gas. The entire parade had to stop and wait until someone could go find a can of gas and get the float going again. And most amusing of all, the float was sponsored by the Standard Oil Company.

I've run into my share of people who simply run out of gas along the road of Christian discipleship. They start well and follow enthusiastically, but the road is long and the temptation is strong, and before you know it, they sputter, stall and sometimes stop. The most disturbing statistic in church membership losses for me are not the deaths or the transfers but the dropouts. Not everyone who claims Jesus as Savior will be able to crown Him as Lord and find spiritual resources for all their days.

**What does it take to stay in shape spiritually? It's summed up in one word – discipline.** Spiritual disciplines take the form of prayer, meditation, study, service, simplicity, worship, confession, and generosity. These are habits of heart and life that keep us vitally connected with God. I want to talk about these spiritual disciplines over the next two weeks.

Let me begin by saying that there are some things that spiritual disciplines are not. **Spiritual disciplines are not merit badges.** A pious man died and found himself at the pearly gates trying to find entrance. “We go by point system

up here,” explained St. Peter. “It takes 100 points to enter.” The quite confident man replied, “I’ve prayed every day of my life and I’ve read the Bible from cover to cover.” “That’s great,” said St. Peter, “that’s 1 point.” A little more anxiously, the man said, “Well, I taught Jr. High students for 20 years in my church and served on every board.” “That’s really good,” said St. Peter, “that’s another point.” Nervously the man said, “I’ve run my business by Christian principles and I’ve tithed my income all of my days.” “That’s really super,” said St. Peter, that’s 1 more point.” Desperately, the man exclaimed, “Lord, have mercy!” “That’s 97 points,” said St. Peter, “come right on in.”

Media mogul, Ted Turner, was quoted in the *Tennessean* as saying, “Almost every religion talks about a savior coming. When you look in the mirror in the morning, you’re looking at the savior. Nobody else is going to save you but yourself.” May the Lord have mercy on Ted Turner. That’s not Christian religion.

Christianity is not opposed to effort, but it is opposed to earning it. When you get to the pearly gates, you bring nothing in your hands except to cling to the cross of Jesus Christ. Christian disciplines are not merit badges.

**Spiritual disciplines are not rulebooks.** Once every four years or so, people called United Methodists get together in what we call a General Conference to write the rules for being Methodist. We spend endless hours debating words like, “shall” and “may.” When all is said and done, we publish a book called The Discipline, which lists the rules of order by which our denomination shall operate. Every time I go through this exercise, I’m not sure it’s worth it. We make rules like there shall be apportionments to every local church and our houses of worship shall not be used to celebrate unions of same gender persons. Then we elect Bishops and judicial councils to make sure we abide by the rules. I guess

churches need rules. I am convinced that spiritual disciplines are not simply rules and I'm totally convinced that you cannot legislate it in the long haul.

In the early days of this denomination we tried to set rules for taking communion. We no longer ask people on the way to communion, "Have you said your prayers?" "Have you read the Bible?" or "Have you paid your tithe?" We don't ask those questions anymore and I'm glad we don't. The road to the table is by grace not by works. After all, every time I want to stand in judgment of somebody else, I remember the words of Jesus who dared to say, "Judge not that you be not judged," and "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your neighbor's eye when you've got a 2 x 4 hanging out of your own." I've thrown a few 2 x 4's around; I know how big they are. Spiritual disciplines are not rulebooks.

**Spiritual disciplines are not consuming asceticism.**

Simeon Stylites, who lived from 309 to 459, built a perch 60 feet high and 3 feet high on which he lived uninterrupted for 30 years. Disciples took him food and carried out his waste. He bound himself to the pillar by a rope, a rope that became embedded in his own flesh, which putrefied around it and brought worms to feed off of it. Simeon picked up the worms that fell from his sores and replaced them back on his body saying, "Eat what God has given you." Spiritual disciplines are not some sort of self-inflicted punishment that we hope will somehow make us more religious people. That's not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**True spiritual disciplines are habits of heart and life that keep us vitally connected to God.**

Some of these are private and a few are public. Some of these are inward and others are outward. All heighten our desire and awareness of God. Let me talk about a couple of inward ones today.

When Peter, James, and John fell asleep waiting for Jesus in

the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus offered them a little advice on how to make it in the Christian life. He says, "Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation. The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

Now I suggest to you today that **watching and praying are two great spiritual disciplines for you to assume.** To watch is to be alert in, to look out for, awaken to, and stay on guard against, to be in touch with. To watch is to live in readiness.

