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Introduction

As Sean mentioned last week, we are starting a new 10 week sermon series on the Spiritual Disciplines that will take us up until Day Camp. Each week we are going to look at one spiritual discipline. Since Sean is away this week I have the privilege to introduce the topic.

Our Scripture this morning is taken from 1Timothy 4 beginning at verse 7. Listen for the passion of the apostle Paul as he writes to his young protégé:

Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; ⁸ for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. ⁹ It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. ¹⁰ For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers. ¹¹ Prescribe and teach these things.

This is the word of God. Let's pray.

Many of you know that a couple weeks ago Sean Carroll started working at our company. At the end of his first day, I invited him into my office and asked him how his first day went. As we know and love Sean, he’s not one to beat around the bush. So he said to me:

"Oh it went well. But I saw another side of you today. I saw your mean side."

Now that’s a good way to start off with your boss. Actually in our case I believe it is a good way to start off with me. I asked him to elaborate and he describe two interactions that he overheard throughout the day where he felt that I did not treat two employees with the respect and honor that they deserved. I was demeaning them.

The interesting thing was that in one of the cases, I was very aware of the way I am with people and I thought that I was being very very careful about how I was handling the situation. Obviously, not careful enough.

This little vignette from my life illustrates how difficult it is for us to change. I don’t want to be that way with people. I have known that I have this problem since shortly after I became a follower of Jesus. There are things in my life that I want to change; that God wants to change; that those who know me want to change. This is such an area. But I don’t change easily.

And I’m not talking about just minor things like changing the way I brush my teeth (Sorry Doctor Finn – maybe that isn’t so minor). These are habits and ways of doing things and dealing with people that deeply affect the way we live and interact with others.

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I remember many years ago working with a young woman who was not a Christian. Two brothers at the company were beginning to share Jesus with her. One day one of these brothers came up and told me that the way I was relating to her was a stumbling block preventing her from coming to faith. I was devastated. That was the very thing I wanted for her.

Why is it that something I want desperately to change – doesn’t change?

There are a lot of reasons. Change is difficult because these habits and ways of speaking and relating are deep seated. It took years to develop so it takes time for them to change. Change is also difficult because many times we aren't aware that we are even exhibiting the behavior – like in my example.

This isn’t unique just to us as followers of Jesus. A couple of weeks ago I was in a book store thinking about this topic and I saw a book on display called: “Why can’t we be good?” As I read through some of that book, I found that the author’s was addressing a question not unlike my question “Why can’t we change?” Christians and non-Christians alike recognize that we are pretty ineffective at changing certain behaviors.

This is where spiritual disciplines come in. What I have discovered is what many followers of Jesus over the past 2000 years have discovered and that is that the spiritual disciplines are the most effective way of bringing about change in those deeply entrenched habits and ways of relating that cause so many problems.

So what are spiritual disciplines?

I have been using the term “spiritual disciplines” but I haven’t defined my terms. What are spiritual disciplines? Let me quote from two of my mentors:

“Disciplines” [are] consciously undertaken or chosen activities that enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort. Spiritual disciplines are such activities, but ones specifically relevant to growth and attainment in spiritual life. Willard

Going to the gym every day or going to a weight loss counselor every other week are disciplines. They are consciously chosen activities that make our bodies more fit. It’s not running one time that directly makes us more healthy. It is the disciplined habit of hitting the pavement day after day and week after week that is going to change our flab to trim. These are the bodily disciplines the apostle Paul is talking about in our scripture today. Spiritual disciplines are activities specifically tailored to create Christ-likeness or godliness in the individual. And it is not prayer by itself that is going to make us more like Jesus. But the regular disciplined habit of prayer spread out over time that causes the change.

1 Jacob Needleman “Why Can’t we be Good?”
Here’s the other definition:

Spiritual disciplines are not ways to eradicate all our desires but ways to order them so that we can serve one another and together serve God.” Nouwan

This is how this series ties in with theme for the year. The spiritual disciplines help us to strengthen ourselves in the Lord; they help us to love and serve God and to love and serve others.

There is no definitive list of spiritual disciplines but they include things like:

- Silence and Solitude
- Prayer
- Worship
- Fasting
- Account-
ability
- Fellowship
- Submission
- Study and
Meditation
- Secrecy
- Service
- Confession

– and by secrecy we mean doing good things without the need for getting credit. That is certainly an area that I need help with.

