

Celebration of Discipline: What's the Big Deal?
Presented at the Gospel Fellowship Church
August 11, 2005
By Jack Heppner

Introduction

Many of us enjoy going on trips. It is exciting to see new places, learn new things about our world, and experience things for the first time. There is another kind of trip we can take, and that is to explore the interior of our souls. There may be even more to learn about and experience on such a trip than on one that explores the world around us.

Today we have begun a focus on spiritual disciplines in our adult Sunday School classes which will take us right until Christmas. We are using Richard Foster's book, "Celebration of Discipline" as a guide, both for the three adult classes as well as the sermons we will be presenting during the worship services.

This presents a unique challenge for those of us who will be preaching during this time because there will always be two audiences. One audience will already have reflected on the subject of any given Sunday before the sermon begins, but for another audience – those who have chosen not to attend these Sunday School classes or read Foster's book – the material preached will be new each time we speak. Our goal will be to address both audiences, but we need to ask for understanding from both.

To the first audience, we who speak, will commit ourselves not just to repeat what you have discussed in your classes. If that were the case you might as well leave when the children go for Children's Church. We will try to motivate and encourage us all to grow these disciplines in our lives – to actually do something about them. Yet some of what you hear may sound similar to what you heard in Sunday School.

To the second audience, we commit ourselves to say enough about the basics of the discipline we are focusing on, on any given Sunday so that we don't leave you wondering what we are talking about. But you may find us skipping fairly quickly to the motivational dimension related to any given discipline. Hopefully this exercise from now until Christmas will, in one way or another, draw us all deeper into the journey of Christian growth as we encourage one another to develop healthy spiritual disciplines.

Dangers and Disciplines

I must confess, that while I see great potential for us as a community of faith if we become more adept at exercising Spiritual disciplines, I also see some dangers lurking on the horizon. I say this not to discourage us to the point where we turn our ship around and flee the threatening clouds that come with a focus on disciplines. I say this to warn us of

the dangers that lie ahead so we will navigate our ships with greater alertness and care so as not to end up on the rocks.

I have learned in my short lifetime that anything worth pursuing will have dangers and risks connected with it. But also that it's usually worth the trip. And so, I believe, it is with the pursuit of spiritual disciplines. Letting your sailing ship feel the strain of the wind in its sails is so much better than keeping your ship in the quiet waters of a safe harbor all its life. I am afraid that too often we massage Christianity to the point where it becomes nice and comfortable for us – no risks, no dangers, no challenge – only safe and quiet waters. We sometimes even preach that way. But...

*I'd rather be the ship that sails
And rides the billows wild and free
Than be the ship that always fails
To leave its port and go to sea.*

*I'd rather feel the sting of strife
Where gales are born and tempests roar;
Than settle down to useless life
And rot in drydock on the shore.*

*I'd rather fight some mighty wave
With honor in supreme command;
And find at last a well earned grave
Than die in ease upon the sand.*

*I'd rather drive when sea storms blow
And be the ship that always failed
To make the ports where it would go
Than be the ship that never sailed.*

Sailing a ship takes disciplined sailors. Making headways in the journey of faith also requires disciplines. But let us not be blind to fact that pursuing spiritual disciplines has its dangers. If there ever were “disciplined” religious people, it was the Pharisees of Jesus day. Their every waking moment was spent trying to perfect the disciplines that set them apart from the average person. They tithed “mint and dill and cummin” – precisely, down to a seed count. They spent hours in study and prayers. They avoided any unclean thing like the plague. They fasted regularly. They kept the law nearly flawlessly, at least outwardly. You might say they were heroes of the disciplined religious life.

And yet Jesus had little good to say about them. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ... You blind guides, straining at gnats and swallowing a camel* (Matthew 23:23-24)!

Jesus warned his followers, *“When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward”*(Matthew 6:2).

“They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogue, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men (Matthew 23:4-7).

So as we set sail on our journey toward greater spiritual discipline, the “lookout guy” sitting in the crow’s nest shouts down to us, *“Dangers ahead! Brace yourselves against the waves.”*

Make no mistake about it. The enemy of our souls will not take it lying down when a hundred people in one place leave their safe harbors and head out to sea. When they take on the challenge of becoming disciplined men and women of faith, we should expect attack designed to drive us back into our safe harbors, there to die in ease upon the sand. You will experience discouragement at your slow progress, and embarrassment at being found out how undisciplined you really are. You might even be tempted to find a biblical way around the exercise of spiritual disciplines, to spare you the effort, as many have done before you.

We will be tempted with pride when we take note, or especially if others take note, that we have made some progress on one or two spiritual disciplines. And if we are not careful, successes on this journey will enflame the perfectionism that so many of us wrestle with. And perfectionism, if allowed to blossom, always rises up to bite your backside. We will be tempted to compare ourselves with others with the light shining on us of course, or to sink into the despair that says, “I just can’t do this! I don’t have what it takes.”

