

Scripture Reading: Joel 2:1-11... NIV (“mighty are those who obey his command”)

Sermon Title: “**Spiritual Discipline**”

Pray

Tonight I’ve felt led to share on a topic that is relatively simple, but critical to the growth of each Christian and to the church as a whole. And that topic is Spiritual Discipline. What I want to emphasize is Faithfulness in our Personal Relationship with God. I’m going to share a bit of my past and how we can grow in discipline and mature in Christ. I hope and pray this message may encourage each of you.

Before starting, let’s turn to Proverbs 1...

Proverbs 1:7 – The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

Proverbs 1:32-33 – For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.”

I was sloppy

When I first truly began pursuing Christ back in high school, I knew that there were some necessary things for me to do to know the Lord more: prayer, read the Bible, and go to church. That was about all I knew. I wanted to know the Lord more, but I was also a bit lazy. I would put off reading the Bible and praying until just before I would sleep. I would read just one chapter or less and kept my prayer time short. For the most part though, I was at least faithful with that.

During the first semester of my freshman year of college I continued with my lax approach to God. I’d fill my day with secular music, secular stuff, do my own thing, and then just before bed I would give God a little time. And because I was so lazy, I began to wonder if that little bit of time with God was even worth it at all. I didn’t feel like I was growing that much, maybe I should quit?

The centipede

I remember one night I attended a rock concert with my roommate at a local club. I left early because my ears were about to explode but I still didn’t get to my room until 2am. I was tired as I got up into my loft to sleep. So I said to God, “I’m tired God, this can wait until tomorrow night.” But then as I went to turn out the light, I saw this dark shadow move across the corner of the ceiling on the other side of the room. It looked like it might be a huge bug. It was on my roommate’s side so I thought about just letting him deal with it, but the thing was moving fast and I decided I couldn’t sleep knowing that it was around. I grabbed some tissues and went over to kill it. As I got close I realized it was a huge, fat, centipede. It was as fat around as 500 원 (a quarter) and had a ton of big legs. I realized I needed more tissues, that just two tissues wouldn’t be enough. I

grabbed about six tissues and went back up to it. After I gathered my courage I grabbed at it with two hands. As I squeezed it I felt it break into pieces into my hand. I danced in disgust as I squeezed it in the tissues a few more times before slamming it into the trash can. And after that, I was wide awake. I got back up on my bed and told God, “You win” and had my quiet time with Him.

God was telling me He wanted to spend some time with me, even if it was late. It was too bad that in all of my selfishness and laziness that it took a huge centipede to wake me up to realize it.

The Busy Husband

It was about this time that I began to be convicted of my relationship with God. You see, I used to be all into relationships, dating and marriage. I was constantly on the lookout for my next girlfriend and I would read a bunch of books on relationships. I would read books like, “The Five Love Languages” and try and prepare myself for getting married. Yes, I was 18 years old at this time. I would read stories about all these wives who were unloved and would share that their only time really talking with their husband was just before they would go to bed, and that usually he would be so sleepy that he wouldn’t remember much from it the next day. He was just too busy working, relaxing, and taking care of things to spend quality time. I would shake my head as I would read about these negligent husbands. I would think to myself, “My wife would be the most important person. I would be so much more faithful. I would want to spend time with her more than anyone else.” **I mean, what you invest your time in is what is important to you.** Right?

Let me say that again, **“What you invest your time in is what is important to you.”**

Please say that to the person sitting next to you, **“What you invest your time in is what is important to you.”**

And then I felt God ask me, **“How important am I to you?”** Here the God of the universe, who sent His Son to die for my sins, was asking me how much He means to me... and as I thought about the past few years of my relationship with Him all I could think of was, “about 15 minutes a night and Sunday morning.” That’s how much you mean to me.

I knew something needed to change. But to be honest, I wasn’t getting anything out of the Bible and felt it was a waste of time. My prayer walk was weak and I really didn’t know how to have an effective prayer time. I had little fellowship. I didn’t know what to do.

Ask!!!

So what do you do when you are you in the same position as I was. You want to grow and you want to be disciplined, but you don’t know how to go about it? **The first step is... pray.**

James 1:5 – If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

Self Imposed Curses

Before I go on with my story, **I am going to share something very important here that you have to understand when you pray: you have to believe.** The very next three verses in James go like this... and as you read them, think of people who are disciplined...

James 1:6-8 – But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave on the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”

Many people say they want to grow with God. They say they want to be disciplined. They say they want to read the Bible more. They say a lot of things. **But they lack the will to do them.** They follow up saying their desires with, “I’m just too undisciplined. I’m just too busy. I’m just too lazy. I’ll never get better.”

What they don’t realize is that they are doubting the power of God who lives within them. **They are thinking that they have to become disciplined on their own, that they have to prove to God that they love Him by their own self sufficiency, and then when they fail, they feel hopeless.** I believe that such negative thoughts, especially when spoken, bring about self-imposed curses upon ourselves.