Over the next 9 weeks we are going to look at one of these each week. What I would like to do this morning is look at the following additional questions:

- Why do we need the spiritual disciplines?
- Why do we reject them?
- What can we expect them to accomplish?

**Why do we need them?**

I have already spoken of our inability to change. But we need to embrace and learn the Spiritual Disciplines for another reason. God has set the bar very high for us.

God’s call upon his people in the Old Testament set a very high bar. He gave them the 10 commandments but He went much beyond that. He told them that:

You shall be **holy**, for I the LORD your God am **holy**. Lev 19:2

Jesus doesn’t mince words when He tells us

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect Matthew 5:48

Becoming godly – becoming like Jesus – like our heavenly Father is not optional. Just as the ten commandments are not the ten suggestions, God’s call for his people to be holy is not optional. We see this high bar throughout Scripture - but we also see a path – and a path that is followed by the Old Testament saints. A path taken by Jesus who for example made it a habit to spend time in prayer. We see the apostles being disciplined about regularly attending worship in the temple. We see Paul describing the life of a follower of Jesus to an athlete.
In our scripture today, Paul tells Timothy to discipline himself for the purpose of godliness / to become like Jesus. Paul uses a very strong word here. It implies training with one’s full effort. It implies constant and rigorous training. Paul is telling Timothy that he has to make every effort / to apply the rigors of a highly trained athlete to become like Jesus. We get the word gym or gymnasium from the word he uses. We need the Spiritual Disciplines because the Holy Spirit has indicated in the Scriptures both by anecdotal example and by clear exhortation that we must be rigorous in our pursuit of becoming like Jesus.

Dallas Willard adds this answer to our question:

“Why should we practice the spiritual disciplines?” “The short answer and the absolute truth is that without discipline nothing of any value can be accomplished.”

**Why do we commonly reject them?**

But many of us know about these disciplines and don’t do them. Why is that? I want to share why I first rejected the spiritual disciplines as a pathway to change.

Somewhere around 1980, all the small groups here at the BARN read Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. The subtitle for this book is: The Path to Spiritual Growth. All of the disciplines that we are going to be looking at are covered in this book. I would highly recommend it. But the first time I read it, it did not grab me. I didn’t say – Yes I need to adopt these disciplines in my life. As I have reflected on this, I think there are a number of reasons why I did this.

At the time I wasn’t convinced that I needed these disciplines to change.

First of all, a lot had changed in me when I became a Christian. I saw the power of God almost instantly transform a number of things in me. I saw God transform others in amazing ways just by becoming a Christian. I had tasted the power of the age to come and it was a transforming power. I didn’t need discipline – I just needed more of the power of God in my life. “More love… more power … more of You in my life.” After all, doesn’t 2 Corinthians 5:17 say

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

The Old Bob has passed away – the new Bob has come. And frankly, that is an easier path. I would much rather be instantly changed than to have to practice these disciplines. They’re hard. They work slowly. They are not nearly as fun as instant transformation by the Holy Spirit.

The other thing that caused me to reject the spiritual disciplines is that I thought they were a “Catholic thing.” Something that monks did. It was sort of a “works thing.” We protestants believe in grace. And I didn’t really see the fruit in the lives of these monks.
In many ways that is true. Much of the discipline used by the monks in the middle ages was not biblical nor fruitful.

Two things changed my attitude towards the disciplines. The first was I got tired of not changing. My trusting in “spirit empowered” transformation where God was going to wave a magic wand over me and change me failed just wasn’t happening.

The second thing was Dallas Willard’s book “The Spirit of the Disciplines.” The subtitle is “Understanding how God changes lives.” In Dallas’ inimical way, he shattered my preconceived notions and prejudices about the disciplines and opened my eyes as to how the spiritual disciplines were both biblical and have a proven track record in transforming ordinary people into people who were becoming like Jesus.

So somewhere in the mid to late 80’s I made a conscientious decision that I was going to incorporate every one of the spiritual disciplines into my life. I want to testify that they do what they are intended to do.

**What can we expect them to accomplish?**

Let me share with you an example of how a couple of the disciplines we are going to be studying over the next nine weeks have transformed my life. I could share on each one but for the sake of time, I’ll just mention a couple.

