

*Basic
Disciplines
of the
Christian Life*

*A Series of Sermons
from
Bruce Van Blair*

BASIC DISCIPLINES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION.....	1
FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT.....	5
INSTRUCTION DEFICIT (FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)	13
THE CALL OF GOD.....	27
MENTOR / SPONSOR / CONFESSOR / FRIEND	
COMMENTS ON SCRIPTURE PASSAGE	39
MENTOR / SPONSOR / CONFESSOR / FRIEND	43
A DISCIPLE BAND.....	49
CHOOSING YOUR SIX	57
THE SERMON ON THE AMOUNT	67
SUPPLEMENTAL SERMONS	
ATTENDANCE.....	79
THE EASIEST DISCIPLINE.....	87

INTRODUCTION TO THE BASIC DISCIPLINES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, seeking in grace and praise to discover God's will for our own lives on a daily basis. As part of our discipleship, we also work to increase our love for one another. We move earnestly toward tithing to "our" Church, that the Kingdom may increase its resources. For the same reason we try to tithe our time and our conversation. Finally, we hope that our faith and love and discipline may increase until they flow beyond our fellowship and become a blessing to others.

G.K. Chesterton once commented: "The Christian Life has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." Well, perhaps some of us are trying it more than Chesterton realized. It is indeed difficult, full of surprises, and filled with endless dimensions. And like anything truly relational, it is never something solved, accomplished, finished, or all figured out. The spectators are often full of scorn and the expert advice of those who have never been "down on the field." But we *like* the game even if it is for sinners – and *because* it is for sinners. And our Leader never asks us to go anywhere or be anything or do anything that He has not gone and been and experienced Himself.

In any case, being the pastor of a church is a fascinating thing. When you first come to a church, you look out over a sea of well-dressed people and pleasant faces – people smiling and being nice to each other. It's easy to think, "Finally, a true Christian community. These people are faithful, close to God, and living good lives, and few of them seem to have any serious problems." A few years later you look out over very nearly the same group of people and realize that there is not a single one of them without serious challenges. It is a sea of wounds and fear, smoldering resentments, and broken dreams. There are many accomplishments too. And these people are more engaged and more caring than any casual glance could ever know. Many of these people are courageous and long-suffering in ways completely hidden from the outer view.

INTRODUCTION

And there is another awareness that comes from knowing a congregation after a while. Among the many faces, there are people who know and trust God far beyond the normal levels of the present society and culture. Some of them you may even have watched change from casual church members to deeply committed Christians. Most often this has happened because of some crisis in life.

Yet, sadly, the truth is that wonderful as all the people are, the majority of church members have not taken the Christian Life with any deep or serious intention or commitment. Most of them are still doing the best they can, the best they know how. That is not the same as turning life over to the guidance and the purposes of our Savior. Perhaps as the church is challenged more and more, the percentage of serious Christians will keep increasing. But in the main, church membership has not equaled great gratitude to God, serious commitment to Jesus, or indeed any sustained, disciplined effort to live in any way that is different from the patterns and behaviors of the society all around us.

Please do not mis-hear this. I am not talking about bad or unworthy people. Most congregations are made up of wonderful people, most of them caring, conscientious, hard-working, and intelligent. Even so, the majority of church members have little attachment to Jesus' unseen Kingdom; they have little conscious awareness of the Holy Spirit guiding and directing and wanting to be a partner in their lives.

Is this harsh and judgmental? No, it is merely sad and honest. Nor do I believe that any of us are "going to Hell" more than the one we are already in. Jesus will go on loving and saving us – unless we absolutely refuse to allow it. The church is supposed to be for sinners, or none of us could stay. The Holy Spirit does keep calling and reaching out, and a pastor also gets to see a person here and there move from mere membership into *discipleship*: into real gratitude and real following.

In any case, in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), people realize that there are twelve steps to take. If we do not work the steps, we make no progress. If we work none of the steps, we cannot even stay sober. Even though AA was born out of the Christian WAY of Life, in the church there seems to be very little awareness that the Christian Life requires disciplines. Disciples are under discipline; if we do nothing about our faith, either we have none or we have lost it. Yet I have run

into many church people who are vague or entirely clueless about any disciplines they consider necessary for maintaining the Christian Life. In fact, some people come to church looking for a different WAY of Life but leave because they do not see anything happening there. If the Christian Life is making no difference to how anybody lives, why bother?

Well, that is a huge aberration. So I preach this series of sermons about the BASIC DISCIPLINES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. And please, whether you need to hear them or not, I need to make a few comments in preparation for this look at the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life.

I know that some of you know a lot about the Christian Life, and that some of you walk it well and have been doing so for years. Catching glimpses of this is always very encouraging to me. But I still do not really know who knows what, and of course some of the disciplines are unseen. So please do not think I am being insulting by going over the basics.

And *please* do not go on any guilt trips! If this series turns into a guilt trip, it will accomplish very little. In fact, it will do more harm than good. So here is the WARNING: None of us (including me) will sit through this series of sermons on the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life and go home comfortable with the way we are already doing all of them. I will from time to time try to remind you of the Gospel: We are not saved by doing all the disciplines or by perfect performance. We are saved by the mercy and love of Jesus Christ our Savior. Walking the WAY is our *response* to this love and mercy, not a substitute for it. Therefore, taking on any of these disciplines – taking any of these steps of the pilgrimage – will backfire if you try to do it out of pride or duty or any motive other than as a grateful response to God’s love and mercy. I hope you believe that. I hope you know *I* believe that.

So here’s the deal: Try to listen to (or read) the whole series with interest and a willingness to consider the possibilities, but watch for one discipline that may be worth adding to the others you already have. Personally you are looking for *just one* of these disciplines to walk up, tap you on the shoulder, and say, “May I have this dance?” And if something in you does not respond with eagerness and interior excitement, do not do it! It is not time yet.

INTRODUCTION

Of course, a part of us will always object to any discipline, no matter how good it is – no matter how much our soul wants it or needs it. Any new discipline requires time and energy and effort, and all of us tell ourselves we have no more time right now – for God or for anybody. So I do not mean you should wait until all your excuses go away. That is never going to happen. But watch for the discipline that calls to you and says, “I’m the one you are missing or neglecting. I’m the one that can bring you closer to God and help you make progress on the Path *right now*.”

So no guilt trips! Watch for the inner calling that is laced with an eagerness to be more faithful. If there is no sense of joy, it does not mean the discipline is wrong; it is just not the time for you. Maybe the next dance.

Finally, there is a difference between theory and practice. There is a difference between considering the basic disciplines for walking the Christian Life – and the truths and principles we discover while intentionally walking the Christian WAY itself. There is a difference between considering the discipline to pray every day – and all the things we discover from prayer itself. There is a difference between considering the commitment to get married – and all the sharing, love, children, squabbles, growth, and learning that take place after we do get married. We cannot get to the second unless we commit to the marriage in the first place.

So the disciplines are necessary, or the rest of the adventure never really happens. I mention this because many people in our time do not seem to know this anymore. They are trying to test and taste and experience Christianity without committing to any of the basic disciplines. It cannot work that way. We live in a culture where people are trying to have a “one-night stand” with God. And it is working about as well as we could expect – about as well as one-night stands always do.

FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT

The first and most important of all Christian disciplines is the commitment to pray every day. If we try to delete prayer from the biblical record, as of course many people do in our time, the result is ridiculous. It leaves Moses looking like an idiot, and Jesus looks like a jerk. Likewise, some people have deleted serious personal prayer from their own lives, and the result is predictable. The thought of being a Christian without also having a prayer life is absurd. I do not mean stupid, though that would also be true. But it is more than that. It has entered the realm of the absurd. (“I’m a great pilot. I just cannot stand getting into airplanes.”)

Prayer is the first and most important of all our Christian disciplines. It is important for us to know this, to put it this way, and to keep remembering that this is true. Why is it true? Why is prayer more important than the Bible, than neighbor love, than the institutional church or anything else about our religion that we can name? Putting it that way makes it simple, does it not? PRAYER IS THE SOURCE. Did people write the Bible first or pray first? Did Abraham become the Father of Faith and then start praying? Did Moses free the Children of Israel and give them Torah and *then* start praying? PRAYER IS THE SOURCE. All other things that matter in our tradition, in the church, and in our Faith all come from prayer – they all come from a communication between God and human beings.

It is true that in America today, people are frequently trying to reverse the order and let prayer be the caboose instead of the engine. Get yourself into a deep hole first, *then* pray. Choose a mate, get married, have children, *then* start praying. Go to college, get a job, get deep into a vocation, *then* start asking God to bless it all. The secret of a secular life is to never let God in on the planning. Never let God in on the early stages of anything. Do all the work – get everything set, started, up and running – then invite God to come in and bless it. Never mind all the things that God might have stopped us from getting into in the first place – if we had been listening. A lot of prayer is not prayer at all; it is only superstition. We try to tack on a blessing *after* we have already set everything up the way we think we want it. God is our mascot, our genie in a bottle. God is here to serve us and to make us happy and successful.

All genuine prayer is the reverse: We are God's servants. God is the Creator, and life belongs to God – not to us. What does God want of us? How can we spend our lives to please God? "This day and all my days belong to You, O God. Anything You ask of me, if I can understand it, I will do it." That is where the Bible came from, as well as the church, neighbor love, and all things truly Christian. PRAYER IS THE SOURCE. It is not the caboose or an afterthought.

COMMUNICATION WITH GOD

Christendom is founded on the assumption – the working principle – that there can be communication between us and God. You – every single one of you – can be in conversation with the Omnipotent, Numinous, Holy One who calls all the worlds into being. All miracles pale to insignificance beside this incredible precept and possibility. We cannot always get through to the president of the company or the President of the United States, and sometimes not even to our own spouse or children. But we can always get through to God.

Of course, history is replete with evidence that people do not want to get through to God (or let God get through to us). I mean, we do if we think we can control the conversation. A lot of people are pretty comfortable with their prayers because they are issuing orders, clarifying things, making sure God knows how they feel and what they want in any and all circumstances. But they did not learn this kind of prayer from Jesus, certainly not from Gethsemane. And when it finally dawns on us that God *is really God* (and we are not) and that God really will communicate with us – well, that is understandably terrifying.

At that point, some of us declare war on silence: We fill every day with nonstop noise and activity so that God cannot get a word in edgewise. We go to bed so tired that if we start to pray, we instantly fall asleep. We wake up the next morning running, so that we cannot even remember our dreams. We can still say our prayers, of course, but we do all the talking. And we say "Amen" fast at the end so that God has no chance for comment or reply. If we do all the talking, that is not prayer – that is a filibuster. And of course, the purpose of a filibuster is to stop communication – to stop the action and freeze the process.