A man sits in front of a bad television program and doesn't even know he's bored. A woman joins the rat race of consumerism until she becomes oblivious to her changing values. A teenager tries to fit in without counting the cost of relevance. As the country song says, "You ain't doing nothing wrong, you just been lonely too long." We are lulled to sleep with the routines of the day and when that happens to you and to me, we need a shock treatment. You shock your hot tub or your swimming pool when the chemicals are out of balance. Something has to happen to radically remind us that we have a soul as well as a body. I would suggest that you try a fast as a shock treatment for your life. A fast from food, from sex, from television, from the internet, from activities for a little while will remind your body that you have a soul that needs to be nourished.

Bill Bright, founder of *Campus Crusade for Christ*, tells us that fasting is a spiritual atomic bomb that will demolish evil. It's interesting that in our day fasting is coming back around among the Christian teenagers of America who want to understand the deeper side of their spiritual lives. We are not earthly beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings in an earthly body and there are times and places when we ought to let our body know that our spirit is in control. **Fasting is a spiritual discipline.**

**Study is a spiritual discipline.** It will keep your heart alert. Discipleship is a life-long school. You're not going to graduate from the school of discipleship. You enroll for the whole show and blessed are those who finish well in their adventure to become Christ-like. Study, study, and then study some more.

A critic of John Wesley wrote this letter to him: "Dear Mr. Wesley, The Lord has directed me to write you that while you know Greek and Hebrew, he can do without your learning." Mr. Wesley, never known to mince words, wrote back to him, "I already know that the Lord can do without my learning. I wish to say that the Lord does not need your ignorance either."

We are what we think. Let me repeat that – we are what we think. We become disciples of Jesus Christ not simply by a change of heart but by a change of mind. Christians think radically different than non-Christians. Christians have a set of glasses through which they see the world and perceive reality. Christians think differently. "Lord, help this to be so," is my prayer. Paul put it this way in Romans 12: "Do not conform any longer to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."

I rejoice that you sit in a church today that has one of the largest Sunday school attendance numbers in our denomination. But I weep that nearly half of our members are not connected to any Sunday school class, any small group, or any disciple Bible study. I rejoice that Disciple Bible Study and Christian Believer classes are vibrant and available among us but I weep today that the majority of the membership of this church has never read the Bible nor do they understand it.

To be Christ-like assumes that I become a student, a lifetime student, of the Word. We know that babies who listen to

classical music are stimulated to learn more quickly. We know that study wards off senility in older people. The Psalmist was right when he said, "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes." Wake up -- wake up! This is no time to be asleep. Be alert.

"Watch and pray," said Jesus. While most of our prayers are in private, some are public. When a nightclub in a small town opened right across from the church, the people of the church got together and asked the Lord to do away with this nightclub. Two days later, the place burned down. The owner of the nightclub sued the church for damages incurred from the fire. The church denied responsibility so they wound up in court. After hearing both sides of the case, the judge issued this statement: "It would appear that wherever the guilt may lie, the nightclub owner believes in prayer and the church members do not."

What about you? Do you believe in prayer? Do you believe it enough to practice it? When I was sick four years ago, hundreds of people came to me and said, "Howard, what can we do to help you?" I said, "There is only one thing I want. I want you to pray for me." I've never since said that so lightly to people as I used to say it. It is a sacred trust for you to look anybody in the eye and say, "I will hold you up in my prayers." The great saints of history knew it well. Martin Luther used to say, "I'm so busy and in so much conflict that I've got to spend at least three hours a day in prayer. John Wesley used to say that his schedule was so tight that he had to spend at least two hours a day in prayer. George Fox was known as one who, above all, excelled in prayer. After 35+ years in the ministry, I've failed mostly in the priestly role of holding people up in prayer.

What do you believe about prayer? Jesus in this model prayer says it is adoration and confession and thanksgiving

and supplication. That's the order for your praying. Prayer is more listening than listing. It's more surrendering to the will of God than consulting and contending about God's will. It's more likely to change us than others. It's much easier to talk about it than it is to practice it. The greatest service we can render our families and ourselves is to hold them up before the Lord in prayer.

How's your prayer life? Jesus put it this way – “Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.” Eugene Peterson in his translation in *The Message* continues that discourse this way – “This is not a cat and mouse, hide and seek game that we're playing with God. If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of doing such a thing so consider how much more it is that your heavenly Father wants to give you the Holy Spirit.”

What was Jesus trying to say? He was trying to say that God is more anxious to do good things for you and for me than we are willing to ask and believe. Be careful what you pray for, you might get it.

Watch and pray. Oh, what spiritual disciplines! It was the great concert pianist Paderuski who once said: “If I fail to practice one day, I notice it. If I fail to practice two days, my close friends notice it. If I fail to practice three days, the people in the audience begin to notice I'm not quite as sharp as I once was.”

So what is the key to effective, life long, Christian discipleship that helps us not only start well but also finish well. It's practice, practice, and practice. So how about it? Have you been practicing your spiritual disciplines lately? Today might be a great day to start.

Amen.