Matthew 12:36-37 – But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

Our words have power. When we say negative thoughts about ourself, we are doubting God within us. And that can lead to grave consequences. An example of this is in Numbers 13 and 14 when the twelve spies return from exploring the Promised Land.

Numbers 13:30-31 – Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.”

Numbers 14:2: All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert!”

After all their complaining God responds to them...

Numbers 14:28-29a – So tell them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very things I heard you say: In the desert your bodies will fall.’

The only people able to enter the Promised Land were Joshua and Caleb, the only two who had professed faith in the Lord.

When it comes to spiritual discipline, so many people want it but lack the faith to believe they could ever truly grow. They are wrapped up in their past failures. And this can go with any other addictive sin as well; there is this feeling of defeat and hopelessness. **But God tells us not to look at ourselves and our own defeats, but to look at Him and to know that His resurrection power lives within us**, just as Brother Christian preached this past Sunday. What God wants us to do is to be real with Him and ask. Ask for Him to help you.

Hebrews 4:15-16 – For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The verse ends with, “**Find grace to help us in our time of need.**” That goes for every need. We are called to approach God in our time of need and ask. And more than any other need on earth, God knows that our greatest need is a relationship with Him. Believe me, He wants to help us know Him more.

Psalm 145:16 – You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

If we are struggling in a specific area of our walk, we need to approach God and look for Him to satisfy our needs, to help us in our struggles.

Psalm 146:5 – Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God.

You are not going to become disciplined on your own. You aren’t going to mature and be victorious on your own. Every good and perfect thing comes from God. We have to ask of Him to attain victory.

Accountability

Okay, now let’s get back to my story. My prayer walk was weak. I was getting nothing out of the Word. I had little fellowship. I needed help. So I began to pray and ask God to help me. I kept praying, “Lord, help me grow with You. I want to know You more. Help me.” And after time, God began answering my prayer.

God led me to join an accountability group that met once a week. Our leader had us read 24 chapters of the Bible a week and we decided to set rules to help be disciplined. If one of us failed to do the reading, we would have to all read the same 24 chapters again and *also* read the next 24 chapters. During our meetings we were able to share our struggles and pray for each other, strengthening one another in our weaknesses. We didn’t have pity parties like, “Oh yeah, I struggle with that too, boo hoo.” Instead we really encouraged one another and prayed for each other.

Despite this accountability though, I still wasn't getting much out of the Word. I remember reading 24 chapters of Isaiah and then thinking to myself, "I don't think I got a single thing out of any of this." I didn't know about Babylon, Assyria, or the people of Judah. I would ask myself, "Who are these people???" Some of the chapters were just plain confusing. **I realized I was just reading to get through it, so I wasn't growing with God.** I felt conviction inside to start taking notes. I decided I would type one sentence about each chapter I would read. I saved these notes on my computer. The first few months were pretty humorous looking back. Like my summary of Isaiah 13 – "God is really angry and will destroy Babylon." Nice. But you know what? **You first have to learn to crawl before you learn to walk.** As I kept praying and asking for more of God, a hunger began to grow in me. And I began to feast on the Word. Those one sentence chapter summaries turned to small paragraphs and then to full pages. By the end of college, that document of my Bible reading notes had become 390 typed pages, 12point font, single spaced. Growing in the Word didn't happen overnight, but it did indeed happen.

The accountability group gave me greater discipline for the Word, but I still needed to improve my prayer time. Then God led me to attend the spiritual maturity 201 class at my church. The class taught the basics of each spiritual discipline.

I want to share briefly how they taught us to pray. There are many different teachings on how to pray and I think we each can grow in different ways in our prayer walk with God, but this specific way really helped bring structure. Please turn to Matthew chapter 6 and let's look at the Lord's prayer. We start with verse nine.

Matthew 6:9 – This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.'

1st P – Praise. Prayer should always start with praise. When you enter the courts of a king you always enter with reverence and praise. Even great men in the Bible like David, Daniel, and Paul gave proper respect to the kings and men of authority. So much more are we to give proper respect to God.

Psalm 100:4 – Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.

Praising God also helps get our focus off ourselves and onto Him. We remember He is in control of everything. We also remember His character (He is our Father!) and that He is gracious and loving.

Next in the Lord's prayer...

Matthew 6:10 – Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

2nd P – Purpose. After praise, this is the next most important part of the prayer. **What is your purpose in life??? Why are you praying???** Is it for selfish reasons? Is it all about you? All about your future, your emotions, your needs? Or is it about God's kingdom? About living for Him? About discovering His will for You. About obeying His commands and callings in our lives and seeing His kingdom come? **If you want to grow in spiritual discipline, your priorities have to be straight.** We don't, "Become a better you," for our own sake, for our own benefit. We "become a better you" for God's sake, for His glory. **I don't care how great your motives might be in the world's eyes, if your motives aren't for God then God isn't pleased and He isn't going to use you.**

Proverbs 19:21 – Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.

