

Title: Growth in God

by Susan Forde

Subject: Christian Disciplines

Theme: Redefining Christian Disciplines

Proposition: To continue to change, a person must practice Christian Disciplines

Transitional Sentence: By drawing near to God in a regular and authentic relationship of Christian Disciplines, motivated by love for who He is and what He has done, God will continue to transform that person in ever increasing glory for His will and grow that person in maturity and provide all that people need to be all that God wants them to be.

Introduction

The first week we talked about changing for the New Year and how to get past our good intentions to reality, the second week, we talked about my life changing relationship, my personal testimony and how God can use anyone with a willing heart to serve as we draw closer to Him and make the most of every opportunity, the third week we talked about the result of the Spirit of change and the transforming power of the Word, that is an increasing hunger and thirst for a deeper relationship with God and with one another, and for God's glory...

This week we will speak about continuing in God's transformation and what that looks like.

First I'd like to compare life to a journey. We are on the journey of life. Last week I talked about how water, bread, wine and milk had not only physical meanings, but also deeper spiritual meanings. So also is our journey of life not only physical, but spiritual. So, we need to know how to walk as Jesus did on our Christian journey of life to be all God wants us to be. Let's start with

*Phil 1:3-6, 9-11 (NIV) I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of **your partnership** in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that **he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion** until the day of Christ Jesus.*

*⁹ And this is my prayer: **that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.***

We are also partners in the work of the gospel on our journey of life. God wants to do His kingdom work and He uses the body, the church. I asked you to consider the first week that we are all ministers, first we minister to God through worship and then to each other through offering love and nurture, and finally, to the world through evangelism. God fills us to overflowing and we pour out His love and His light to others. Love the Lord... And neighbor as self.

God began a good work in all of us. His work of salvation in us involves being **partners** of the gospel and He will carry the work in us on to completion as we journey through life, in our everyday life events. Paul prayed that the Philippians may increase love and as a result that love would develop in them a deeper knowledge of God, a truth, and depth of insight into His ways, that they may be able to discern God best for their lives, and remain pure, blameless and fruit producing. That is the process of maturity. That is continuing to change into His likeness in ever-increasing glory (2 Cor 3:18). That is growth in God.

Does growth, does maturity, does continuing to change just happen? Can we just sit on our couch and watch the TV all day long and He'll just keep changing us? Oh, better not use the TV, I don't want to step on any toes. Can we just sit in front of our computer all day long and He'll just keep changing us? Oh, that's bad too... Can we just play games all day long and He'll just keep changing us? The key words are "all day long". I'm not saying that these pleasures are bad, they have purpose, they are tools, they give our lives variety, but I think you get the point.

The point is that growth doesn't just happen. In other words, we have to take action, not for our salvation, that is a free gift. The action we take is a response to who God is and all that He has done for us in His providing the free gift of salvation, in providing a way to restore our relationship with Him.

*Phil 2:12-13 (NIV) Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—**continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,**¹³ **for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.***

This talks about spiritual **growth and maturity** for God's purpose, not working to earn our own salvation. It talks about being **active** not passive, but in being active we are not alone. As we walk on our journey as Jesus did, God is with us through the Holy Spirit, remember, helping us, teaching us, guiding us? God works in us.

Our response to God's work of salvation in our lives expresses itself by **progressing, by growing, by straining and pressing on** towards the goal of God's high calling for each one of us (Phil 3:14).

The Philippians were told to "work out," in other words to **practice**. God had already worked salvation in them, but there should be some evidence of what God had already given them. More love, more knowledge and depth of insight, the ability to discern God's best for us, bearing fruit of the spirit...

We too must practice, but recognize that God is with us, enabling us to do it. But practice what?

Why Action is Necessary

Before I suggest **what** must be practiced, I would like to demonstrate **why** action is necessary.

Peter and the temple tax

Mt 17:24-27(NIV) After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum (cah-puhr'nay-uhm), the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

²⁵ "Yes, he does," he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?"

²⁶ "From others," Peter answered.

"Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. ²⁷ "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

That was really nice of Jesus to pay for Peter's tax. What a blessing. But he wanted Peter to do something in order to receive the blessing. He wanted Peter to act, in this case to practice faith that what Jesus said would happen. Do you think that it would have happened if Peter had not done as he was told? Do you think it would have happened if Peter would have gone instead to the market to buy the first fish he saw? No, he needed to be sensitive to the Lord's voice and obedient to what Jesus told him. We also need to be sensitive to the leading of God in our lives, b/c He wants the best for us and He wants us to have a deeper relationship with Him.