It is not all our fault, of course. If we want to know how important prayer really is, start to notice how hard Satan fights to interrupt it, undo it, mock it, discredit it. The most important thing we can do is set aside extra time each morning to invite the Holy Spirit to direct and manage our day. If we do that, we will quickly run into the fight of our lives. We think at first that it's an accident, but it is planned and strategic interference. Children, spouses, phones, work, and mostly our own unruly minds all conspire against *true* prayer. Not talking *at* God, but listening for what God might want to say to us – that is the core of prayer. When we try to do this, we quickly discover that we have no time for God – that God is quite low on the priority list. We do not really want God messing around in our personal lives. “Get out – keep off” is something we would never normally say to God, but we do not have to say it. As noted above, we can rig it so that God can never get a word in edgewise. And if somehow God does, we can be sure that we are not listening.

In this “noise conspiracy,” Satan tries to contrive things so that there is never a possibility of silence between us and God. Not always, but most often, the Holy Spirit speaks in the silence, when our hearts and minds are still and waiting and listening. This is no secret in our tradition. Jesus gave God lots of silence – time to break through all the distractions, fears, problems, pressures. Forty days and nights. Time apart, alone. Undivided attention. The Top Ace of all time knew He had to get truly emptied and willing and ready, or God could not make it clear enough for Him to go on with His ministry. Some of us have never given the Holy Spirit one clear hour.

Humans are afraid to communicate with God because all of us know (somewhere deep inside) that if we start a true relationship with God, God will take over our lives. It is not, after all, a relationship between equals. Our religion tells us that God loves us, and Jesus tried to make this clear beyond any shadow of a doubt. But what if it is not really true? And even if it is, what about the possible changes and overhauling that God might consider helpful? Like my friend Garland once said: “I had to stop praying for a while. Every time I tried to pray, this voice in my head kept saying, ‘It’s time for you to stop smoking.’ I’ve tried before and could never make it, so I had to stop praying.” There are infinite variations on this theme.

Every person here is afraid of God on some level. That fear is our problem with prayer. The level of that fear is the ceiling of our prayer life. When we come to realize that this is the real issue, all the confusion starts to clear away. The issue remains, but the confusion clears away. Only to the degree that we truly believe God loves us can we open our lives to God's influence. That is why the Gospel of God's love is central to the Christian Faith. And it is not what we *say* on the outside; it is what the soul within really *believes* about God's love. If to you the Cross is just an ancient theory, or if on the inside you think God is just the Great Chess Player and you are merely a pawn in the game – expendable, not truly and deeply loved – then you cannot put your life and your will into God's hands, no matter how hard you try. Every time we go to our prayers, it is as if God says "Trust me." If we cannot trust, we cannot pray. The religious word for it is FAITH. The problem is, there is no cheating – no pretending – with this answer. If we do not trust God, we cannot pray, no matter how much we may want to or how hard we try.

Now, let us be very clear: If there is no communication possible between God and human beings, all the rest of Christianity is gibberish. All the rituals, hymns, creeds, sacrifices, and Christmas pageants do not mean a thing if humans have simply made it all up – if we are merely playing with pretty theories. Either God really does exist and really is communicating with us, or nothing in our religion matters. If there is no communication possible between God and human beings, all the rest of Christianity is play-acting. And if there is no communication going on between God and you, then your spiritual journey has not yet begun.

TO PRAY EVERY DAY

Prayer is the first and most important discipline of the Christian Life. But why turn prayer into a discipline? Why not just let it flow naturally? Our best prayers do flow naturally. They flow best and most naturally when we are in serious trouble and we know it. This is not a good or defensible theory; it is simply our reality. Most humans get into the spiritual life because of trauma; because we get desperate; because our need breaks past all the pride and defenses and we get open to God. "Pain was the touchstone of all spiritual progress." (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*) I do not like this; I love to find exceptions. But essentially it is true. So shall we be straight with each other, or shall we go back to how we think it *ought* to be?

When I am in trouble and know it, the prayers flow easily. Fortunately, God does not hold a grudge. It is never payback time for all the times I should have prayed and did not. God always seems happy to talk to me again, no matter how little I deserve it. Like with all of you, when I start listening again I get amazing help. Problems I thought were huge get whittled down to size, often in a few days. But when I am in trouble, it is easier to be teachable, to listen, to feel The Presence close and helping me.

Sadly, I can only receive so much help before the situation improves. Things get less desperate. The crisis turns back into the more normal challenges of life here. Things are still difficult enough, but you know how it is: nothing I cannot handle, within reason. So then what do I say? “Thanks a lot, God. Don’t get too far away. But I think I can take it from here, at least for a while.”

Prayer will not really flow “naturally” again until I come into another crisis. Yet I am no longer content to live my life apart from guidance or to spend my days for goals or purposes no higher than my own head. So I have no choice but to turn prayer into a discipline – a conscious habit pattern. Every morning I want to be reminded that this day belongs to God and that I belong to God. Every morning I want to remember that if I do not invite the Spirit’s presence to be with me, I will live the day in my own way and never stop to ask for the Spirit’s instructions. Of course, I can get away with that – in a way, for a while. But it is no longer the issue. Now there is the gratitude, and the memory of a greater wisdom and purpose than I can ever know when left to my own devices.

So I want the discipline. I set in place the practices and maintain them. And from time to time I ask the Spirit to help me refresh them – to add to or subtract from them. Intriguingly, I often get a different kind of crisis from practicing such disciplines. I get into trouble I could have avoided if left to my own devices. I pray for guidance and then *need* the guidance more and more because of where the Spirit is taking me. So then the prayers flow naturally again, only now from the far side of the prayer discipline. And I am into a LIFE I would never have known, never have imagined, never have found except through the discipline of prayer.

GUIDANCE PRAYER

The trouble with talking about prayer is that a huge array of approaches and practices come under that one word. When we mention prayer, what another person means and what I mean may be worlds apart. And how do I talk about what I mean without seeming to disparage what *they* mean? Well, many different kinds of prayer have their place and purpose. But primary to all other kinds of prayer is what we will call GUIDANCE PRAYER – that is, prayer for guidance. As hinted at above, it is an invitation for the Holy Spirit to come direct and guide our lives. With well-deserved humility, aware of all the foibles and booby-traps involved, it is a desire and a willingness to let the Holy Spirit outvote us on the inner council of our lives. True prayer gives God rights – first priority – over all our choices and decisions.

I know that red flags just went up all over the place. I know all the abuses of such principles at least as well as you do. I know all the excuses because I have them and use them as much as you do. I know how hard we fight to keep out of the clutches of the God we neither trust nor love. But I also know better than some that bondage goes both ways. Either we are bound to Christ or we are in bondage to Satan. And insofar as it is to Satan, we pretend not to notice. When we do notice and turn to a new WAY, it is, as Paul says, in fear and trembling.

Nevertheless, Guidance Prayer means I am trying to find out what God wants me to do with my life – and not in a vague, general, generic way. We are talking about specifics: Today, one day at a time, I am trying to turn my will and my life over to God – seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and sworn to allegiance and obedience ahead of time. That is: If God can make it clear to me, I will do it. I can throw a little dust in the air or act dumber than I really am, but it never works for long. Not in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We do not have to read very carefully in the Gospels to realize that Jesus' life is surrounded with prayer. Forty days and nights in the wilderness are just for openers. Then over and over we discover that Jesus has been all night in prayer or has gone off to a quiet place to pray. Or some new circumstance (like the murder of John the Baptist) causes Him to recheck and re-sort everything. The pressure mounts, the temptations increase, and Jesus has more and more opportunities – both reasonable and natural – to go off course. Clearly

He sees things differently and decides things differently from the way most humans have ever done.

There is only one explanation. We may not like to see or say it this starkly, but there is only one explanation: Jesus' life is guided by His prayers. He prays when He feels like it. He prays when He does not feel like it. His relationship with God is the top priority above and beyond all other purposes. Only, Jesus does not just *talk* at God – ordering up world peace and justice and fair play for everyone, and offering His own various schemes for fixing all that is wrong down here. Jesus *listens* to God! He listens *for* God, and He listens *to* God. There is not much about fixing everybody else; it is mostly about “What do You want from me?”

So there is nothing grandiose or eloquent on our part here. We are just trying to let the Holy Spirit in on the actual planning, deployment, and execution of our daily lives. Other kinds of prayer are mostly talking; this kind of prayer is mostly listening. Other kinds of prayer take a few minutes; this kind of prayer takes more time than we ever have to give it, and it never really shuts down for long. (Luke 18:1; Ephesians 6:18; Romans 12:12; I Thessalonians 5:17) Other kinds of prayer order God around; this kind of prayer invites God to order our lives, insofar as we are able to understand and keep ourselves from running away. Other kinds of prayer can occur from time to time and that's fine; however, if I neglect Guidance Prayer, my whole life reverts from Life in Christ Jesus back to me running my own affairs. Sometimes that can happen in only a few minutes; certainly within a day or two of neglect, I am back to the old life.

Clearly prayer is the most important, and also the most difficult, of all the disciplines of the Christian Life. It is constantly frustrating to realize how willful I am, and how undisciplined, forgetful, rebellious, and ungrateful I can be. On the other hand, nothing is as exciting, fulfilling, and full of surprises and gifts and opportunities and blessings as LIFE in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

* * *

So the first and most important discipline of the Christian Life is the commitment TO PRAY EVERY DAY FOR GOD'S GUIDANCE. There are lots of different kinds of prayer, and some of them do not need to be done every day. But today we are talking about the first and most important discipline of the Christian Life: to pray every day.

And we are talking about only one specific foundational kind of prayer: Every morning, before the first cup of coffee, before breakfast, certainly before you leave the house, you check in with God. It is God's day, your life belongs to God, and God is the *only* one you have to please. If you do not start the day remembering it and clearing the decks, the day will be over and it will not have had much room for God.

Essentially, this every-morning daily prayer is a time to go over your schedule and agenda for the day – in God's presence. It is essential to remind ourselves: "It is my top priority to live like You want me to – to do what You want me to do. If You make anything clear to me, I will respond and obey." Then you take a little time for God to put thoughts in your mind, if God wants to. You think about the day's obligations, the people you will see, the tasks you have before you. And you give the Holy Spirit a chance to make any additions, deletions, or corrections. You then try to align your attitude and motives to God's will. And you ask God to go with you through the day, because there will be surprises and interruptions – and maybe some of them will even be coming from God. So you try to leave the channel on "open" for incoming messages throughout the day. And *then* you move into the day.

