

Disciplines of Grace: Introduction: Philippians 2:12-13

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with a statement, this generation of Christians in the West is the most informed and least godly generation of Christians that has ever been. I am not only talking about the fact that Christians are no longer recognizable as different from the world, nor am I referring to the many instances of public sin that Christian leaders and Christians in general are caught in. No, in our modern age with all of its conveniences, and all of its media and distractions we have lost our inner disciplines and spirituality. We are a people who are prayerless, we do not read our bibles, we do not think about God, we have grown impatient with reading, with hard thinking and research. We want google spirituality that is instant, that has taken all the difficulty out of accessing information, that is always attractive and well presented. We don't know how to sacrifice but are connoisseurs of all the best things. We are not able to suffer well not having enough resources. We are full of constant complaints about our comforts. In a word we are infants. Think about children for a moment, they demand instant gratification, they squall as if they are dying when all they are is hungry because they haven't eaten in 3 hours, they weep at the smallest injury, they fixate on their appearance not the state of their hearts, they are suckers for advertising and want the next new thing that shows up on an advert or their friends have begun to collect, they have no ability to clean their own rooms, brush their teeth when they should, they don't self-regulate whenever sweets are around, and on and on I could go, but sadly this is what Christians are like today. Sadly many Christians are in a constant state of immaturity.

We are wanting to begin a series that addresses this common need. As sinners we are always inclined to self-gratification and not self-discipline, it is only as we mature that we take control of our urges and desires and thoughts and bring them into line with what we ought to be doing. Sadly, we find it easier to be good at things like sport or work or a hobby than in spiritual things. We want to do a series on the spiritual disciplines. Now what do we mean by spiritual disciplines?

You can call them spiritual disciplines or you can call them the means of grace, but what we mean by this denomination is those things that God blesses for our spiritual growth. J I Packer says that 'the doctrine of the disciplines is really a restatement and extension of classical Protestant teaching on the means of grace.' The list of things usually includes prayer, fasting, bible reading, going to church, worship, giving, family worship, journaling, etc. So which is best spiritual disciplines or means of grace? Each label has a good emphasis, spiritual disciplines emphasizes our part, that we need to apply ourselves that godliness does not come easily like sin, it comes with effort. But this could be overemphasized to make it sound like we are the authors of our own holiness. Means of grace has that key word grace in it which stresses that we grow in the same way we are saved, not by our efforts and merit but by God on the basis of His free and lavish grace giving us the growth. The word means also directs us to look at those God appointed things that God blesses to help us grow. Some have taken this emphasis to make it sound like Roman Catholicism where just by doing certain things mechanically and guaranteed blessing can be had ex opera operato. I have chosen to call these series, disciplines of grace as a way to try and strike a balance in what we mean. Grace is always the initiator, the catalyst, the one that beings the process of salvation whether it is in justification or sanctification. It is by grace that God gives the increase in any growth in holiness. However, we also recognise that God has appointed the use of means and that a diligent use of them is required for us to know the increase God gives.

How do we grow?

If I were to give you a multiple choice question about how are we made holy with these following options which would you choose?

We grow in holiness in our sleep?

We grow in holiness when we have hands laid on us in front of the church?

We grow in holiness through a crisis experience of offering our whole selves in total consecration?

We grow in holiness by receiving it by faith?

We grow in holiness when we let go and let God?

We grow in holiness through the habitual use of the means of grace?

We grow in holiness when we have our own personal Pentecosts and are Baptised in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues?

We do not grow in our sleep like our physical bodies do, this would support the passive approach to holiness. We are not dependant on altar calls or the laying on of hands, or the occasional ministry of someone to us in a church for holiness because the Holy Spirit lives in us. The ordinary mode of growing in holiness is not in a crisis experience of total consecration that will make all of our efforts in holiness simple. Holiness is not had by an act of faith in asking Jesus to crucify us, or simply letting go and letting God. Nor is the Pentecostal/Charismatic experience of baptism in the Spirit the ordinary way of growth. No in fact the real way in which the Spirit works is much more boring than all of those interesting notions. Growth in holiness comes from the long habitual use of the ordinary means of God's grace. The two extremes that need to be avoided in our view of holiness is the passive view of doing nothing, and the quick fix view of seeing a sudden miraculous silver bullet in some technique.

Philippians 2:12-13

'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.'

Our key verse in the first part is Philippians 2:12-13. These are well known verses and give us the biblical answer to the question, 'who does what in our holiness?' Paul is writing to the Philippian church from prison. They are a little concerned and discouraged. In part because they are suffering from some false teachers and divisions, but also because of Paul's imprisonment. In these verses he is urging them on to live the holy Christian life despite their discouragements. We see that they have been walking a road of obedience until now and he does not want to them come to a halt but to go on in holiness. Even though he cannot be there to help them, they have something better they have God helping them working in them to both will and do. We see Paul calling upon them to 'work out their salvation with fear and trembling.' Some have mistook these words to mean that Paul is calling on the Philippians to earn their salvation by works, but a closer analysis will show that they are already saved, and must now continue on in their salvation. In other words, they have been justified by being made righteous in God's sight by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, but now they must cooperate with the Spirit's sanctifying efforts into conforming us into Christ's image. This is the aspect of our salvation that Paul is referring to. But notice the word work. I need to stress this as my goal for this message is to vanquish all notions of passivity in holiness. He tells us about the attitude with which we are to work, 'fear and trembling.' Now this is another phrase that has been misunderstood, when one first reads it you get the impression that you are supposed to work as if heaven

depends on your efforts and you should tremble and shake in fear of hell if you don't work hard enough. The truth is that the phrase 'fear and trembling' was common coinage to talk about humility. We see this in Eph 6:5, 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ.' Fear and trembling means with respect and humility.