The man on the roof

There was a man trapped on the top of his house during a flood. The water was swiftly rising and was already up to his ankles. This was a praying man and he was praying and praying for a miraculous delivery. "God, deliver me; I believe You for a miracle."

A few moments later, a farmer friend arrives with his boat and says, "Hey, friend, want a ride to safety?"

"Nope," the man on the rooftop says, "I'm a praying man and I'm believing God for a miracle."

An hour later, the water was up to his waist. A voluntary rescue person comes by on his yellow raft. "Hey, let's get you off of there—and on to safety," he yells.

But the man on top of his house says, "No, that's ok, I'm a praying man and I'm believing God for a miracle."

Another hour passes and the water was up to his neck. The man is praying desperately just knowing that God was going to come through for him.

Fortunately, a rescue helicopter arrives to rescue the man and yells down to him, "Climb into the basket." But Roof Man refuses yelling back, "No, I'm a praying man and I'm believing God for a miracle."

Finally the water comes up to cover his mouth and then nose and he was swept away and drowned. He finds himself in heaven and he met St Peter and he was really upset and said, "I was a praying man! I was believing God for a miracle!! What happened???"

St Peter just shook his head and said, "Well, God sent two boats and a helicopter, what more did you expect?"

The man needed to take action. He needed to first of all discern that God may have rescued him or answered his prayer in a variety of ways. Secondly, he needed to get into the rescue vehicle.

He wasn't rescued b/c he didn't take action. God was faithful, but the man, even the praying man, didn't take action.

So again, we too must take action; we must practice. But practice what?

Let's look again at vv 9-11. Paul prays that the Philippians get knowledge, depth of insight, ability to discern God's best... pure, blameless, fruit bearing all for God's glory. How do we get knowledge? How do we become more discerning? It comes by having an active, authentic, intimate relationship with God. It's a daily relationship, daily sitting at the feet of Jesus so to speak, like Mary did in the story of Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42). Mary chose what was better. She chose a relationship with the Master over the busy daily activities that can overwhelm us and consume us sometimes. Jesus answered Martha when she complained that Mary was not helping her prepare, "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*" (Lk 10:41-42) We too have a choice. We can take action by choosing to make our relationship with Jesus a priority.

So once again, what do we practice?

I want to suggest that we practice Christian or Spiritual Disciplines, that we seek to deepen our relationship with God and seek growth through Christian Disciplines, that we seek to continue changing into God's likeness in ever-increasing glory by practicing Christian Disciplines even as we walk through our journey of life.

Redefining Christian Disciplines

Oh, oh, here we go again with these limiting things, this time it's not called guard rails, but called Christian Disciplines!

What image forms in your minds when you hear the words spiritual or Christian disciplines?

Do you see a man with a funny shaved head and a brown robe?

Do you have memories of being forced to do something religious?

Do you associate Spiritual Disciplines with guilt b/c you never quite succeed when you try?

Do you think of punishment? As in the other definition of discipline?

Definitions

Webster's defines it as "training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character." Well, doesn't that sound stiff?

Properly understood, the word "discipline" is an appropriate term for **that which a disciple actively practices in response to a loving God.** American Heritage Dictionary

Growth in God is about a relationship. Jesus' disciples were people just like you and me who believed what Jesus taught and followed Him. They were being trained through a relationship with Jesus as they walked along with Him in their journey of life. They then went out and taught

what He taught them. This reminds me of children. They admire and believe their parents. They idolize them and when you ask children what they want to be when they grow up, the chances are pretty good that they want to be whatever their parents are. We also want to be like Jesus, we want to walk as He did. We are disciples when we practice being Christ-like. And we become Christ-like when we are in an authentic intimate relationship with God.

We talked about “true freedom” from the first sermon. What it came down to was practicing. With the practice of Christian Disciplines we experience the improvement of the quality of our relationship with God. In Christian Disciplines, we are attempting to place ourselves in a frame of mind and heart in which God can draw us closer to Him, and use us for His purposes. Through the practice of these disciplines, we’re trying to remove some of the barriers, (sin and bad habits) that block us from experiencing God and the sheer joy of the abundant life of the kingdom of God. It’s a lifestyle in our journey of life ...it’s not about doing something out of obligation and then putting a check in the box. It’s about relationship.