Nevertheless, in spite of the dangers that come with the disciplines, we are setting sail to explore spiritual disciplines that have the potential of producing healthy spiritual growth for all of us individually and as a community.

Bridging the Gap

As I mentioned earlier, there are people who have figured out a biblical way to avoid the “blood, sweat and tears” that come with developing spiritual disciplines. And it really is quite simple. All you have to do is keep reminding yourself and others that all we are and do is by the “grace of God”. And of course there is enough truth in this statement for some to justify not putting forth any significant effort. “We are saved by faith, and we live by faith,” we can say, without batting an eyelash, which leaves me free to just be on the receiving end of things. God will make of me what he wants in his own time. I don’t want to be bothered.

Some have even developed their predestinarian theology to the point that they say that if I strive to develop spiritual disciplines I am guilty of trying to earn my salvation or gain extra brownie points. Or at least I will be challenging the sovereignty of God. If God wants me to be a disciplined Christian he will see to it that it happens. I wouldn’t get to

first base anyway. So, que será, será. Whatever will be, will be. Some hold to this position openly and piously. Some of us hold to it secretly with a tinge of guilt – knowing that that can not be the whole story.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who suggest that it is all up to me. If I want a bag of peanuts I have to put in my quarter. There are no free meals on this trip. I alone am responsible to do what it takes to make positive changes in my life. And as in the former position, there is enough truth in this statement that it appeals to many of us. I can't change you and you can't change me. Just try it! I alone must make decisions and choices that bring about changes in my life. The rows and rows of "self-help" books in bookstores basically follow this line of thinking. And if you check them out, you will find to your amazement, perhaps, that some of the advice given actually works to bring about changes in your life. It all depends on you. Some hold to this position openly and proudly. Some of us hold to it secretly – with a quiet and subtle arrogance.

It seems to me that the way of spiritual disciplines bridges the gap between these two – partly right and partly wrong – positions. I believe the biblical view is somewhere on the bridge between these two polarities. If you say that, however, it means that most likely you will get walked on from both ends. But that is, after all, the definition of a bridge, is it not – a contraption that gets walked on from both ends. We find in scripture an interweaving of two threads – one that we are what we are by the grace of God, and two; that we are called to put forth effort to grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Its really impossible to pull one or the other of these threads out of the biblical text with integrity.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works lest anyone should boast.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God Prepared before hand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8-10)

Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand... (Rom. 5:2)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...(Rom. 12:1)

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...

Let us use them: if prophecy in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:6-8).

By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead... (I Peter 1:3)

Therefore gird up your minds, be sober...As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance...love one another earnestly from the heart...(I Peter 1:13-22).

Perhaps no other verse of scripture binds God's grace and our effort into one package as well as 2 Peter 3:18:

But grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

These are just a few examples illustrating that we can never stay camped for too long in either the camp of grace nor that of human effort. Scripture moves back and forth readily between the two in a natural kind of way – as though there is a bridge between the two. And it seems to me that it is the bridge of spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are born and bathed in grace, but at the same time require a volitional response. So when we seek to grow through spiritual disciplines it will mean that we will need to walk on both ends of the bridge. Perhaps moving from one end to the other as naturally and as readily as scripture does. Touching base with grace regularly as well as putting forth some effort regularly. That, in my mind, is living biblically. That is bridging the gap needed for Christian growth to happen.

Let us not forget that god's grace has and does frequently operate in our lives even without us know it. But we are now talking about how to grow in grace once we have tasted it.

Two Illustrations

I have thought long and hard about how I could illustrate the significance of living on the bridge - living in grace, yet acting in a disciplined and responsible way. I came up with two illustrations, although they are far from perfect. I have pulled them from our experience as Jesus did his parables. If the first one doesn't click with you, perhaps the second one will.

For the first illustration I will request that all lights in the sanctuary be turned off. Thank you. As we sit here in semi-darkness, let us think about the power this building is loaded with. It is hooked up to electric power and it surrounds you. It is in the ceiling, in the walls, in the floor. Electric power is alive and well in this building. But right now it is not helping us very much to see things and people around us, let alone read a paper. Would it help if someone called Manitoba Hydro to tell them that we are sitting in semi-darkness? If someone did come out to assess the situation, what would he say? Probably he would say, a little sarcastically, "Have you ever heard of turning on switches?"

Now that is a novel idea! I think that the practice of spiritual disciplines is something like turning on switches. It takes some effort. It means finding the switches and then moving them to another position. (Actually it would have been better to have dimmer switches for this illustration to be more true to life, because seldom does the full work of grace happen in an instant. But I didn't want to go to that expense.) So as we learn the discipline of **meditation**, for example and practice it, grace begins to flow more readily into our lives. As we learn the discipline of **prayer**, more grace and light finds its way into our walk. And so it happens with all the disciplines. As we learn about them and how to use them our world begins to lighten up – as I said, probably more gradually than our "on-off" switches illustrate. Nevertheless, you get the point. As you grow in the

disciplines they become channels through which God's grace can flow more freely. As Richard Foster says, "The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us."