There are lots of other fine and wonderful things you can add to your morning devotions. I am merely talking about the primary kind of prayer – the hard-core, essential, and basic prerequisite for walking the Christian WAY.

Now, I know as well as any of you do that none of us have time to do this. The Almighty, Omnipotent, Omniscient God is not important enough for us to give a few minutes of our undivided attention to each morning. You *do* have time to get dressed; you would not dream of leaving the house physically unclothed. Do you really think you can afford to go through your days spiritually unclothed?

Time in The Presence. Do we really have more important things to do? Is there any place on earth more comforting, more exciting, more joyous? It seems so to many who have never tried it. This kind of prayer is the first and most important discipline of the Christian Life. It is *necessary* for us as Christians to pray every day.

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

Religion is dangerous business. With even a little information and awareness, most of us realize that our world is reeling under the hatreds and convictions of seriously religious people. With no intention to minimize this threat, it is nevertheless what we see on “the outside.” I happen to be even more concerned about the spiritual life and what happens on “the inside.” It is dangerous indeed to allow in and even cooperate with the God – the Holy Spirit – who wants to have a major influence on how we live our lives and, in fact, with everything we think, say, or do. It is no secret, though many seem slow to catch on, that humans who have wanted this kind of “involvement” with God have walked into patterns and issues and challenges quite different from what most of our kind have been dealing with. I happen to admire and find myself very moved by such lives: by Abraham and Joseph, by Moses and Elijah, by Jesus and Peter and Paul, and by a significant array of “followers of Jesus” whose writings I have read and whose lives I have pondered, perhaps a bit more seriously than most.

In any case, it is clear that their lives did not follow the expected goals, values, and purposes of the normal world. Their lives, in many cases, did not turn out to be “successful” by any of the measuring sticks of this world. *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* (Hebrews 10:31) Some of us may want to do that anyway; we may come to believe that, all things considered, there is no better way to risk, use, or spend one’s life here. Nevertheless, religion is dangerous business.

And it is not merely a matter of choosing to be religious or irreligious. Those of us who choose to be disciples – who choose to follow Jesus – are constantly aware of subtle traps, self-deception, mixed motives, efforts, and disciplines that end up betraying us, at least for a while. Why does God make it so hard? Is it possible – probable – that we can use religion at least as much to garnish and defend our own prejudices as we do to discover the will of God for our lives?

Last week we talked about the first and most important of all Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life: DAILY PRAYER. But we also remember that not so long ago, the Twin Towers were brought down by people who sincerely prayed five times a day. And while all humans

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

have mixed motives, they did this believing that it would please God. Yet I know more than a few people in my own religion who were (and perhaps still are) sincerely convinced that it would be a good thing to nuke hundreds of thousands of people – anyone associated with or in sympathy with those who destroyed the Twin Towers. Religion is dangerous business.

Prayer that assumes God is on our side and that we are the good guys is far more dangerous than no prayer at all. I suspect that the majority of our prayers are focused on how we want God to serve *us*, and I suspect that if we do not get the results we want, many of us stop praying. Most New Testament prayers are focused on how *we* can serve God. That is a night-and-day difference.

Today we come to the second of the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life: READ, STUDY, AND PONDER SOME PORTION OF THE BIBLE EVERY DAY. That is a great and wonderful discipline, necessary for any person sincere about walking the Christian Path and living the New Life in Christ Jesus. But is reading the Bible a certain and automatic “fix it” kind of discipline? Have we no respect for Satan? We are told point-blank that Satan loves to quote Scripture. And some of us know for certain that Satan loves to use religious intention and conviction to undo, weaken, and destroy what God is trying to accomplish in our lives.

But despite all the qualifications and complications, we are talking about the *basic* disciplines of the Christian Path or WAY. Last week was about prayer. This week is about the Bible. Remember, this is not supposed to turn into an exercise in guilt-tripping. Nobody does it all. Most of you do more than you think. This is a series about the basic disciplines that help us to stay on the Christian Path and grow in the Christian Life. We are not trying to save ourselves. We are not trying to get good enough for God to care about us. We are only trying to respond to what Jesus has made incredibly clear: God *does* care about us.

Last week you heard me say that prayer is more important than the Bible. That is true. Spirit outranks Scripture. God is more important than the *book* about God.

In my own opinion – and I never assume that you have to agree with my perspective – there are lots of places today where the Bible is

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

being worshipped as if it *were* God, and even to the neglect of God. I believe that is called “idolatry” – the worship of a “thing” instead of a relationship with the Living God. Strange and recent doctrines are being taught about the Bible being inerrant, perfect – without any errors or mistakes in it. The early church fathers challenged, debated, and argued over our New Testament writings with eager interest, but if you had tried to tell them that these writings were inerrant or perfect in some way, they would have thought you were nuts. Now some people are trying to tell us that anything and everything in the Bible is beyond challenge or question: Do not even try to understand; just hold your nose and swallow. If you read it, believe it, and get it right, you will be saved. And never mind understanding any of it – just believe it. Presto chango, we have a new savior: The Bible. And indeed it is a savior much clearer, less troubling, and ever so much less personal and caring than Jesus.

If you look closely at these doctrines, you will see that the Incarnation and love and the Cross are really just seen as formulas. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” It is all neat and tidy and clear, and you can fit it into a four-page pamphlet. Besides, nothing Christian should ever go deeper than a twenty-minute sermon on a Sunday morning (mixed with lots of jokes and inane platitudes.)

Some people tell me I should not be so sarcastic. Well, Jesus was more sarcastic than I am capable of being (He was always very good at what He did). Paul had a bit of a nip in some of his remarks too. I love the Bible as much as any person you have ever known. I just hate that in so many places in our time, it has been turned into a mindless insult. If we think we have God all figured out, that is insulting! Both to God and to us.

A couple of men found themselves sitting together on an airplane bound from New York to Los Angeles. After a while, one man put down his newspaper and decided to try a conversation. Before long it came to the inevitable question: “What is your profession?” His companion replied, “I’m a minister.” There was a pause. Finally the first man said, “You know, as far as I’m concerned, all religion can be summed up in the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Another pause. Then finally from the other: “And what is *your* profession?” “Oh, I’m an astronomer. It’s an incredibly exciting field in our time.” “Well,” said his companion, “as far as I’m concerned,

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

all astronomy can be summed up in that profound phrase: Twinkle, twinkle, little star.”

Doubtless those who teach inerrancy and simplex formulas for salvation or damnation are only trying to encourage greater faith and give the Bible greater authority so that more people will come to believe. But falsehood drives some of us away, however much it may comfort the ignorant. If we have a book we cannot question, we also have a book from which we cannot learn. If we think there is any possibility of the Bible being inerrant or coming to us straight from God without the possibility of human error or human misunderstanding or human perspective, we lack important information about how the Bible came to be.

When Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth – some of them quite contentious – did he have the remotest notion that his letters would end up being canonized as Scripture? Up in Heaven, Paul still apologizes to Jesus every morning for that crack about women keeping silent in the church. We only have *translations* of copies of *copies of copies* of what people wrote. Nowhere in the world is there an original text of any biblical writing. Not even close! So even if Paul *were* sinless, perfect, and incapable of changing his mind about something, we would still not have an “inerrant” Scripture. In fact, by his own word, Paul was not sinless. I am always eager to hear what he has to say about anything, but I would be silly indeed to assume that he was right about *everything* – any more than I assume that you are right about everything or that I am right about everything. I happen to believe that Paul was growing and learning all the time. In fact, he had a fierce learning curve. And that means that what he wrote in A.D. 48 will not match up perfectly with what he wrote in A.D. 60. Twelve years of prayer and experience and working with different churches gave him new perspective. Either that or he was brain-dead. So which is inerrant: the letter to the Thessalonians, or the letter to the Romans? Or maybe the book of James, which disagrees with most everything Paul believed or wrote?

In any case, you heard me say that prayer is more important than the Bible. What none of you heard me say – what nobody has ever heard me say – is that the Bible is not important. I do not know anything in this broken realm that is perfect. Therefore, the Bible does not have to be perfect for me to honor, revere, and study it with

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

earnest and grateful attention. I am even grateful for the errors and inner inconsistencies because they are proof of authenticity, and because they teach us many things.

So with all the magic and superstition set aside, we have in the Bible the essence of all the written records the faith community has considered most authentic and most helpful regarding what happened, how it happened, and what it means to us. That does *not* answer all our questions or solve all our problems. Sorry! But it is wonderful common ground from which we can learn and grow and be pilgrims on the WAY together.

Are we better Americans if we know nothing of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, or Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address? The parallels between a nation that no longer remembers its heritage and a church that no longer studies the Bible are shocking. The issues and the urgency are compelling, even self-evident (to borrow a phrase).

So we do not have to jump up and down, wave magic wands, or threaten anybody with extra or unusual hells. The truth is clear and simple: If we want to preserve The Union and our way of life, we better know and keep pondering our roots – where we come from – and what it means in our present situation and to our present ways and goals. Ditto the Christian Faith and what it means to *be* the church: not just to *go* to church (that's pathetic), but to *be* the church in our time, as those who came before us *were* "the church" in their time.

And so: Though the Spirit outranks Scripture, not much else does. At least not for Christians. But what always amazes me is that so many churchgoers in our time know so little about the Bible. That's scandalous! You would think that one thing we could be absolutely sure of is that every member of a Christian church would own a Bible and read it every day. If you were an outsider and heard about an organization of Christians who were serious about their faith, is that not one thing you would expect to be true of every member? It might scatter from there; the members would be doing quite an array of different things as they felt drawn or called to them. But at least you would expect that all of them would pray every day and that all of them would read their Bibles every day. Two Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life: keep reporting in, and keep reading The Manual.

