

# Imitating Christ:

## Through Dependence and Discipline

Philippians 2:12-18

In last week's message, we considered the necessity of having Christ as the epicenter of our life and as the One on the throne of our life. After all, if we believe that our Lord sits on the throne of the universe, then how can it possibly make sense to relegate the Master to a lesser place in our life?

This morning I want to begin to deal with the dichotomy – the wide gulf – that often exists between our theology and the way we actually live our life. As the Lord has been dealing with me in recent times, He has shown me that there is a great need for the high theology of the seminary or the church sanctuary to be brought out onto the streets, into our places of employment, and into our homes where we actually live. Our high theology states that our Jesus is a great King, the Mighty God, in fact, that He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. In our practical everyday living, however, how many of us actually live the way Jesus lived? If we did, would we be considered oddballs?

As I examine my own life and the lives of my ministry colleagues, I must ask the question, “How many of us actually live the way Christ lived, or even as Paul lived?” In reflecting on our Lord's dependence on the Father and in his disciplined approach to life, I confess that I feel rather ashamed. What a beautiful balance there is between dependence and discipline in the life of the Master! It is a balance that is too often missing in my own life. I strongly suspect that I am not alone. I suspect that many professing Christians struggle with the task of trying to translate what they hear and believe about Christ into day-to-day action and lifestyle. It is a tremendous struggle for most of us to actually live out our faith in practical terms.

In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul seems to contradict himself. First he says, “*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*” In the very next breath he states that, “*It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*” We are left spinning! Do we work it out, or do we sit back passively and let **God** do the willing and the working? The answer is that Paul is showing us a picture of the beautiful balance between a life of dependence on God and a life of spiritual discipline. On the human side, we are responsible to work out – not work for – our salvation; that is, we must work out the implications of the salvation we have received in practical everyday living. On the divine side, it is God who works in us to create godly desires and to provide the power to accomplish His purposes. God takes the initiative by implanting His desires in us and making His power available to us, but He does this without canceling our responsibility. We must take the initiative to practice a life of spiritual discipline in which our work leans on His power. There is a balance, a synergy, a working together, of God and man.

### Dependence

Now let us be sure about the fact that the life of Christ can be reproduced in us only by the indwelling presence and power of the Spirit of God. There must be an inner work of God, a divine enabling, without which we have no hope of either salvation or the Christian life. Paul said, “*If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ*” (Rom. 8:9). Jesus said, “*Apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). So, it is essential that we develop a sense of dependence upon the Spirit's power in all that we attempt to do. That's why Paul added, “*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh*” (Gal. 5:16). Jesus said, “*I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does*” (John 5:19).

When we listen to Jesus, and to Paul, it becomes so clear. We were never meant to create life! We are meant, however, to receive the life of God and display Christ's life in us from day to day in real and practical ways.

## **Discipline**

So, dependence on God is crucial and indispensable. But that's not the end of the story, for there can be no growth, no development, no progress, and no Christ-like living apart from discipline and self-control. As Kenneth Boa reminds us, "Spirituality [spiritual maturity] is not instantaneous or haphazard; it is developed and refined." The New Testament letters are full of exhortations to obey, walk, fight, reckon, pursue, and imitate. These are action verbs. There is nothing passive about them. We do not simply wake up some morning to discover that during the night the Lord waved a magic wand thereby making us spiritually mature. That is why, in describing the Christian life, Paul used such metaphors as the athlete, the soldier, and the farmer to paint pictures of the discipline required in the Christian life.

Nowhere is the need for discipline more evident than in the life of the athlete. It is those hours of training off the field that give the athlete the freedom and ability to play well when the game begins. The star performer didn't hone his skills by trying to perform in a certain way *only during the game*. No, the skills that are so evident in the game were developed over years of practice and preparation of both mind and body. The mental toughness, the muscular development, and the proper techniques and skills were all developed on the *practice* field.

Think about young people who idolize their favorite athletes. They want to pitch or bat the ball as well as their idol does. They want to pass or catch the football just as they see it being done on television. Young men growing up in Vancouver want to be Roberto Luongo or Geroy Simon.

But they don't get to be like these heroes simply by watching them on television. They must make a conscious choice to commit their time to a rigorous training regimen if they are to have any chance of performing at a high level in an actual game. This training regimen may seem to be enslaving, but it is actually liberating because it results in the freedom to be able to play the game with excellence.

How true this is in every other field of endeavor! You may have the desire to sit at a piano and make glorious music, but if there is no willingness to invest the time, energy, and discipline to make it happen, it will never be more than a dream. Only those who sit at the keyboard and practice hour after hour develop the freedom to make the piano sing. Discipline is always the pathway to freedom rather than bondage. This is the case whether one wants to be a musician, an athlete, a doctor, a mechanic, an accountant, or anything in life that requires knowledge and skill. So it is in the Christian life.

