

**LEARNING TO BE FREE:
THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
(6) COMMUNITY DISCIPLINES**

Ephesians 5:15-20

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PROLOGUE

Did you ever get the impression that some people have difficulty establishing what is truly important?

Four friends were playing a round of golf on Sunday morning. Their scores were terrible. On top of this embarrassment, it began to rain. The men returned to the clubhouse only to learn that the electrical power line had been hit by lightning, so the restaurant was closed. As the men prepared to rush for their cars, one of them remarked: "You know, we could have just as well gone to church this morning." Another of the men disagreed, "No, I couldn't have gone to church, anyway. My wife is terribly sick in bed this morning."

In contrast, David said, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'" (Psalm 122:1 NRSV).

SCRIPTURE

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, {16} making the most of the time, because the days are evil. {17} So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. {18} Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, {19} as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, {20} giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:15-20 NRSV).

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

In order to "live as free people" (1 Pet 2:16 NRSV) we need to be like the only person in history who ever lived a completely free life, namely, Jesus of Nazareth. The process of learning to become like Jesus is called discipleship or spiritual formation. Spiritual disciplines are time-honored practices that aid in our spiritual formation. They are not magical nor do they earn us any favor with God. Rather they help us to pay attention to what God is doing in our lives and ready us to receive the love and grace God wants to give us.

Jesus gave priority to the disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping. Other

spiritual disciplines can be laid upon these foundational disciplines and include inner disciplines, which are generally practiced alone; outer disciplines, which are practiced in relation to others; and community disciplines, which are practiced within the community of faith.

THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

(6) COMMUNITY DISCIPLINES

Today we are going to look at three examples of community disciplines including the disciplines of spiritual guidance, koinonia, and celebration. On the one hand, all spiritual disciplines are community disciplines because we cannot learn to be like Jesus apart from a connection to the community of faith. On the other hand, community disciplines are those disciplines that cannot be practiced without the obvious involvement of at least one other believer.

1. SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

The first of the community disciplines we shall consider is spiritual guidance.

Over the last two thousand years there have been four main ways the Church has provided support and guidance for individuals: church discipline, confession of sin, pastoral counseling, and spiritual guidance. Church discipline involves restricting a person's participation in church life in order to bring about a change that leads to reconciliation and healing. It is based on Jesus' teaching as found in Matthew's Gospel and is often identified as the "binding and loosing" function of the Church (Matt 18:18). However, it was a lot easier to practice in the days when there was only one denomination! Today we have over nine hundred major denominations in this country. If someone wakes up one morning and says, "I don't like being a Presbyterian," they can simply roll over and become a Congregationalist or a Methodist or something else.

A public prayer of confession was part of the corporate worship of the early centuries. It affirmed the fact though we are redeemed by Christ we still need forgiveness. In addition, many Christians found it helpful to talk to their pastor or other spiritual leader about specific concerns in order to find relief and solace. But by the 13th Century the public prayer of confession was out and private confession to one's priest became mandatory. The Reformers did away with mandatory confession and encouraged voluntary confession. Calvin also restored the corporate prayer of confession.

Pastoral counseling is an expression of God's unconditional love toward persons experiencing various difficulties in life. The counselor helps a person come to terms with a problem, resolve the problem, or find the grace to live with the problem. Pastoral counseling changed dramatically in the 1930s as a result of the work of such persons as Carl Rogers and Wayne Oates. These people were pioneers in applying the insights of the new

science of psychology to the practice of pastoral counseling. The results have been a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it has provided pastoral counselors with effective tools for understanding the complexities of the lives brought before them. On the other hand, it has helped lead counseling away from a connection to the Christian faith. Ironically, this trend has left many to come away from pastoral counseling with a sense that something is missing. Consequently, they have begun to look elsewhere for explicitly spiritual guidance.

The number of individuals in this country who advertize themselves as experts in spiritual guidance has dramatically increased over the last couple of decades. Some represent other religions. Others some seem to represent a confusing mess of religion, pop-psychology and New Age thinking.