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

It is one of the characteristics of fundamentalist Christianity that its people read the Bible and quote the Bible constantly. From my perspective, however, they do not always know very much about what it means. They quote it constantly as if that were a sufficient excuse for some very ridiculous and very unchristian opinions. They are told ahead of time what it means, and then they are instructed to memorize some passages to support that meaning. Quite often it feels like a wooden recitation rather than a living dialogue. “You *have* to do this. Hebrews 13:8.” Like that says it all; end of discussion. That’s when I usually turn to a friend and say, “Genesis 22:5.” (“*You stay here with the ass; I’m going on ahead.*”)

In any case, it is not enough to know that Adam and Eve ate the apple. It is also important to know that it was not an apple – it was the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And we must know that “Adam” means all humankind, in every age. And that the story means we have all been given free will – and that once we have it, we rebel against God and run our lives in our own way and apart from God. It is important to realize that God knew this would happen, that it was necessary, and that we were created this way on purpose because otherwise God would end up with robots instead of human beings able to choose and capable of love. It is even important to know that Jesus Christ came to reverse the curses of our being thrown out of the Garden. He came so that we could finally use our free will to turn again and choose God on purpose – to repent and turn toward HOME. And if you know anything about life, you know that we cannot do that unaided or all by ourselves just because we finally realize we need and want to. We need a Savior! That is a far cry from the usual “Eve ate the apple and they had sex, and you should not.” If that is all you want from the Bible, it is far better to not read it at all.

Well, conservative Christians have their problems, and liberal Christians have theirs. In the last fifty years, it has become one of the characteristics of liberal Christianity that its people have stopped reading the Bible altogether and are now biblically illiterate. It’s not because they cannot read; they are highly educated in other ways and in other fields. They simply no longer read or study the Bible. And it is *not* an exaggeration to call them biblically illiterate. Surveys and polls make it sadly and boringly clear. We have a serious INSTRUCTION DEFICIT. We do not know what we are doing, but instead of studying The Manual, we are making it up.

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

As an aside, but not very far aside: The vast majority of liberal Christians are afraid to engage conservative Christians in serious conversation about the Faith because they think the conservatives know their Bibles and the liberals know that they themselves do not. Who suffers for this? Jesus! He comes off looking more like Satan than Satan himself. Jesus loses countless potential followers who want nothing to do with a “Savior” who delights in throwing thousands into the burning fires of Hell. And where are His friends, who should know better yet are afraid to stand up for Him? Perhaps on the inside they know better, but they do not read their Bibles enough to be able to say so with any conviction or authority. So they let others tell the world about Jesus and His Kingdom, what it is like, and what it is all about. And they let them tell it wrong.

In our denomination – Congregational (United Church of Christ), the so-called “mainline” wing of Christendom – over ninety percent of our churches have no Bible study groups whatsoever. And it shows. It is the same in most liberal denominations. Over the last fifty years, church leadership has learned to push *programs*, not Christian Life. (Just one more variation on the ancient theme: back to the Law – forget the Gospel.) Of course, the programs dry up after a while, because spiritual growth and Life with Jesus are what inspire and energize us. So, not everywhere but in general, we are dying across the land. Apparently most members of liberal churches think the Bible is optional or a sideshow or a hobby for those who like that sort of thing.

I am not scolding – just describing. As always, if we cannot admit our true condition, we cannot repent, we cannot change, we cannot go beyond where we are. So please do not be embarrassed, but indulge me in a little foray into honesty. Nobody is going to remember how you respond; they will be too busy thinking about themselves. Besides, we are a faith family; we do not have to pretend any perfection with each other. The second greatest barrier to adults learning about the Bible is their fear of looking foolish because they do not already know the Bible better. All of you will know, after today, that you need never be embarrassed about your knowledge of the Bible. If you ever want to get into a class or study group, you will be with lots of others who are just getting started. So let this be what it is – maybe even interesting, and in-family fun.

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

Okay: gently, calmly, honestly ... imagining that you might be called upon to prove it:

Can you name all ten of the Ten Commandments?

The Ten Commandments are the core of the Old Covenant, apart from which we have no chance of understanding the New Covenant.

Can you tell another person what all of the Beatitudes are? The Beatitudes are the core of the New Covenant, or at least the summation of what Jesus came to teach us.

How many of you know for sure whether Elijah came before or after King David?

How many of you have read the Bible from cover to cover at least once in your life?

How many of you are inspired by the book of Hezekiah?

How many of you know for sure which book of the Bible talks about Jesus being born in a manger?

How many of you are certain that God loves you?
(The song says "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." But can the Bible still tell people about this love if they never read it?)

How many of you know who built Noah's ark?
(Just wanted to be sure everybody got at least one answer right.)

* * *

Many people would still make the claim that Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived. Some would even include in that comment that Jesus is the wisest and truest man who ever lived. Since it is true that all of our pertinent and reliable information about Jesus comes from the Bible, is it not obvious that all Christians – all followers of Jesus – would spend a significant amount of time reading, pondering, and going over in our heads the available information about the things Jesus said, what He did, what He decided, what He tried to show and tell us? What did Jesus Himself believe? What did He live for, and why?

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

Bible study does not separate good people from bad people. It does not prevent bad things from happening to us. It does not automatically make us rich or popular or successful. But it does make it possible for us to understand more and more about the life of Jesus, what He thought life was about, what He thought we should be living for, and how we should be conducting ourselves. For people sworn to follow Jesus, the Bible is the only source of information we have about Him, and we can never get enough of it. Yet we know that even the Bible can be dangerous, because the people who wrote the Bible did not always understand Jesus perfectly. The Bible itself makes it clear that the early followers and writers made some very big blunders. That is no surprise to those of us who live in a broken world. We must all go on learning and seeking understanding. We do not just read the Bible every day, like little robots. We also *ponder* it. This also we learn from Jesus. Jesus did not merely read the Scriptures of His time, or He would have been just like the scribes and Pharisees. He pondered and doubted and rethought and reworked the Scriptures, or there would be no New Testament – no Christianity.

* * *

So how do we explain the fact that so many church members in our time have read and pondered the Bible so little, so sporadically, so casually? Actually I cannot explain it. It seems like a strange and sad contradiction to me. I simply know that many of my Christian friends do not read or know the Bible very well. It's not that they have studied and rejected it; they do not know it well enough to have done that. "You cannot get a divorce if you have never been married." Many of these friends have never been properly introduced to the Bible, never mind courted it or fallen in love with it. Whose fault is that? I'm not sure, but I blame the church. As I mentioned earlier, the liberal church has been so busy with other things for the last fifty years that it has taken very little time to teach its people to read or ponder the Bible. Our children have grown up with the barest smattering of biblical knowledge, and now many of *us* are those children. So we get further and further away from the only objective source of our Faith. It is a major Instruction Deficit. We do not read The Manual anymore or study the instructions. And everywhere in the liberal church today, we are living with assumptions and claims that are wrong and ludicrous – and in my view, even dangerous – because we have stopped reading OUR BOOK.

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

To put it another way: Many Christians in our time are trying to live by patterns and principles that they think came from Jesus but which in fact did not. This means they often feel guilty about the wrong things and sometimes proud of the wrong things. Some of them are trying really hard to do things Jesus never suggested they should do. Some of them are trying to live by principles and patterns that destroy faith rather than build it up, only not because they are rebellious or disobedient, but because they have been told that this is what Jesus wants. Told by whom?!

Did Jesus teach us that there are no conditions to love? That we do not have to repent in order to receive forgiveness? That love means not trying to get an alcoholic into treatment, even covering up his mistakes so he will not have to face all the signs that he is heading into disaster? Who makes up this kind of falsehood, and why does the world love to receive and believe it so quickly?

The Instruction Deficit leads people into a church life of mayhem, confusion, and even disaster. The church gets weaker and weaker because it teaches many things Jesus never taught and it believes things Jesus never said were true. And so, of course, more and more people who come looking for a better, truer LIFE find instead a Christianity that is neither inspired nor empowered by the Messiah whom God sent to us. Consider just a few illustrations of comments many modern Christians would agree with that do not come from Jesus and that Jesus' life and teachings starkly disagree with:

If you do good, everybody will love you.

Good Christians forgive everybody.

God loves poor people more than rich people.

All religions are the same.

If you live by the Sermon on the Mount, you will be
happy and successful.

Jesus teaches inclusivity and unconditional love.

Nobody who is rich is truly Christian.

It does not matter if you are conscientious, dependable,
care about your family, and are loyal to your friends;
the only thing that matters is how much you give to
the poor.

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

Good Christians never get angry.

Everything in life is solved if we just have more faith.

Faith is another word for positive thinking.

God helps those who help themselves.

Who makes up this tripe? It did *not* come from the Bible. The Bible is not perfect, but it's a really good book – you should read it sometime! In fact, it is necessary for us who want to be Christians to read and ponder some portion of the Bible every day.

The result of this Instruction Deficit has been a growing anarchy within the churches. We no longer speak a common language or share a common source. More and more, we each “make it up” as we go. Then we are unable to even help each other along the Path, grow in the Faith, or check our opinions and prejudices against those who have walked the WAY before us. So we rave about the great virtues of diversity, yet we keep getting more isolated and lonely as we go. Diversity is not the goal – it is the situation; it takes no great skill or genius to disagree. It is the bond of God's love in Christ Jesus that can draw us together *despite* our differences. *That* is the goal. *That* is the hope. We are not here to brag about our differences; we are here to celebrate a love that is *greater than* our differences.

If you are a Christian – if you want to walk the Christian WAY, grow in understanding, make progress on the spiritual Path – one of the basic disciplines you can undertake is the commitment to read and study the Bible every day. By the nature of the culture and time in which we live, we are all being bombarded every day, all day long, by attitudes, appeals, information, causes, and beliefs that are not Christian – that do not honor God or care about God's Kingdom. If we do not find some way to counter this constant barrage, we will not stay on the Path for very long. Reading the Bible every day is one of the things that can help us to do that.

We walk along and our days get busy, there are too many demands, there is too much pressure, and the values are out of kilter in some places. No matter who we are or how strong, staying in that atmosphere all the time starts to get to us. If we have a commitment to the discipline of reading the Bible every day – that is, sometime during the day (whether we feel like it or not or whether we have the time or not) we open it to read a chapter or two – then even a few verses can

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

call us back to who we are and what we really care about. If we are committed to a different WAY, it does not take much to remind us of it – and how refreshing and helpful that reminder can be.

In addition, a daily habit of reading the Bible will keep making us more familiar with the common language of Christians. Every group of any significance has its in-group language. It's not only fun and a common bond, but it saves enormous time and confusion in communication.

I think she just walked the Damascus Road.
Send it into the pigs.
Maybe you forgot the mantle.
Have you been to the wilderness with it?
I have been hearing the rooster crowing.
He is acting like the Elder Brother on this one.

It would take me two hours to try to explain the dimensions and implications of just those few phrases. Yet every Christian should be able to pick up all two hours of significance in the few seconds it takes to say them. It is our common language – our mutual code.