So we meditate and pray. Then we learn and practice of **fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance and celebration.** (*With the mention of each discipline another light goes on.*) Through the exercise of spiritual disciplines we can actually walk in the light, as He is in the light.

The second illustration has to do with water and how we access it. Where I grew up on the prairies we had no real wells, but we had dugouts or ponds. Because we didn't want cattle wallowing in the pond - messing up our swimming hole - we had a shallow well dug beside the pond with an underground pipe connecting it to the water in the pond. One of our regular summer chores was to pump water for the cattle out of this well with an old tall pump on top of the well. That is perhaps where I learned the most about the power of gravity. The water resisted being drawn to the top. It was hard and seemingly endless toil. Cows drink a lot of water on a hot summer day!

It is possible to see spiritual disciplines like this. A lot of hard work. Endless toil and then, just when we think we have done okay, the fruit of our toil keeps disappearing on us – like water into the bellies of our cows. If we view spiritual disciplines like this it is small wonder that most of us know so little about them. It just looks like too much effort for too little gain. And it leaves the impression that God is reluctant to supply us with living water – we have to pump out every liter of God's blessing by our own strength.

But there is another way of getting water out of the ground. If you are lucky you have an artesian well on your property. The water is right there. It is plentiful and wants to come up. But if you don't turn on the tap it won't begin to flow. Now I have an artesian well here, although it is upside down to the real thing. (A pressurized tank would have illustrated the point a little better.) But even in this model, the water wants to emerge, but the tap is turned off. So in a sense grace is available but we are not available. Learning and practicing spiritual disciplines is like turning on the tap so we become available to the work of God's grace in our lives.

So each time we grow in one of the disciplines the tap opens a little farther making more of the living water available to us. (*Turn the tap from the "artesian well" thus opening the tap gradually as you read the next sentence.*) We learn to practice **meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance and celebration,** in each case making ourselves available for God to do his work in us.

We are All Beginners

Now when it comes to spiritual disciplines all of us are beginners. Yes, some might be somewhat ahead of others in one or the other discipline. But none of us reaches the ultimate goal in any of them in this lifetime. That is true partly because once you begin

reaping the benefits of practicing any particular discipline, you begin to realize how great its potential really is. And you begin to marvel at how great God is and how eagerly he wants you to be filled with all the fullness of his grace. We can not exhaust God's vast storehouse of grace and love. Each discipline we learn, while beginning to transform our lives, will also open our eyes to the vast and incomprehensible greatness of God's grace and love that stretches as far as our spiritual eyes can see.

I think F. M. Lehman caught a glimpse of what I mean when he penned the words of the familiar hymn, "The Love of God". Verse four reads like this:

*Could we with ink the oceans fill, And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill, And every man a scribe by trade.
To write the love of God above, Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky.*

Have you ever been to the place on your spiritual pilgrimage at which you could have written these words with integrity? I think our foray into the world of spiritual disciplines just might take you there. But it will mean turning on switches and opening taps. I used to think the images in this hymn were a bit cheesy and outdated, but the more I think about them the more I long to be in the place where I could truthfully write similar words.

But all of us are beginners. On a scale of one to ten, most of us do well if we reach two or three on most disciplines. Perhaps in a few cases some of us reach four or five. So we have nothing to brag about. We don't boast about the benefits of spiritual disciplines. We talk about them in hushed tones – in the context of quiet intimacies. We don't compare ourselves with others. We just live with a growing dismay of what we have missed thus far. And that dismay is only assuaged by the wonder and awe of the grace of God we see flowing in and through us as we keep turning switches and opening taps. Oh, the wonder of it all, the wonder of it all...it is so much more than we can begin to imagine.

Disciplines and Community

In our individualistic culture, it seems natural for Christians to think only in terms of the benefits they might personally receive from the exercise of spiritual disciplines. Make no mistake, there are personal rewards to be gained. But in God's economy, in God's Kingdom, the end result is not a bunch of happy and fulfilled individualists. Rather it is the development of true community in Christ. And so, if we give ourselves to the practice of spiritual disciplines as individuals we will gradually become aware that it has become at the same time a recipe for the formation of true community.

Much of Christian community these days is built on the hollow hopes of a consumer-oriented culture. And too often these are shallow communities with every one trying to suck up as much as possible for him or herself. I believe that a more sure way to build communities of the heart is the way of spiritual disciplines. In the end we find our true

selves, but ourselves in the context of a community embraced by the love and grace of God.

Can you see it? I see it through a glass darkly. Lord, please take away the “darkly” part. Amen.

[Click here to comment on this sermon](#)