

## **I. Intro: As spring moves forward closer to summer, it's the time when gardeners are out in full force**

### **A. So here's a casual observation from one who doesn't have a green thumb and would never start a garden on his own**

1. Some people try their hands at gardening with a lot of enthusiasm on the front end ...

a) They are gung ho to pull out the old dead stuff, prepare the soil, buy the plants and seeds and start digging!

b) Things go well in their garden for a few weeks as they remember to water, and they watch for the sprouts to pop up or the blossoms to appear.

c) But as the summer heats up, and vacations call away the gardeners, they gradually pay less attention to the little things that make a difference:

Weeds start to appear ...

worms can destroy a vine before you notice there's a problem ...

shoots of a tomato plant have to be trained to go thru the cage surrounding them or they will later sag under their own weight.

2. When the peak harvest time comes around for those vegetables, some gardens simply look fuller & healthier than others

a) Many are the gardeners who realize that the high hopes with which they greeted spring, and the high energy with which they planted, did not result in a bumper crop

b) They also realize that if they want maximum growth, there's no substitute for regular care and attention given to that garden throughout the growing season

### **B. The same is true in the extended growing season of the garden of our Christian walk with God.**

1. Once we commit ourselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, in effect we are still only seedlings, or maybe potted plants being transplanted into a bigger garden.

a) As disciples of Jesus, the rest of our lives we are here to grow up into Christian maturity, to reach the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (as it says in Eph. 4:13)

b) The verses we heard today from Romans 12 call us to be not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds

2. How do we keep growing strong toward Christlikeness, esp. in a world of information overload, with increasing demands on our time?

a) A living Christian faith can easily be squeezed to the margins of our jam-packed lives ... It can be choked out by dozens of other “must-do” activities that claim higher priority

b) One very significant answer to Q of how to keep growing toward transformation in Christ: spiritual disciplines

## II. Introduce series on spiritual disciplines

### A. Today is 1<sup>st</sup> of 3 Sundays highlighting spiritual disciplines

1. For some of you, this series will mostly be a review of the classic spiritual disciplines.

2. For others who are less familiar with spiritual disciplines, it will be only a quick introduction

3. In 3 Sundays we're barely scratching the surface of this subject. We could easily spend 3 or 4 months focusing on 1 discipline after another

4. For this series, we've organized ourselves after the kinds of spiritual disciplines found in Richard Foster's classic book, Celebration of Discipline ...

a) Foster categorized them into inward disciplines, outward disciplines, and corporate disciplines ...

b) So as not to be confused with what happens in the corporate business world, we'll call the 3<sup>rd</sup> category community disciplines

### B. So why emphasize spiritual disciplines?

1. One short & simple answer, using the garden imagery I started with: Because that's what it takes to make it possible for our spiritual gardens to grow.

a) Richard Foster states clearly, “Spiritual growth is the purpose of the Disciplines”. (Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline, rev. ed., HarperCollins, ©1988, p. 8)

b) And I want to be clear, no matter if you've never heard this phrase “spiritual disciplines” or if you've been turned off by it before, what we're aiming for in these next 3 Sundays is spiritual growth for all of us ...

We want to introduce you to some classic tools for spiritual growth

We'll also encourage you this summer to take your game to the next level, spiritually speaking, by actually doing one of these

2. In a book called Pursuing God's Will Together, which our pastors and church board are reading, Ruth Haley Barton directly connects spiritual growth with spiritual disciplines:

*Like a gardener who prepares for plants to grow by tilling the soil, adding fertilizer and watering, so we can create the conditions that make it possible for the life of Christ to grow and flourish within us. This is where spiritual practices come in. Spiritual practices are not ways to make brownie points with God or to prove our spiritual superiority to others. They are not a self-help program by which we take control of our journey and change ourselves. Rather, spiritual disciplines are concrete activities that we engage in in order to make ourselves available for the work that only God can do.* (Ruth Haley Barton, Pursuing God's Will Together, InterVarsity Press, ©2012, p. 243)

3. I agree with Barton that only the Spirit of God produces spiritual growth in us, but we can facilitate that growth, or we can get in its way, depending on whether we build these practices into our lives

4. Let's go a little deeper in understanding spiritual practices in general before I recommend to you 4 particular inward-oriented ones

### III. (More indepth about spiritual disciplines)

#### A. 1<sup>st</sup> clarifying a few cautions

1. Did any of you react negatively inside when you first saw or heard that word “discipline”?

- a) We have to name that *there is some negative baggage around with that word*. You may prefer calling them spiritual practices for that reason.
- b) Spiritual disciplines are not about punishment for wrongdoing
- c) They are not some bitter medicine that we're “supposed” to take for our own good

Spiritual disciplines arise not out of running away from a scary God, but rather of moving toward a loving God

Frankly, if there isn't an inner desire to be closer to God motivating our disciplines, then we will eventually resent them like a bitter pill.

2. The language of inner desire and outer action leads to a 2<sup>nd</sup> caution with spiritual disciplines, which is *turning them into laws*

- a) It's not hard to see how practices like Bible reading, solitude, or worship can become “litmus tests” for one's faithfulness, or else they can be wielded like a heavy club against oneself or against others.
- b) As soon as we use the disciplines to manipulate or control people we are doing them for the wrong reason, & finding ourselves in the company of people Jesus criticized for doing their praying or their fasting in order to

obtain a certain response from other people.

c) A spirituality of legalism is not a spirituality of Jesus. In fact, it's really no spirituality at all, because we have simply replaced “spirit” with law.