Some of you may be noticing, even with alarm, that I am staying away from some of the big and important claims: The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is holy and sacred. The Bible is our canon scripture. (“Canon” means “measuring rod,” by the way: that against which we measure all other things.) I believe these things are true. But if *others* believed these things, they would already be reading the Bible every day. My hope is that if I can get more and more of *you* to start reading and studying the Bible, then maybe you will come to such conclusions for yourselves. What I *am* telling you and what I can promise you is that if you make a serious commitment to the discipline of reading and studying the Bible every day, over time it will make a huge difference in your spiritual life. It will help you to keep walking the Christian WAY, and it will make a big difference in how much you grow and learn along the WAY. If you want *progress* on the Path, this is one of the time-tested and best-documented ways to get it.

So for the moment, never mind all the highest and best claims and conclusions. But know this: The Bible is the best and most carefully preserved record we have about the people who claim to have

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

encountered God from about 2000 B.C. until 100 A.D. It contains the only useful records we have about the life of Jesus. Essentially, if you want to know where Christianity came from, how it got started, what it is about, or how you yourself can walk its WAY, you must read and ponder the Bible – and talk to others who read and ponder the Bible. Then the Bible becomes a Living Word, and you yourself get built into the ongoing story when you also begin to pray. I think we mentioned prayer last week.

It needs to be mentioned that reading the Bible devotionally every day is not enough. It is also important to *study* the Bible: to share with others what you are understanding, to listen to what others are finding, and to delve into the context, the tradition, and the background together. I fervently hope that you will each start reading the Bible individually and every day. But I must mention that you will not get very far – you will not make much progress – if you *only* read the Bible alone. If you study the Bible with others and also read it alone, then the benefit of both will increase exponentially. It is dangerous to read the Bible without the perspective of other pilgrims. (For example: “*And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.*” (Matthew 5:30)) It is helpful to have other sincere pilgrims to consult with before doing anything brash. God will cause you problems enough, if you are serious about following the WAY. But the WAY itself is intended for community, and without the perspective of Christian friends and the wisdom of our past experience and traditions, it is easy to become fixated on details and items that can sidetrack us, sometimes with serious consequences.

To be clear then, this discipline about the Bible has two parts: read the Bible every day, and study the Bible with others.

If you have never made the commitment to the discipline to read the Bible before, here is a suggestion: Promise God that you will read two chapters every day, six days a week – one chapter from the Old Testament and one chapter from the New Testament. Keep it simple: Start in Genesis and Matthew and keep going, one chapter a day from each. If you stay on schedule, you will read the New Testament through a little more than twice as often as the Old Testament.

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(FAILURE TO READ THE INSTRUCTIONS)

Then I hope that you will promise yourself to get into a Bible study group as soon as you can make that work with your schedule. Meanwhile, maybe you can get a friend or a spouse to agree to talk with you for one hour each week so that you can talk about the most interesting things you have discovered in your Bible readings that week. And you can also decide to set aside a special time once each week to read a commentary or Bible dictionary that gives a little background to one of the passages you have been reading.

Well, I know it is really strange for me to be standing in a Christian church on a Sunday morning urging church members to read the Bible. An outsider would just assume we all had already been doing this. In any case, through the ages, thousands of us have lived and died for this book, or at least for the One whom it reveals. For all the years of the church up until about the time of Luther, nobody had a Bible of their own. The only way to read or study it was to come to church, where you could hear it read to the gathered group. People looked forward all week to the chance to come together, and one of the big reasons was that it would allow them to hear more from the Holy Word. Now it is rare to find a household that does not have at least one Bible, and rarer still to find a household where anybody is reading it. Who could have imagined that persuading church members to read the Bible would ever be necessary? It should be impossible for me to prevent you from reading the Bible. It should be impossible for any person on earth to prevent you from reading the Bible. But we live in strange times.

Make the commitment to the discipline to read the Bible every day. Make the commitment to get into a Bible study group. When we do that, we play right into the Spirit's hands.

THE CALL OF GOD

It is no secret that if we do not know what we are doing, we waste huge amounts of life and time. Nevertheless, many people live as if this were a secret. If we have no goal or purpose for our lives, we walk and choose and live in aimlessness – a synonym for SIN. Before it became theological, the word SIN meant “to miss the mark.” If we are aimless, we always miss the mark. If we are aimless, we are separated – alienated – from God and from every true purpose or goal. In my tradition, the Statement of Faith says point-blank: “God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.” If we then mix aimlessness with the strange notion that “My life is my own – I can do anything I please,” we have a true definition of disaster. We see it destroying individual lives all over the landscape. And it will destroy our nation and our way of life unless a significant number in each new generation realizes it is Satan’s Creed – a freedom designed to enslave us. True freedom is only the right to choose what and whom we will serve. True freedom leads to genuine commitment.

My suspicion is that most of you know and agree with such precepts. Sometimes we get careless, though that is not news. But since we are talking about the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life, it is a blessed and happy thing to remember that we have switched from bondage to Satan to bondage under Jesus Christ. Well, sometimes we clean up the wording a little. Actually we are *slaves* to Christ – our only hope and our only true freedom – but we prefer to say *servants*. And in some ways, that *is* more accurate, since it is a chosen slavery. We put ourselves under Christ’s authority on purpose. In fact, He will accept our service and our lives on no other terms. There are no secret police in Christ’s Kingdom; there are only willing citizens. We like our new Master better than Satan, better than ourselves, better than anything or anyone else that has ever tried to run our lives. The first person to get really unhappy when I start to stray out of the Kingdom is me!

If I were to try to pick the most neglected subject in modern American Christendom, it would not be politics or the ecology or anybody’s rights. It would not be abortion, world hunger, poverty, or terrorism. Huge problems dog our steps as a species and as a civilization. We have not solved them, and both the quality of life and the probability of life are endangered. I suspect that all of us know

this, which is not to say we are all responding correctly or adequately. Nevertheless, the church of my experience is not silent on these matters. If we have not always been effective, at least we have been noisy. And indeed, on such subjects there have been many serious, sustained, and even sacrificial demonstrations of concern from the church and its people.

There is, however, another subject that comes up in most churches somewhere between rarely and never. That subject is VOCATION. The conclusions we draw from silence are always suspect, but it is as if the church does not think of vocation as an important part of the Christian WAY or Path. “God is about weekends and holidays. Everybody knows that. The Holy Spirit cares about you, your relationships, your prayer life, and your beliefs, but not about your WORK.” I think such a statement is blasphemy, and far more damaging than most of the things we call blasphemy.

We are in the midst of a series of sermons about the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life. I will not review the introductory comments and warnings, though they are as important as ever. Some of you will notice, more and more, the interplay between the disciplines, and also how they can enhance each other if we keep them. The Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life are not about something we *have* to do to get “saved.” They are about what we *want* to do to move our lives into the passion and excitement and joy of the Christian drama – the Christian WAY. Your own personal awareness of and participation in the Kingdom are directly related to how many of these disciplines you have committed to and how well you have followed through on them. Engaging in the disciplines does not mean God loves us more, but doing so dramatically affects the ways in which we respond to God’s love, and how much and how easily God can reach us. In other words, the more of these disciplines we commit to and keep, the more excited and enthusiastic we become about the Christian WAY itself. None of us commit to and keep them all, or even commit to and keep any one of them perfectly. The Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life are there as beacons: they help us make progress on the WAY. Every time we are ready, we can add a discipline or take one we already have to a new level. And every time we do that, the joy, the excitement, and the interior satisfaction increase.

And just as an aside, or brief pause for “station identification”: When I make statements about the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life, I sometimes get complaints from Calvinist types who think I do

not understand the gospel of grace. They think I do not understand Luther or that I have never studied his book *The Bondage of the Will*. Yet Luther himself did not sit around on his hands just because he knew it all depended on the grace and mercy of Christ. If no response to grace is possible, there is no Christian Life. Relationship means that two parties are involved – that two or more parties are in covenant with each other. Gratitude brings us into our own response and participation. If somebody loves you and you do not love them back, nothing happens. Unrequited love is one of the saddest things on earth, especially if it is God’s unrequited love. So back to the disciplines by which we can respond to what God is doing for us.

The first and most important of all the disciplines is the commitment to pray every day. The second discipline is to read and ponder the Bible every day. The third discipline is the commitment to find our vocation and move into it.

- a.) This involves discovering who we are and what our best gifts and talents are.
- b.) This involves the constant training and honing (sharpening) of our gifts.
- c.) This involves the continuing search for better ways and better approaches – any and every way we can find – to enhance, design, and increase our ability to fulfill our vocation.
- d.) This is the constant dedication – turning over – of our efforts and our labors to God. We do our work for God, never merely for a paycheck or for any notoriety or outward success. As Paul said: *“Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ.”* (Colossians 3:23-24)

The key element, of course, is this: A true vocation is an assignment from God. We do not make it up. It is given to us. It is a “calling.” As we discover our vocation – our assignment from God – we are also given authority to accomplish it. I do not mean in any final or perfect way. Where do we think we are?! But much will happen as we find and move into our *true* work. And when we are doing what we have been designed to do, we will love doing it (most of the time, for the most part).

Jesus said, “*My yoke is easy.*” But do not be fooled by English words that no longer carry their proper meanings. Jesus was a carpenter; He doubtless made many yokes for oxen in His time. If a yoke fits right, an ox can haul an enormous load. A good team of oxen loves to haul, but if the yoke gouges or rubs their shoulders raw – well, lots of people are in jobs that do that to them. Jesus said, “*My yoke is chrestos.*” Not “easy” as we use the word today – meaning, no effort. That kind of “easy” means it is not worth anything. Is that what we expect from Jesus? No effort, no struggle, no problems, no significance, no importance – nothing matters? Is that how *His* life was? No, when Jesus gives us a task, we will carry it *with ease* – with grace – because it is tailor-made just for us. *Chrestos* means “it fits right.” Jesus said, “*My yoke fits right.*” A true vocation matches our true identity and our purpose here.

A true vocation is a life-long assignment. It usually goes through many phases and expresses itself in different structures, but the major theme is recognizable throughout. There is no retirement. If you are seventy-eight or eighty-six or one hundred and three, do not cut out on this discipline. It is never time to quit on what we were called to accomplish. Christians never willingly stop working. It’s too much fun. And God has been so involved in it that the *task for God* and the *relationship with God* become all mixed in together. Of course, age slows us down and impairs some of our abilities; despite all the hype, in the end nobody beats or cures old age. But we keep finding ways to care about what we love. The Spirit loves to use us, and we love to cooperate.