We have victory when we are living for His purposes.

Next in the Lord's prayer...

Matthew 6:11 – Give us today our daily bread.

3rd P – Provision. This one is the easiest for us; this is when we lay down our prayer requests before God. We have already declared God is king and that He is holy. We have declared that we are living for His purposes. And now we ask for His help. Now we ask for more of Him, for spiritual growth, for His blessing.

Next...

Matthew 6:12a – Forgive us our debts...

4th P – Pardon. This is when we need to pray and ask God to examine our hearts and lead us to repent of any selfish motives and of any sins we may have committed.

Next...

Matthew 6:12b – ... as we also have forgiven our debtors.

5th P – People. Not only are we to repent for our own sins, but we are called to forgive those who have sinned against us. Ephesians 6:18 also tells us to continually intercede for the saints. In this part of prayer we are called to intercede for those around us, for our church, and for whatever else the Spirit lays on our hearts.

Matthew 6:13 – And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Last P – Protection. We aren't in heaven yet. The world is still a battleground between Satan's kingdom and God's kingdom. **We are advancing, but only through God's grace.** We need to ask for His protection daily. Amen.

So to sum it up, I just listed the 6 P's... Praise, Purpose, Provision, Pardon, People, and Protection. I would write out this structure in my prayer journal and leave plenty of space between each P. Then I would write down praises, thoughts, and prayer requests under each section. And my prayer time began to grow. It wasn't just me aimlessly praying anymore.

And as I grew in prayer, I also was convicted again of the "busy husband" analogy. I had always put off my prayer time until bedtime when I would be tired and not be my best. I felt God convict me to give Him the best time of my day and prioritize Him first. I moved my prayer time to earlier in the day when I would be most alert and would have a good amount of time. And God blessed this. With each semester my daily prayer time grew both in time with God and also intimacy with Him. My relationship with Him grew deeper and deeper. When you invest time into someone, you are going to know them more. When you invest your time into someone wonderful, you are going to love them more and more. **When you invest your time in God Almighty... He won't disappoint you.**

There are other important disciplines in our walk with God, such as giving, serving, fasting, and fellowship. I felt a desire to emphasize the Word and prayer today.

I think that many of us in our walk with God want the quick solutions. We want the anointing and the favor of God immediately. We want the miracles and the ministry. What we have to understand is God is looking for people who are fully dedicated to Him. He wants the relationship more than anything else.

In Between Chapters

When I read the Bible I often wonder about the stories in between chapters. Take the stories of Abraham for example. We only read small bits of events in his life that spanned 175 years. Sometimes I would wonder what was happening in between chapters. I believe it was a life of faithfulness and devotion. We know that Joseph was enslaved and imprisoned for about 13 years of his life. We know he prayed during that time and was faithful to God. And that is about it. We know that the great man of God, Daniel, prayed to the Lord three times a day. **He was faithful to the Lord so much to the point that all the leaders of the kingdom knew Daniel's schedule and priorities.** Daniel's quiet time and discipline are only mentioned in the Bible because it caused him to be tossed into the lion's den. It was that devotion, that discipline, that gave Daniel and all the other great men of God the resolve to be faithful to God in their troubles.

God Is Watching

I want to encourage you that God sees you and is with you during your every quiet time with Him. He loves His time with you. And if He has to, He will even send a big centipede to you to make sure you spend time with Him.

If you guys fast, you've probably noticed that on the day of your fasting you are usually offered food that you are not usually offered. I would get angry at first and say, "Away from me Satan! Do not tempt me!" But then I began to realize those "temptations" were

pretty lame and were actually a sign that I was doing something right. I mean, **if there is no temptation, then that means Satan doesn't care.**

When I first arrived to Korea I fasted every Wednesday. And amazingly, pretty much every Wednesday I would fast someone would bring me donuts as a gift. And I love donuts. I would laugh to myself and put the donuts away until my fast was over. This happened nearly every time. Well, I got sick for a time and had to stop fasting for a while. After getting stronger again, I fasted another Wednesday. But this day, no donuts. I remember around dinner time I went into my room and laid down and prayed and asked God with a smile, "Where are my donuts? Is this fast pleasing to You?" Late at night an old friend of mine came by for a short visit. Sure enough, he had a box of Dunkin's Donuts in his hand as a gift for me. Praise God! God is indeed watching. ☺

So to conclude this message, I want to encourage you all to be faithful and disciplined in seeking the Lord. He will reward you. And if you are struggling in these areas, know that all you need to do is pray and ask for help. Pray and ask in faith, because God will not deny you. He wants an intimate relationship with you. He wants you to be strong, disciplined, and ready. His power lives within you.

1Corinthians 15:57 – Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pray

- Have people pray and ask God to give them and the church a greater hunger for Him and greater discipline in seeking Him.
- Have the people pray that as the church grows in faithfulness and discipline in their personal time with God, that warriors may rise up and the church may become strong and uniform in Christ.