## **B. A 2<sup>nd</sup> thing to understand about spiritual disciplines might almost sound like a contradiction to what I just said about legalism**

1. Although some of the disciplines we'll name in these 3 weeks are specifically commanded of us in the Bible (e.g. prayer), other disciplines (like fasting) are not explicitly commanded

a) *Yet all of these disciplines are assumed in the Bible as normal for God-followers ...* They are practices you can expect to find in the faith community

b) They are not optional for the church

2. The overall message of the Bible related to spiritual practices is NOT IF you pray, or IF you fast, or IF you serve others

a) The Bible's assumption for Jesus-followers is WHEN you do these practices, not IF you will

b) If we want to grow in maturity as Christians and we think that these practices are an optional way to get there, we are mistaken!

3. Having said all this, I do not believe we are expected to be doing all of the 12 or so disciplines you'll hear about from us.

4. So if we decide to engage in spiritual disciplines in our lives ...

a) How might we maximize their effectiveness?

b) what does it take for God to really have a chance to work in us thru these practices?

## **IV. 3 qualities necessary for spiritual disciplines to begin to transform us:**

### **A. Regularity**

1. Doing your spiritual practice regularly is important, even though how it fits in your weekly schedule will vary from person to person

2. But a practice that happens randomly or just once in a while has little chance to transform you.

3. Many spiritual practices don't have to be daily to be effective ...

but the regular repetition is what molds us into Christ's image

## **B. Persistence**

1. Don't give up too quickly.
  - a) Don't stop just because it felt like “nothing happened”.
  - b) Our own feelings about a spiritual activity are not always the best indicator of God at work in it. Sometimes God moves in mysterious ways that we don't understand at first
2. Just like in baseball, we don't “hit a home run” in spiritual disciplines all the time
  - a) Sometimes it will feel like spiritually we didn't even get on base!
  - b) But the longer we stay in the game, the more chances God has to produce that growth in us ...

## **C. Grace**

1. Grace is the single most important antidote against making disciplines into laws
2. When you fail, be as gracious with yourself as God is with you

**V. After helping us understand spiritual disciplines in general, I want to briefly recommend 4 “inward” disciplines identified by Richard Foster**

### **A. 1<sup>st</sup> is Meditation**

1. Basically this refers to reflecting & engaging with our minds on God's word and God's works
2. Meditation requires openness to hear God, & it cannot be rushed.
3. It is often especially done with Scripture, but good devotional writings can also lead us into meditation. Spending time in God's creation is another good focus of meditation.

### **B. Prayer**

1. This may be the most central of all disciplines, yet is far too big for this brief mention ... In a later book, Foster named 21 different kinds of prayer!
2. Although people sometimes refer to prayer as just talking to God, that's only partly true.

Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard once observed, “*A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening.*” (Foster, p. 39)

3. Sometimes we actually pray without knowing it ... I believe that when our minds & hearts are drawn in godly directions, we are already praying thru the Holy Spirit's guidance, whether or not we considered it praying at the time.

### **C. Fasting**

1. In its simplest form, fasting means abstaining from food for spiritual purposes.
2. Fasting is almost unknown in our lives because we have believed the propaganda of our culture telling us that if we don't have 3 big meals every day with snacks on demand, we are deprived.
3. In our food-saturated society, fasting may be the most challenging spiritual discipline of all

### **D. Study**

1. This may appear similar to meditation, but it's more focused and deliberate. Richard Foster distinguishes the 2 this way:

*Meditation is devotional; study is analytical. Meditation will relish a word; study will explicate it.* (Foster, p. 64)

2. It's thru the spiritual discipline of study especially that we take seriously Jesus' words in John 8:32 – “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

### **E. My own experiences of these have varied over the years**

1. They have definitely enriched my life, but I've engaged in some, like meditation, more often than others, like fasting.
2. I know what it's like to feel “too busy” to do spiritual disciplines, and I also know, over time, how distant I can feel from God when I don't practice any of them.
3. In the spirit of Matt chapter 6 teachings, here are 2 glimpses into my own disciplines, not so you can think I'm such a holy person, but to just be practical.
  - a) Most mornings I get up 20 or 30 minutes earlier than I need to, for some quiet time of prayer and meditation
  - b) Lately I've joined AMBS professor David Miller in the practice of disciplines of prayer and fasting on Fridays @ lunch time, using some

guided prayers focusing on MCUSA & our challenges around homosexuality and Christian faith.

## **VI. Concluding invitation**

**A. As you enter into the busy rhythms of summer, how will you stay close to Jesus?**

**B. Let me issue a modest challenge to take with you:**

1. We are not doing this 3-Sunday series on spiritual disciplines just so you can be more informed about some time-honored practices. These practices are of no value if you know about them but don't do any of them.
2. I invite everyone to make some space for God to work in you, by adopting one of these disciplines over the course of the summer
  - a) Maybe you will take up a new discipline that you've never tried before, like fasting from lunch 1 or 2 days a week for the purpose of prayer or meditation instead.
  - b) Or maybe you'll make a plan to try again some practice that you haven't done in a long time, such as a daily quiet meditation time, or committing to saying "flash prayers" for someone anytime that person comes into your mind.
  - c) Or maybe you'll simply become more regular, persistent and gracious in the manner you do an existing discipline

**C. In Rev. chapter 3, the Laodicean church was rebuked for being a lukewarm church, neither cold nor hot.**

1. To those Laodiceans, the word of the risen Jesus came:

*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If any of you hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with you. And you will eat with me.* (Rev. 3:20, NIRV)

2. Friends, the spiritual disciplines are an open door inviting Jesus to be more intimate with you. Will you open that door this summer?