I remember a middle-aged woman in a past parish who had a terrible time whenever the subject of our vocation came up. There would instantly come into her mind an image of herself in stocky brown shoes, off in some remote village in Africa. It was an image from her childhood, no doubt, but she could not pray about her calling because she was sure that if she did, she would end up in Africa in ugly shoes. I thought that now that we were talking about it openly in our church, she would get over this block, but it was just not happening. People in her Disciple Band began to realize how much this was troubling her. One of them finally said, “Linda, I truly don’t think you would make a very good teacher or preacher anywhere in Africa. I want you to go around the group and ask each one of us if we think that’s your gift.” When Linda had asked each person and each person had seriously denied the image, her friend continued: “Linda,

I don't know the mind of God, but if nobody here would send you to Africa, I suspect that God is not foolish enough to do that either. But one thing we all do know: if that's where God wants to send you, you would end up being absolutely delighted that you went."

That broke the spell. Two years later, Linda was in Africa. I'm kidding! It *did* break the spell, however, and Linda was able to pray about it. God sent her back to a job at the bank where she worked and she started being much happier there, improving relationships and getting better positions as she went. But the real assignment was sewing. She was an expert seamstress and had nearly forgotten how much she loved it. Now she was under orders to turn her home into a sewing shop and go back to designing and making clothes as soon as possible. The job at the bank paid her bills, but sewing was her vocation. And of course she loved it. And of course there were many challenges and many problems, but that never really bothers us if we are doing what we love and what we were designed to do.

There is nothing in this world that God is not interested in. We have to keep breaking apart the boxes we try to put God in. God wants us doing what we can do best and what we love most. Stop worshipping the cosmic imbecile. I have friends who do great in Africa, but Linda was never designed to be one of them.

* * *

A few stray remarks and then we will get serious. One of the reasons we do not make more headway and have more impact on the great problems and issues of our time is because we have forgotten – or never comprehended – the concept of vocation. We are trying to solve our greatest problems in our spare time. We think of the Christian Mission in terms of the extras and the leftovers. The church, as everybody knows, is its people. And the only way it will ever begin to fulfill its Mission is when the Mission is carried in the vocations of its people. Not where they spend two or three hours a week, but where they spend between a third and half of *their entire lives*. God is supposed to be in control of our real work, not just our spare time.

What if all the people in Christendom across the world truly believed that God also owned their lives and their efforts from nine to five? That would be a revolution to turn the world upside down. And I am *not* talking about interfering with work by trying to convert

everybody on the job. I am talking about each of us doing our work as if deep in our hearts and minds we had made the commitment to do whatever work we do *for our Lord*, and not for success or money or other people.

For the most part, at least in the past, the leadership of the church has not trusted its people to be Christian out of its sight, and it has acted like it does not think we *want* to live the Life or obey God *except* when the leadership is watching. So church programs are forever trying to haul us to special meetings and volunteer efforts where the church can watch us being faithful: march for this; dance for that; sign this statement; give to seventy-eleven causes (but never enough to do any real good); stand on your head if you love Jesus. We have to end the posturing and the play-acting. But not all at once; just quietly and gently, as we put true and earnest endeavors into place.

* * *

Let's get oriented, lest some think these notions are mere whims on my part. Dictionary: "vocation – from Latin *vocatio* – a calling, a summoning; from *vocare*, to call." You see, our language remembers, even if we have forgotten what it means. *Voice* and *vocal cord* come from the same root. A VOCATION IS A CALLING FROM GOD – a summons to accomplish. You are not an accident. You are here for a reason. You have a special identity, and with that comes a special cluster of gifts and abilities that nobody else quite matches. You have an assignment from God. God is calling you. Are you listening? And are you willing to answer?

When we start praying – when we become willing to let God into our lives – the danger of our being called to the purpose for which we were designed increases. Of course, we really want this on the soul level. But there are two little wrinkles.

The first wrinkle is that it is always disruptive to our present lives. Even if we have stumbled into work close to our real *vocatio*, which is often the case, nevertheless when the calling makes the assignment clearer, there are always changes of focus and direction that can seem quite disruptive. And naturally, if the *vocatio* beckons us toward a whole different field, that becomes a major upheaval in life, even if we end up loving it.

The second wrinkle is that a real vocatio always scares us. It always feels like a compliment higher than we deserve and higher than we can live up to. Even though we want it very much – which is always the case, since a true vocatio always matches our true identity – we are quite sure it is not possible. We will never be able to be or do what is being asked. The problem is: God assumes we will do the task together, and we always start out thinking in terms of doing it alone. So it scares us. “*I am a man of unclean lips*” was Isaiah’s first response. “*I am slow of speech and tongue, send my brother Aaron*” was Moses’ first reaction. “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man*” was Peter’s first reply.

These are classic responses to God’s call. We constantly assume that God does not understand the situation or know who we really are. “Who, me?” “Sorry, wrong number.” “You must mean my older sister.” “I have never even been sure You really exist, and now You want me to do *what*?” “Please give me a sign so I can be sure this is real ... Well, how about giving me another sign ... Maybe three or four more signs would be really helpful ...” (That last one is called the Gideon Complex, and Jesus did not have a lot of patience with it.)

There are thousands of people out there who have heard God’s call but turned away from it because it was too scary. In many cases they did not have the background to know what was happening, or they would not turn off the radio, the television, or the drugs long enough to be able to track it. This is very sad – one of the saddest things in all of life. Not only do people miss the connection between identity and task – one of the highest joys in life – but all the rest of us miss what they were sent here to accomplish. Every person who does not find and fulfill their vocatio is cheating all the rest of us out of the plans and purposes of God. Well, God has backup plans and systems, but that does not take away the sadness or minimize the waste.

Some may be thinking: If finding our vocatio is such a huge and important piece of the Christian Life – if it is so important that we are going to name it as the third discipline of the Christian Life – how come it is not mentioned more often? How come it is not emphasized everywhere in Scripture? Why is it not one of the major, blaring themes? Well, surprisingly enough, it is.

Have you ever heard the term “conversion”? All the biblical stories of conversion are stories of people receiving their vocatio – their calling. Only in fairly recent times have we reduced conversion

to trivia. Today, many people talk about conversion as if it were some kind of emotional high – a touchy-feely, goose-bumpy thrill from God. Sometimes God does give us a strong hint of presence and support; sometimes the Holy Spirit does touch us in ways that say, “I like your intentions and honor your struggles – and should you be wondering, I REALLY AM HERE!” When that happens, claim it and keep it and never let me or anybody else ever talk you out of it. But that is not conversion. Not by itself.

We have a significant number of church members who are bored or half-hearted about the Faith, but I do not think it is always their fault. Many of them have simply never been told much about the New Life. They have been told about conversion but not about what comes after that. Conversion is for openers. Conversion does not complete the Christian Life; conversion begins it. If a person “gets converted” and then just sits around waiting for Heaven, they did not get converted and they know nothing of the Christian Path or what the church is all about. Some of us come to Jesus weary, frightened, and discouraged and try to jump up into His lap to rest, only to discover that Jesus does not sit around a lot. Part of the healing is to find ourselves enthralled and involved in a very different LIFE.

Some people still ask, “Are you saved?” Meaning, “Have you encountered the Living Christ in such a way that you know for sure that you are loved and cherished, and that God will never desert or forsake you?” That is a really wonderful question, if asked in the right setting and in an appropriate way – which some of us think it very seldom is. But even that is not conversion, though discovering the love of God very frequently *leads* to conversion. The question that goes with conversion is not “Are you saved?” The question that goes with conversion is “ARE YOU BEING USED?” Have you turned your life over enough so that God can use you? Are you a citizen of the Kingdom enough that you work for it? Do you know who you are and have you found your vocatio? And is God your true Boss? *That* is what conversion is about.

This is essential biblical perspective, so it is essential for those of us who do not already know it to realize that this is the standard Christian awakening and perception. All biblical stories of conversion are the receiving of assignments. All biblical accounts of conversion are about vocation – vocatio. Track it with me.

Abraham is the Father of Faith and the beginning of Judaism. He starts praying and walks right into marching orders: Leave Ur, go to the land I shall show you (Israel), and there establish a new people – a new nation that shall be my chosen, my holy people. This is not just a religious high, though it is also that (as it often is); that is not the primary point or purpose. It is an assignment, a *vocatio*. Abraham's conversion changes the face of earth history forever. It is not because it makes him feel good; it is because he accepts his assignment. And using Abraham, God is able to back and support and carry on that assignment. Naturally, when God breaks through to us, it is pretty startling – a memorable moment. But the assignment – the *vocatio* – is *the reason* for the breakthrough. If we forget the assignment and focus on the feelings that surround its coming, pretty soon Christianity is like most Christmas celebrations in this country: a nice diversion, but without any power to redeem us.

Moses has an amazing experience on the mountain: a burning bush – a classic conversion encounter – and the assignment to go back to Egypt, free the people, and take them to the Holy Mountain to receive the Covenant. This is not something he concludes later or evolves into as a result of the amazing experience. The assignment is the conversion. The *assignment* is what changes his life. The burning bush is only what gets his attention. It is the *assignment* that changes his life.

Isaiah gets into this incredible theophany and is stunned by the beauty and majesty of it, but God has agenda and business in mind: “*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’*” (Isaiah 6:8) And the rest of the book is about that sending – that calling to accomplish something for God.

Would you like to talk about Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, David, Jeremiah? How about Amos or Hosea or Gideon? The conversion is *always* a calling, *always* an assignment. They are not being entertained; they are being sent – and used. They are called to their work, to their vocation, to their *vocatio*.

Peter's conversion: I will make you a fisher of men.

Paul's conversion: I will send you as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Jesus' conversion: Oh yes. His conversion starts with His baptism, which sends Him immediately into the wilderness for forty days. And He does not come out until He has His assignment clear.

There are no exceptions. Conversion means you receive your vocatio. It means you hear the call of God to accomplish what you were designed and sent here to accomplish. If you hear a story about a conversion experience and it contains no assignment – no calling to accomplish – it is a fraud, a dud. I do not mean you should challenge the person to a duel over it. Maybe the calling – the assignment – will follow close on the heels of the awakening. Maybe the person has received their vocatio but is still too shy or too humble to claim it yet. It maybe is not *your* vocatio to straighten out all the false claims and play-actors, just like it is not *my* vocatio to teach all motorists how to drive or all church members how to vote. I just want you to know that if there is no calling – no vocatio – there has been no true conversion.