But I am talking about Christian spiritual guidance. This is where someone consults with one or more mature believers on how to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). The Apostle Paul was one of the first to provide such guidance. Through advice, support, and even admonishment he urged others to imitate Christ. A major reason why he was so effective at this was that he established close relationships with the people to whom and with whom he ministered. We get a glimpse of this in his letter to the Corinthians:

For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel (1 Cor 4:15 NRSV).

We learn from history that by the fourth century, many Christians made it a common practice to reveal the condition of their soul to a spiritual guide or director. Some of these early spiritual leaders became well known and include Anthony the Great and Basil of Caesarea who formed religious communities under what became known as an Abbot, from the Aramaic word *abba*, meaning "father."

By far and away the best known and most influential spiritual guide of the era was a man named Benedict from the Italian town of Nursia (NUR she uh). He wrote a book called the Rule of Benedict that became the leading guide for monastic life in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican religious communities. The spirit of the Rule of Benedict is captured in the Latin phrase, *ora et labora*, which means "pray and work."

Protestant Christians have historically been less likely to turn to a guide for aid in spiritual matters. The long-standing emphasis on personal prayer and reading Scripture has convinced many that they need no one else. Protestant ministers have been expected to be counselors, administrators, officiants at religious ceremonies, and even entrepreneurs but

not spiritual guides.

I am glad to say that there are signs that this is changing. There is a greater interest in what is called “spiritual direction.” Courses dealing with this subject are likely to have a large number of Protestant students even if the course is taught at Roman Catholic institution. In general, more and more Christians are seeing the benefit of experiencing a guided reflection of their own spiritual journeys.

2. KOINONIA

The second of the community disciplines we shall consider is koinonia.

The word koinonia is taken from the Greek New Testament and is often translated as “fellowship.” Instead of the spiritual discipline of koinonia, I could have said the spiritual discipline of fellowship. But we generally use the word fellowship to refer to social fellowship like sharing a meal, going on an outing or joining in on some recreational activity. Whereas, the primary meaning of koinonia is “participation” as in participating together in the life of faith. Fellowship is seen more as a commodity that you can keep or drop according to your preferences. Fellowship says, “What’s in it for me?” Koinonia says, “How can we do this together?” Fellowship says, “I’ll stay with you as long as I enjoy it and there are no problems.” Koinonia says, “If we work out our problems we grow closer to God and each other.”

Generally speaking, the practice of neglect is not a good thing. If you neglect to keep fuel in your gas tank you could end up in an embarrassing situation. (That has happened to me a time or two!) If you neglect to pay your taxes there can be an unpleasant consequence. If you neglect a loved one the result can be a damaged relationship. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield spoke of his relationship with his wife in this way: "We eat apart, we take separate vacations. We never see each other. We're doing everything we can to keep our marriage together!" But in real life, neglect is bad for a relationship.

The practice of neglect is also bad for faith. The author of Hebrews gives us this exhortation:

“Do not neglect to meet together” (Heb 10:25).

Apparently, some, for whom the book was originally intended, were doing just that - neglecting to meet with other Christians. Either because of external pressures or internal apathy they had begun to drift away. In light of all that the Lord had already done (shed his blood, opened the way to God, vs 19-21) and the fact that there was so much more to come (“Day approaching” vs 25), the author encourages them to persist in their commitment to Christ and each other.

We also need such a commitment. We need each other not only to face the challenges and struggles of life but also to learn how to love each other as Christ has loved us. There are benefits we cannot receive, strength we cannot attain, and growth we cannot experience apart from fellowship with other believers.

The spiritual discipline of koinonia is a reminder that when it comes growing in faith we need all the help we can get. Who among us possesses perfect discipline and pure motivation? No one! In order to wake up in the morning we have alarm clocks. In order to get projects done we have deadlines. In order to practice love and forgiveness God gave us each other.

The discipline of koinonia is a commitment to meeting with other Christians in a setting other than corporate worship. Worship is a vital part of the Christian life but it is primarily a “vertical” experience. Koinonia is also a vital part of the Christian life and is primarily a horizontal experience. You can have worship and koinonia on the same day, even the same morning, but it is difficult to do them both in the same hour.