It is with some degree of trepidation that I share these, because change and transformation is incremental. If you hear me say something like: “God has really used this spiritual discipline to change me over the years” and you think – “Bob, what are you talking about? You are still that way?” All I can say is you should have seen me before.

**Silence and Solitude** –
Next week I will be speaking about the discipline of Silence and Solitude. I am glad that this is the first discipline we address – because it is in the silence and in the solitude with God alone that we see both the need for the spiritual disciplines and receive the way to walk and grow in the spiritual disciplines.

I’ll share much more about this next week.

**Study – June 19**

On June 19th, Joe Dietrich will cover the discipline of Study. At the core of my being I am a very shallow person. I don’t naturally think things through. I never have. Many years ago I overheard two different, independent and unrelated groups of my peers describe me as shallow. It hurt me when I heard them say that. And I was angry at them at first. I never knew I was shallow. But over the years, I discovered that what they were saying was true.

However in learning to study God’s word, to saturate myself in all aspects of God’s word, to soak daily in the word of God has transformed that part of me. The discipline of studying God’s word has taught me to desire to plumb things more deeply than ever. I’m not nearly as shallow as I was before. There is still residual shallowness. I still struggle with this at work. Sometimes
I jump to quick conclusions before all the research has been done. Sometimes I want to get to the answer before the question is even framed.

But by and large, I am a very different person today because of that spiritual discipline.

**Confession / Forgiveness – June 26th Dan Kerwin**

I hate to admit my faults.

Growing up I was one who told fibs. It was a habit that started very young. The lies were never about things of consequence. When I was with my friends I would tell them things that I had done or places we had gone as a family that were just not true. As I grew older, I sort of outgrew it – mostly. But every once in a while I would find myself altering a story or just saying something that wasn’t true. What I found was the lies were mostly to cover up something I had done wrong; something that would make me look bad.

Most importantly, I had never told anyone that I had lied to them. Never. Up until a little over 20 years ago - when I learned the spiritual discipline of confession.

On two different occasions over the space of about 2 years I lied to two of my best friends – covering up something I had done. In one case over something totally inconsequential. In another case – betraying a confidentiality which was much more serious.

David says in Psalm 32

> 3 When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away

That truth had a powerful effect on me. In both cases, God kept telling me that I needed to go to my brothers and confess these lies. I didn't want to do that. What will they think of me? If I had not confessed, they would not have known that about me. But if I had not confessed, I would not have changed. A part of me would have wasted away.

What the discipline of confession did in me was to burn into my conscience a fear of having to ever go through that again. Some people say that it is easier to confess once you make it a discipline. That has not been my experience with lying. But I have found that those first times opened my eyes to what had become a habit and drastically reduced the number of times that I have lied since.

Over the next 7 weeks we will cover

**Meditation – July 3rd Sean Martin**
**Prayer of Adoration – July 10th**
**Submission – July 17th Sean Martin**

**Simplicity – July 24th Sean Carroll**
**Worship – July 31st Ken Finn**
**Service – August 7th Santiago Velasquez**

Both Ken and Santiago will be preaching for the first time – I think we are in for a real treat.

**The Challenge**

Why don’t we change? I believe it is because we haven’t taken seriously the spiritual disciplines that God has shown us in His word. The spiritual disciplines hold a promise for this life and for
the next. I know that they work. I want to challenge each and every one here who wants to change to do the following:

- Commit today to hear every message of this series. If you are away, listen to the sermons on-line. If you aren’t connected to the internet, ask me and I’ll make you a CD.
- Take notes – as a culture here at the BARN – we don’t take notes during the sermon. It is a proven fact that even if you throw the notes away, you will retain more if you take notes.
- Use the study guide as an introduction. Follow along with the series. Read one a week. Look up the scriptures. Dig deeper. Take some time to answer the questions.
- Get one of these books on the subject and read it this summer
  - Dallas Willard’s “Spirit of the Disciplines”
  - Richard Foster’s “Celebration of Discipline”
  - John Ortberg’s “The Life You’ve always wanted” with the subtitle: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People or affectionately known by John as “Dallas for Dummies.”
- Finally, don’t do this alone. Get someone to do this with you.

I want to change the title of my sermon from a question to an invitation.

From: **Why don’t we change?**
To: “Why don’t we change?” [said as in “Why don’t we go for a ride?”]

Let’s pray.