In addition, over the years I have been in many conversations about prayer and spiritual experiences, and there are always some people who say that they have never had any dramatic religious conversion. They did not see any bright lights or hear any loud bells or whistles; they grew into it all gradually. But my question to them is: Have you found your vocatio? If you know your vocatio, you have been converted – I don't care how quietly, gradually, or humbly. And if you do not know your vocatio, you have not been converted – I don't care how many bands of angels danced or sang or did cartwheels all over Heaven.

The third discipline of the Christian Life is to find and follow our calling. It is important to note that the zeal of this discipline begins with the search. That is, all the energy and devotion that will later go into the work itself goes into the search for that work until we find it. The blessing of this discipline begins as soon as we make the commitment to it. A few of you may be troubled by a logical inconsistency: If God does the calling, why are *we* searching? The experience through the ages is that God often does not call *until* we are searching. I suspect it is for the protection of free will, but the reason does not matter. God usually waits until, on some level, consciously or unconsciously, we want it and we are willing. Much of the Christian Life feels stuck somewhere between boring and irrelevant until we make the commitment to the discipline to find and follow our calling.

One of the fastest theological overviews of what is going on here on earth is found in the Garden of Eden story. Because of the serpent (the tempter, Satan) connecting with human pride – our tendency to “go it alone,” to forget our Creator, to do things our own way – we both inherit and earn all the curses of alienation: aloneness, estrangement, being out of tune and out of relationship with God. The one-word summation of this condition is SIN. The curses are not a trumped-up punishment. The curses are descriptions – the inevitable consequences of our alienation. The curses are all definitions of apartness, out-of-synchness, things not in tune: humans alienated from God; brother against brother; men lording it over women; humans at odds with nature. This is *not* the way God wants it! Some people keep forgetting that the curses are not God’s will or desire. Jesus Christ came to reverse the curses: to reconcile us to God, to put brother back in love with brother, to fill up the ever-widening chasm between men and women, and more.

One of the curses is the curse of toil. Out from under the weight of alienation, we love our work. We love to accomplish. It is one of life’s highest joys. Only under the curse is work reduced to toil, to meaningless labor – the squandering of energy with little return and no satisfaction. If Jesus cannot give us meaningful labor, He is not the Christ. Yet we have to be willing to listen and to obey. Jesus never coerces. The Kingdom Movement that Jesus brought to this earth is a volunteer revolution. If we do not want to, it does not count. We have to *choose* the Kingdom, or it leaves us pretty much alone (pun intended). But the truth is, each one of us has a special identity and a special vocatio. The third discipline of the Christian Life is the commitment to listen until you hear your calling, and then to live it out.

I know many of you have known and followed your vocatio for years. But if you have not, this third discipline is dynamite. And I said it before and I must also end with it: It does not matter if you are young or old or in-between – God has work for you.

MENTOR / SPONSOR / CONFESSOR / FRIEND

COMMENTS ON SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

We are about to read one of the most famous passages in Scripture. I want to take a few minutes to set it in the context some of you never hear about.

Saul, David, and Solomon were the only kings that Israel ever had over a united Israel. Their reign was the most prominent period in Israel's history. Abraham was the beginning of Judaism, about 2000 B.C. David reigned about 1000 B.C. Jesus came at the turn of the ages, as we count it – about halfway between Abraham and us. Keeping this timeline in our heads helps many things start sticking in our minds instead of drifting on through.

At the death of Solomon (931 B.C.), there was civil war, and Israel split into two kingdoms – north and south. (Knowing what happened to Israel as a result of this split was partly why Abraham Lincoln was so determined to not let it happen to us.) Adding to the confusion, the Northern Kingdom was called “Israel” and the Southern Kingdom was called “Judah.”

Ahab was the seventh king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (*Moby Dick* came later). He reigned for twenty-two years (873-851 B.C.). As a political and military leader, Ahab was an outstanding king of the Divided Monarchy. But the Bible *hates* him because he came within a whisper of destroying Israel's religion (a story we are going to read about in a minute). Ahab did this by forming an alliance with Ethbaal, the king of Tyre (the Sidonian kingdom north of Israel – what you think of as Lebanon). You can tell by his name that Ethbaal did not worship Yahweh. He worshipped Baal. This alliance between Ethbaal and Ahab was sealed by Ahab's marriage to Ethbaal's daughter. Her name was Jezebel, one of the most religious ladies who ever lived. If she had been on our side, there would be statues of her everywhere. She lived and died for her gods. Not only did she introduce the worship of Baal and the Ashtoreth, but she instituted severe persecution against Yahweh worship and began killing off all the prophets and priests who tried to maintain Israel's religion.

Today every liberal Christian knows that all gods are the same and that every path to God is as good as any other. But they did not know that yet in Ahab's time. Ahab should have known better than to marry Jezebel. Her two sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, became kings after Ahab, thus extending Jezebel's influence. Remember, this was in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Jezebel was then able to get her daughter, Athaliah, married to the king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah (Jehoram). When the king died (who knows how), Athaliah became the queen of Judah. She then killed off (or thought she had) all the male heirs who might return Judah to Yahweh worship. This is not a Walt Disney movie. This is Old Testament history.

If you are tracking the story, Jezebel very nearly succeeded in replacing Judaism with Baal worship in both Israel and Judah. Had she succeeded, we would not be here. No Israel, no Judah, no Jesus. One man stood in Jezebel's way. His name was Elijah. (Now you know whether Elijah came before or after David.) Elijah's name means "Yahweh is God!" (NOT Baal! YAHWEH.)

Jezebel had all the armies and all the resources of the nation at her beck and call. Elijah had only his feet and his God. He could run like the wind, and all day long if he had to. Elijah appeared and disappeared like smoke. They simply could not catch him.

Finally, in one of the most startling and dramatic stories in the entire Bible, there was a contest on Mount Carmel. Elijah and God won this contest, and Elijah killed all the priests of Baal that were present (about four hundred of them; Jezebel had previously killed all of the priests and prophets of Yahweh that she could find). This account of Elijah killing the prophets of Baal annoys many modern Christians; it does not sound very loving or forgiving. Lots of things have happened and continue to happen in our world that are not very loving or forgiving.

In any case, Elijah knew that Jezebel would be utterly furious when she learned what happened. He knew that he would not be safe anywhere in the nation. Messengers were sent by horse to Samaria, the capital city about thirty miles southeast of Mount Carmel, to tell Jezebel what Elijah had done. Elijah outran the horses and, as Jezebel's men swarmed out of Samaria looking for Elijah to the north, he was already past Samaria, heading south.

Elijah kept going south – clear out of Israel, clear through Judah, into the vast wastelands of the Sinai Peninsula – to the Mountain of God, where Moses and the newly freed slaves out of Egypt first made covenant with God and received the Ten Commandments and the Torah. Where else *could* Elijah have gone? He went, as you can imagine, to report this utter disaster to God: Your plans, Yahweh, have come to nothing. The Promised Land, the Chosen People, the Holy Nation – it is all in utter ruin, and Baal worship has overrun the land. “*I, and I only, am left of the whole dream of what would come to be.*” And God said, “Oh, you poor, dear, sweet child. Things have been really hard for you, haven’t they?” Oops: wrong story; wrong God. God said, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, kid.”

HEAR, THEN, THE SCRIPTURE READING (I Kings 19:9-21):

And there Elijah came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and God said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”

And God said, “Go forth and stand upon the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” [Self-pity always tends to sound like a broken record.]

And the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah you shall anoint

to be prophet in your place. [The bad news is, I have daring and difficult work for you that will make all your former tasks seem like child's play. The good news is, you are almost out of here. And Elijah says, "Thanks Lord, I can hang-in if it's just for a little while longer.] *And him who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.* [In fact, Tyre, Israel, and Judah had formed a strong alliance, united in political interest and in the worship of Baal. The alliance was working well, and doubtless most people thought the prosperity and security were more important than Yahweh, or were the result of changing to a better god. But then Jehu killed off the Baal contingent, the kings, and all their successors in both Israel and Judah, thus splintering the alliance forever.] *Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."*

So Elijah departed from there, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing, with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his mantle upon him. And Elisha left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." And Elijah said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" [Elijah says, in effect: "If you want to screw around with other priorities, we can just forget the whole thing." Then Elisha understands and gets serious.] *And Elisha turned, and took the yoke of oxen and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah, and ministered to him.*

MENTOR / SPONSOR / CONFESSOR / FRIEND

We are in the middle of a series of sermons on the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life. Before we were called “Christians,” we were known simply as “Followers of the WAY,” which meant followers of the Path or WAY that Jesus taught. Today, many people do not think of the church as a community of people who walk a special WAY. That is, they do not see the church talking about or practicing any special WAY of Life. They see Christians going to church, but they do not know why. And lots of Christians go so erratically that it does not seem to make much difference to anything. If going to church makes no difference, then what difference does it make?

Add to this the fact that many people go to church looking for a spiritual path and cannot find it. That is, it is possible to go to many of our churches for months or even years and never find any description of or instruction in what it means to live the Christian Life. Of course, if the Christian Life were set forth in any discernible way, many people would reject it. On the other hand, at least that would make some choices available, and perhaps many who rejected it at first would return to choose it at a later time.

Since we are talking about making commitments to the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life, let me say just a word about commitments. No authentic commitment can ever be forced on you from outside. If it is forced from outside, it is coercion, not a commitment. We choose to make commitments when something is important enough to us that we begin to really want it. Today, people are fond of saying things like “I’m really very spiritual, but I don’t much like religion.” And that statement often sums up the attitudes of our time. Yet “religion” is what we DO about our spirituality. Everybody is *spiritual* – God made us. Some of us have learned that we cannot escape our spirituality, no matter how hard we try. But we become *religious* when we decide to do something about it: When we take steps. When we make commitments to the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life. When we let it make real changes – let it begin to make a difference – in how we live.

It is my belief (not my faith, but my belief) that we start wanting to make commitments to walk the Christian WAY when we start to love Jesus – that is, when it hits the heart. I suspect that it is mere

theory or curiosity until we get “caught” (hooked) – drawn by Jesus’ purposes and also drawn to what Jesus Himself is like. None of the Christian disciplines are worth the time, energy, or risk they require – until we start to like Jesus; until we start to want Him as our teacher and guide; until we begin to notice that He is more than we can fit into normal, rational patterns of explanation. I keep trying to use a variety of phrases because all the usual ones have turned into formulas which explain very little and usually get even *that* wrong.