If you want to practice the discipline of koinonia you need to be intentional about meeting with other Christians on a regular basis. There are many ways to do this: Sunday school class, small group study, prayer group, women’s circle, men’s Bible study and more. In order to really benefit from this discipline you need to commit to some type of fellowship experience for at least six to ten sessions. (Experts tell us that it takes that many repetitions before we begin to learn something.) Then you will have a sense of what it means to practice the discipline of koinonia.

3. CELEBRATION

The third of the community disciplines we shall consider is celebration.

They say you cannot truly celebrate until you are grateful for the little things in life. A state trooper sees a car going real slow and pulls it over. It's an elderly woman driving and he gives her the "driving too slow is as dangerous as too fast" speech. "But officer," she replies, "I was going exactly the speed limit, 22 miles per hour, just like the signs say." "Those are the Route Numbers Ma'am, you are on Highway 22; the speed limit is 55," the amused officer tells her. As he is talking to her he notices there are two other ladies in the back seat, wide-eyed and visibly shaken. "Is everything OK, ladies?" he asks. "Yes, officer," one of them replies, "We're alright now. Thank God we're no longer on Route 125."

Most everybody likes to party but not every party would be considered a righteous celebration. The secular mindset views parties as a means to induce happiness usually through drugs or sex. The biblical mindset views celebrations as an opportunity to express

joy and gratitude.

Celebration is at the heart of the Christian life. Richard Foster writes:

[Jesus] entered the world on a high note of jubilation: "I bring you good news of a great joy," cried the angel, "which shall come to all the people" (Luke 2:10). He left the world bequeathing his joy to the disciples: "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

The Biblical word for joy is intricately related to the act of rejoicing. Joy is a VERB. Paul says:

"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say rejoice" (Philippians 4:4).

Rejoice means to celebrate that there is such a thing as goodness and that goodness will triumph. It may look bad now, but you know that someday it will change. Jesus said:

"In this world you will have great trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

The Bible tells us that angels are party animals. More specifically, it says that if even one person finds new life in God, all heaven throws a party (Luke 15:10). A few years ago Geoff and Becky Thurman wrote a popular song entitled, "Start A Party" a portion of which goes like this:

I wanna to start a party
Up in heaven
And get those angels dancin'
For a new heartbeat
It's a righteous celebration
Singin' hallelujah
I wanna start a party
Angels rejoice, and the demons all tremble
When a lost one is found, all of heaven assembles
If we each do our part, This party could last for years.

If you want to get an angel to dance all you have to do is help win one person back to God. Celebrating the redemptive work of God is something that believers on earth and the company of heaven have in common.

In the original language of the New Testament, the words grace, thanksgiving and joy all have the same root. I do not believe this is merely a coincidence. The more we understand grace, the more we respond with thanks. The more we respond with thanks the more we experience joy.

Grace refers to God's unmerited favor. All of God's gifts to us are undeserved, especially the gift of salvation. In spite of our sinfulness, God gave us his own Son to be the means by which we are forgiven.

A genuine experience of God's grace will cause us to respond with gratitude. As a result of our gratitude, we will want to grow in our commitment and in our desire to please God.

As we grow in our desire to please God we experience real joy. This is not a happiness based on circumstances or "luck" but rather the joy of a growing, personal relationship with our Lord. The Bible clearly teaches that believers will experience trials and challenges in this life but we can rejoice in God who will never forsake us and who ultimately triumphs over sin and death and raises his children to everlasting life.

The discipline of celebration starts with a commitment to please God and a willingness to intentionally look for ways to express our gratitude. Such a discipline will change the way we go about worship, observe milestones, and look at life from dreary apathy to joy-filled festivity.

One practical example is called the "Ten-Ten-Ten" party. You get ten people (or however many you want) to join you in writing down ten different things for which you are grateful for ten consecutive days. Then everybody gets together for dessert and shares their list. With very little effort the result is a thousand reasons to praise God! The really cool thing is that even when you get to a thousand, you have barely scratched the surface for reasons to celebrate the living God!

CONCLUSION

The community disciplines build upon the foundational disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping. The discipline of spiritual guidance, like the discipline of Scripture, helps us to focus on understanding God's will for our lives. The discipline of koinonia, like that of prayer, gives us courage and strength. And the discipline of celebration is an extension of the discipline of Sabbath-keeping – a festival celebrating the grace of God.