It reminds me of a husband and a wife that were celebrating their anniversary... the husband brought home flowers and candy for the wife and she gushed over them and thanked him and was generally thrilled... that is, of course, until he said, “Oh, think nothing of it, I was only fulfilling my obligation.” What would the wife think if her husband responded like that rather than wanting to do something out of love? What do you think God would think if we responded to a relationship with Him as an obligation rather than responding out of love?

A relationship is not about setting aside a time for you to do something.
A relationship is about setting aside a time for you to meet with Someone.

Redefine

I am going to suggest that we consider that Christian Disciplines is meeting with God not as an obligation. The first week I said to schedule it in and write it down and that is a great way to excel and succeed in whatever we do in life, but at the same time that is not what having a relationship is about. Yes, schedule it in, yes, check it off to monitor your progress and show proof, but we don’t come into a relationship with an attitude of obligation. Like last week, we **long** for a deeper relationship with God. It becomes a regular part of our journey of life.

Here is how I define Christian Disciplines. I define it as **giving glory to God and enjoying Him forever**. That’s how I define it. Some of you from a more traditional church background may actually recognize that phrase from catechism. When I am with God, it is very enjoyable. Think of something that you enjoy so much. It’s a pleasurable experience, you look forward to your walk, you feel good afterwards, you have a sense of accomplishment, and you can’t wait to do it again. Or you get together to enjoy a friend, to talk to them, like my friend Marylou. I don’t just get together with her and then ignore her. We talk, we share. We get to a place that we cannot imagine our journey of life without that enjoyable experience.

We have been given the opportunity to enjoy God forever through a relationship with Him. Have you ever just tried enjoying God? Have you ever considered that spending time with God could be enjoyable? I have found an expression that I use quite regularly to describe the

enjoyment of an ever deepening relationship with God. It is “holy luxury.” I call it holy luxury, b/c a lot of times we find ourselves busy, too busy for God, but if we make the time for Him first and a relationship with Him first, it is a holy luxury, something enjoyable. Imagine spending time, holy luxury, with God, just for God, to get to know Him better, to bask in His presence, to have a deeper relationship, to find food for your soul, water to quench your thirst, to experience His abundance and to find rest in His provisions.

In other words, when we practice Christian Disciplines, we are meeting with God regularly, including Him in our journey of life and growing in knowledge and depth of insight, and as we spend time with God we are better able to discern His best for us.

Summary

When we know God in an authentic, intimate relationship in which we meet with Him regularly, we will not only know Him better, but be better equipped to carry out His Kingdom work (as He fills us up, we pour out of His abundance to our brothers and sisters in love and nurture and to the world through evangelism). We will be better able to hear His voice, be led by God and better able to know His will for our lives. And if God takes you through your journey of life like He is taking me through mine, one lit up stepping stone at a time or one open door at a time which requires a faith walk, the time with God will prepare you with faith to follow Him in obedience more readily. In other words, we grow in knowledge and depth of insight as we spend time with Him and get to know Him better. Then we are better able to discern His best in our journey of life.

Some of the questions to ask are: Am I growing spiritually? Am I helping my brothers and sisters grow spiritually? Am I ministering to God, to one another, and to the lost? A couple weeks back I said “make the most of every opportunity? b/c the opportunity is the call?” The call is your ministry, right? Well, you can answer the call and be very busy doing all this ministry, but if spiritual growth (or an authentic, intimate relationship with God) is not at the heart of that ministry, very little will be actually accomplished of lasting value for the kingdom. In other words, we are investing time into our calling and our ministry, but if God hasn't filled us up because we are not spending time regularly with Him, it's coming from our own strength and resources. When it comes from our own strength, it is like investing money into a bucket with a hole in it.

In our journey of life, we walk as Jesus did, in relationship with His Father and we continue His work of love and compassion, but the heart of ministry is loving God and the result of loving God is that He fills you up and enables you to effectively love and minister to people. (Mk 12:30-31.)

So the call this week, is a call to a deeper relationship with God through the work of Jesus, His life, death, resurrection and ascension. God made a way to restore the broken relationship. That means He wants a relationship with each and every one of us. He's calling us to a deeper relationship through Christian Disciplines that is spending time, authentic, intimate time with God to know Him better, to become more like Him, and to grow in His love and knowledge. To grow in God.