In the New Testament we see a Jesus who not only depended on his Father as the source of his words and actions, but who engaged in the essential disciplines of solitude and silence, prayer and fasting, submission, sacrifice and service, study, and simplicity. He understood that these practices are not optional for those who are passionate about glorifying God and doing His will. Such activities as seeking out a place of solitude and silence where our Lord could pray and meditate were not ends in themselves, but only the means to an end. Jesus wanted to commune with the Father from whom would come strength and power. Nowhere do we see this more pointedly than when Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed for forty days. One might think that such an ordeal would have rendered Jesus too weak for battle with Satan, but instead, what we see in Jesus is great strength and power. The forty days of fasting and prayer were a time of gathering strength and increasing power. Satan never had a chance!

Make no mistake about this. This time of solitude and silence in the wilderness, this time of fasting and prayer, was not a one-time event. The Bible tells us that it was the Master's habit to rise early and seek a place of solitude where he could pray (Mk. 1:35; Lk. 4:42; 6:12). At times, he would go to a mountainside and spend the night in prayer. This he did immediately prior to choosing the Twelve.

As for the Twelve, they, like us, were slow to learn from the Master's example. You will remember the occasion of the Transfiguration. Upon coming down the mountain, Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, was greeted by a commotion. A young lad had been demonized. The boy's father had asked the other disciples to cast it out, but they could not. When Jesus cast out the evil spirit, his disciples asked the Lord why they had been unable to perform the deed. Jesus said, "*This kind can come out only by prayer*" (Mk. 9:29). You see, when the moment of crisis came, when the disciples were suddenly put on the spot, they were powerless because they were unprepared. They unexpectedly found themselves in a deadly *game* for which they had not trained.

What astonishes me is how slow I have been to understand these things more fully. How easy it is to buy into the illusion that we can be like Christ without imitating his spiritual disciplines and life practices. Do we really believe that Jesus knew how to live? If the answer is, "Yes," then does it not make sense for us to follow Him in practicing the same spiritual disciplines? I see people wearing bracelets asking, "What would Jesus do?" But I say that it is vain to even ask such a question if we are not willing to practice the habits we know he practiced. It's like trying to play the piano without ever having practiced!

Kenneth Boa is not being unfair when he laments:

**"We desire to know Christ more deeply, but we shun the lifestyle that would make it happen ... It is easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that without the active and painful formation of godly character, we will have the capacity to make the right choices whenever we need to."**

He is so right! It is the disciplines acquired *off the stage* that prepare an actor to perform well when the curtain goes up and he finds himself under the heat of the spotlight. It is the hours of training *off the field* that equip the athlete to play well when the game begins. Similarly, it is the times that we seek out a place of solitude and silence where we can study, meditate, fast and pray, that equip us to live well – in fact, to live like Christ – during seasons of uncertainty and times of testing.

When I think about the kinds of behavior Jesus told us to do (e.g. take up your cross, go the second mile, turn the other cheek, love your enemies, bless those who persecute you etc.) I do not believe for one minute that he ever intended that these should be accomplished in our own strength. They were upheld as being illustrative of the kinds of behavior that might be expected of a new kind of person, one who cultivates quiet times of fellowship and communion with God, one who studies the Word and who prays regularly.

I know that this is the last thing that Satan wants. Satan hates it when a believer regularly schedules a quiet time in a place of solitude. Satan is so afraid that in silence we might hear God that he tries to fill every moment with noise. We need to turn off our televisions and our radios and spend quiet time with the Lord.

I want to challenge every member of this church to take the following steps:

1. Schedule time every day for Bible-reading and meditation. Get into the Word of God!
2. Pray about what you have read. Ask the Lord to show you its meaning and application for your life.
3. Purchase an inexpensive notebook and begin to keep a spiritual journal. That is, while you are meditating and praying on the Word, write down the thoughts that enter your mind. I believe that if you show the Lord that you are so serious about what He says to you that you are willing to write it down, then He will open the floodgates of Heaven and speak to you. You will hear from God, and you will know that it is Him!
4. Schedule a regular time on the calendar, whether it be once a week or once a month, when you will fast. Your time of fasting may be for a day, for half a day, for an evening, or for some other appropriate time. It may be a total fast, or a partial fast in which you take only liquids. The point is that fasting is more conducive to prayer than feasting! A time of solitude, silence, and fasting clears the mind in preparation for communing with God. Done for the right reasons, it is life-changing.

Picture a congregation of believers who are individually studying the Word of God, meditating on it, praying, hearing from the Lord, and writing down what they are hearing. Now picture them coming together to study and pray in groups where they can share what they believe the Lord is telling them. There is no doubt in my mind that the Spirit of God would galvanize them into a unified body of believers who know how to live together, worship together, work together, and witness together.

Christ would be at the epicenter of our lives. Our life together would increasingly resemble the life of Christ. We would glorify Him! We would grow His Kingdom! In the words of Paul, we would “shine like stars in the universe.”