V13 is the verse that we are most concerned to look at, as it gives the motivation why the Philippians should continue to obey and work at their holiness. 'For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.' Here is how holiness happens it is a case of God by His Spirit working in us 100%. He does the regenerating work so that we are new creatures in Christ with a new set of desires. And He is constantly at work in us to bring about the image of Christ in us. He is tireless and more earnest than we are in this pursuit. He prompts our minds, He shapes our characters, He illuminates our understanding, He tends our wills, He convicts of sin, He enthuses us with joy inexpressible. In many different ways the Spirit is working in our hearts both a hunger for holiness and the strength to do it. He is the catalyst, the one who starts the reaction, it is for this reason that the Christian credits God with every good deed and thought, all holiness has its root in His working in our lives.

As some have seen this truth they have become imbalanced and thought to themselves, 'Well, if God is doing it then I don't have to.' In fact there is a brand of holiness teaching called Keswick teaching that taught that we receive sanctification in the same way in which we receive justification, by faith, all you have to do in sanctification is receive it. But this is fundamentally flawed. This resulted in a pattern of waiting for Jesus to nail certain sins to the cross and not working at sanctification. Justification and sanctification are both by grace, but where we receive the free gift of unearned righteousness by faith in justification; in sanctification we are to cooperate with the prevenient grace of God to see results. Sanctification and justification are both by grace, and both do it in dependence upon God by faith, but sanctification includes our efforts to bring about the results. For this reason Paul states that there is a working and willing in us that is affected by the Spirit. We don't not will, or not work, we do both but only because He has first worked them in us.

This verse has been confusing to many because we tend to think of these willing issues in terms of the laws of matter, matter replaces matter and you can't have two objects inhabiting the same space. SO likewise people think that either it is God willing and working, or me, but it can't be both. But this is exactly what Paul is saying, it is a case of both and, not either or. Here is a quote from John Murray:

"And no text sets forth more succinctly and clearly the relation of God's working to our working. God's working in us is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did His part and we did ours so that the conjunction or coordination of both produced the required results. God works in us and we also work. All working out of salvation on our part is the effect of God's working in us, not the willing to the exclusion of the doing and not the doing to the exclusion of the willing, but both the willing and the doing. And this working of God is directed to the end of enabling us to will and to do that which is well pleasing to Him. We have here not only the explanation of all acceptable activity on our part but we also have the incentive to our willing and working. What the apostle is urging is the working out of our own salvation, and the encouragement he supplies is the assurance that it is God Himself who works in us. The more persistently active we are in working, the more persuaded we may be that all the energizing grace and power is of God."¹

1 Redemption Accomplished and Applied 148-9.

Paul reflects this perspective in 1 Cor 15:10, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." This would be a vain brag but for the fact we know who he really thinks is the source of his good works.

Various errors have been made as Christians have considered God's working. When God's actions in electing and saving souls has received one sided attention hyper-Calvinism has emerged and we want to cast off responsibility in evangelism. When too much attention has been given to God's working in this world by providence we see no place for prayer and cease to be active. When we focus on the side that God does in our holiness to the neglect of our responsibility we will also run into error and the passive notion of 'let go and let God.' Let me say that you will not fully be able to comprehend the full mechanics of the situation in how God is at work within us as the catalyst and yet includes us in our activities to fully bring about our holiness. These truths have been revealed not so much that you can penetrate to the depth all the workings of God's Spirit, but rather for your encouragement. These verses are intended to encourage you in the face of external discouragements, to show you that you can move forward as God works by His power within you.

The next thing we need to emphasize is that the Spirit causes us to grow in holiness, not overnight but over a long period of time as we habitually employ the means of grace. This is something that shouldn't surprise us. If we think about any area where a person progresses whether it is playing a musical instrument, mastering a language, dancing, painting. All of these skills were developed over a period of time, it is the same with our holiness. When you plant a fruit tree, if it is a mango tree it will take 7 years before it bears fruit, an apple tree about 4 years. The fruit does not come overnight.

This is why Paul says to Timothy, in 1 Tim. 4:7-8, 'Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; ⁸for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.' Paul uses three pictures of lifelong discipline to show Timothy how to cooperate with the grace at work within him, he speaks of the soldier, the athlete and the farmer. 2 Timothy 2:1-7, 'You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, 2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 3 Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. 5 An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. 6 It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. 7 Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.' No doubt these pictures are given to Timothy with their impact on the ministry in view, but the lifestyle of each is for every Christian. We are all to have a soldier's discipline in weathering bad working conditions and maintaining a professional attitude towards getting caught up in things that are not part of a soldier's discipline. We too are to train and compete as an athlete, and we too are to be the hard working farmer who must toil to see a harvest from his labours, but who is ultimately dependant on God for the results.

So what do we conclude? Holiness comes by effort, the blood, sweat and tears of a soldier, athlete and farmer. It incorporates all of our efforts in a pursuit of life long habits. Sow an action reap a habit, sow a habit reap a Christlike character. However, as we go about this effort we are doing so with the confidence that the strength that is compelling us is Christ, the strength that sustains us is Christ, the one who adds the increase is Christ. It is because we are united with Christ and doing what God has appointed that we will see these things develop a life of holiness in us. Throw out all passive notions of holiness and

get disciplined applying yourself to those things that God uses to grow you. And throw out all superspiritual notions that reject God using the ordinary habits of our lives.