I know that some people here today do not have any strong or special link or bond with Jesus. I want you to be comfortable coming here. I want you to be comfortable saying that Jesus is not very important to you. All of us remember the feeling. Nobody starts out already in love with Jesus. If we cannot be honest and keep our integrity, no authentic search or path is possible. If you cannot participate in the life of the church for a while, how else can you explore, learn, or find out if any such connection might be possible? It must nevertheless be true – and stay true – that this is a *Christian* church: a community or fellowship of people who *do* love Jesus; who, for that reason, make every earnest effort to walk His WAY; who therefore have made serious commitments to disciplines that keep them growing and learning in the Christian Life.

So I am in the midst of lining out seven of the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life. There are others. These seven are time-tested and built deeply into our experience and traditions, and they *do* work if we work them. Now, we are all constantly being told about endless activities and disciplines that somebody thinks we “should” do or which would make a big improvement in our lives: Read this book. Eat that food. Go to such-and-such a lecture, concert, spa, or weekend event. Get an astrology reading. Become a Rotarian. Volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. Give to Global Hunger Relief. You get the picture. You have been getting it for as far back as you can remember.

I am *not* saying there is no good in these things. Somebody believes they have found value in them or they would not be suggesting them. But you can do none of them and still walk the Christian Path – just like you can do all of them and never come to know or follow Jesus.

The seven Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life are not guaranteed to bring you to Jesus. But if you already have a bond with Jesus, these disciplines shape and form the Path, and they will

bring you progress and excitement and joy on the journey. And if you have no disciplines, you have no Path, no WAY; it is mere play-acting. The biblical word for it is “hypocrite.” *Hypocrite*, in Greek, means “play-actor.”

First Discipline: PRAY EVERY DAY.

Second Discipline: READ AND STUDY THE BIBLE EVERY DAY.

Third Discipline: FIND AND FOLLOW YOUR VOCATIO.

It is, of course, hard to get anywhere with the third discipline if you have not taken on and kept the first and second disciplines. And we could interplay that thread a lot of different ways.

The fourth of the seven disciplines is the hardest to sell to a modern American. When I talk about the first three, not everybody undertakes them or keeps them, but nearly every Christian knows they should. After I get through talking about the fourth discipline, many people respond: “Say what? I don’t really understand this one. I heard what you said, but I’m sure it’s not as important as you seem to think.”

Well, I already told you that nobody gets into all the disciplines all at once, and that nobody does them all well all the time. If they did, we would have a perfect world, or at least a perfect church. Choose the disciplines as they call to you. I just want you to know what they are. If you get to Heaven and you have not followed the Path, then *you* have a problem. If you get to Heaven and nobody even told you about the Path, then *I* have a problem.

The fourth discipline is to CHOOSE A MENTOR. I do not want to get lost in details here; there is obviously a great deal more to each of the disciplines than I can put into one sermon. There are also many names for a Mentor, but Mentor will suffice. A Mentor is someone you choose, not someone who chooses you. Then you explain to them what you want from them and ask if they are willing to be your Mentor. If they say yes, then every ten to fourteen days, you sit down with them for an hour or so and conscientiously review with them how you are doing on the Path. You share with them the issues you are facing, the decisions you are trying to make, the relationships you are struggling with, the mistakes you think you have made, and the delights and the progress.

A few items (no time to explain much, just putting it out there):

1.) I know many of you do not think you need a Mentor. Actually, some of you do not. But if you commit to even the first three disciplines, you will need a Mentor! If you seriously intend to walk the Christian WAY, you will need a Mentor. Every serious spiritual path in the world knows this to be true and teaches that it is necessary. The Christian Life is dangerous. If you walk it alone, you do not understand the nature of the Path itself, and you have already flunked Humility, which is the first prerequisite, the first beatitude, the first step of the WAY.

2.) Your spouse does not count for this fourth discipline. Some spouses are excellent Mentors, I know. And it is wonderful to be able to share such things with a spouse from time to time. However, it is not good for a marriage to switch from a marital relationship to a mentor relationship on a regular basis. It is not possible for you or your spouse to maintain the necessary objective perspective on some of the most important items. Your children, by the way, are an even worse choice for a Mentor (terrible for them, I mean), though a surprising number of people try it, in many cases without even realizing that they are doing it.

3.) It often works well at first, but it is a very poor idea in the long run to make a reciprocal arrangement: "I will be your Mentor if you will be my Mentor." It's fine to have a Mentor and to be a Mentor, but do not let it be with the same person.

4.) Do not choose a Mentor of the opposite sex. Unless, of course, you are gay. Then by all means do so.

5.) The fact that you choose someone as your Mentor does not mean they are superior to you or more advanced than you are. There are no perfect Mentors. But almost any thoughtful, listening person can see us and our patterns more clearly (at least in some ways) than we can see them ourselves. A Mentor *does* have to be someone you can be honest with – someone you trust – and they have to be someone who will listen and who will be honest with you after they listen. The fact that you choose a Mentor does *not* mean you will always agree with their suggestions or perspective. It does *not* mean you have promised to do what they say. It *does* mean that you will consider their input thoughtfully and prayerfully.

We are talking about the priesthood of all believers here, not anything fancy or perfect.

The fact is, if you choose and use a Mentor, at the end of six months or a year (or any other time frame) your Path will be far more clear and you will be a lot further along on it than if you do not have a Mentor.

Early in our history, the Christian church tried to respond to this category of the fourth discipline by setting up a priesthood whereby every Christian would talk to a Mentor (a priest) to confess sins, set penance, and receive absolution – get cleaned up from the residue of life that clings to all of us – every week before worship and before taking communion. As I said, every serious spiritual path on earth has always known the necessity of this fourth discipline.

The trouble with the institutional answer is that it always turns into rote and ritual for a lot of people. By the way, there are still excellent priests who listen creatively and help their parishioners stay on a vital Christian Path. They assign meaningful penance, and those who use the system well reap deep and meaningful rewards. Even a priest who, swamped by the number of confessions, resorts to rote penance is still often helpful to Catholics who know their faith. Saying fifteen or twenty “Our Fathers” sounds pretty dumb to most Protestants, but a Catholic who remembers that the Lord’s Prayer is a summation of the very Path itself does not just rattle it off as an empty form, but meditates on it until their own life is realigned to God.

The trouble with the noninstitutional answer is that, while it has the potential to be far more vibrant and creative and tailor-made to each person, in reality it often ends up neglected or even forgotten entirely. Then pretty soon, the Path itself may be forgotten also.

In any case, you should know that one of the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life is a commitment to find a Mentor. If for any reason you lose a Mentor or it stops working with them, find another one. Forgiveness and new starts are the very essence of the Path.

If, in the course of time, the bonds of Christian love do not seem to be very strong in a church; if the people do not seem to feel the power of the Christian Life flowing in their midst; if sometimes it seems like the church is just another social organization or maybe another service club – sometimes it is because the people no longer

remember that they each need a Mentor for the WAY, and they have forgotten that one of their top reasons for existence is to embody the priesthood of all believers.

By the way, controlling twelve yoke of oxen is quite a feat. Not many men could manage it. Elisha must have been in the heavy-hauling business. And he almost missed his calling by trying to act logical and normal when Elijah came by. "Give me time to get all my affairs in order and say goodbye to my folks." Elijah had no time or sympathy for that. Elijah's dismissal awakened Elisha to the nature of the call, and he sacrificed all his earthly wealth on the spot. He gave all he had to the people around him and left everything to follow Elijah. It is also true that Elijah was casting his mantle. So Elisha got an awesome Mentor, and soon the incredible spirit that had been guiding and inspiring Elijah's life was flowing and directing the life of Elisha.

Could this really be true? That the heroes and leaders we honor had Mentors? What about Moses? Jethro. What about King David? Samuel and Nathan. What about Jeremiah, who, not from choice but from necessity, was the most isolated, lone-wolf character in the entire Bible? Baruch. Just wanted to remind you that this is not my idea; it is not some newfangled theory. It has always been part of the Path. If *you* are serious about the Path, you *need* a Mentor.

Somebody or something is always trying to destroy the worship of Yahweh. Somebody or something is always trying to destroy our relationship with the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. So it is not just a game or a pleasantry or a sideshow. It is a life of commitments to the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life, made in dead earnest by those who mean to follow the WAY. Take them on one at a time, as they call to you. All of them are meant for your benefit. Sooner or later you will want all of them to help shape and form your LIFE in Christ Jesus.

A DISCIPLE BAND

Jesus has been busy since He came out of the wilderness. His life has changed dramatically. Instead of the normal days of carpentry, neighbors, friends, family, work, and worship, suddenly He is the focal point of a new Movement. His days are full of confrontation and conversation. He has a Message, and some are enthralled by it, others are puzzled, and many are fiercely antagonistic. Along the way, He heals people – sometimes in one way, sometimes in another. And right in the middle of this busy, busy time – as was frequently true of Jesus – He goes off to pray. “*And from time to time he would withdraw to remote places for prayer.*” (Luke 5:16 REB)

This time, Jesus has gone off to some mountain in the vicinity. I suspect Mount Tabor, just because that would be dramatic, but there are plenty of other places nearer the Sea of Galilee (Mount Arbel, for instance). This time, He prays all night. What is troubling Him? What is at stake? Some of us think that forty days and nights should have been enough prayer to last a lifetime. But Jesus is at it again, as indeed He always is. What’s going on?

We do not have to wait very long to find out. “*When day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.*” Most of you know that a *disciple* is a learner, a pupil – someone under the discipline of the Master or Teacher. An *apostle* is a messenger – “he that is sent out”; in this case, an ambassador of the *Basileia*: the Kingdom and its Gospel. Jesus knows He cannot accomplish His Mission all by Himself. We have no idea how many disciples (followers) Jesus has at this point; probably hundreds and growing every day. From these disciples, He calls and appoints twelve to become a special band of apostles – the inner core: the insiders who will train and learn from Him to help carry and spread the Message. (So much for ridiculous comments that Jesus was not exclusive. All quality of life depends upon exclusivity. Has anyone here ever been married?!) It seems clear that Jesus trains and teaches this DISCIPLE BAND all through the rest of His time in this realm. (Luke 9 and 10 make it obvious, but it is hinted at in many places if we are alert.) It also seems clear that Jesus has been doing this ever since, though many of us do not seem to know it.

Some of you are happy to rejoice at Pentecost and to call it the “birthday of the church.” I certainly do agree with that. But if

Pentecost is the birthday, then this quiet, unsung moment is the inception of the Christian church. Jesus spends all night in prayer, talking things over with God. Moses had gone up the mountain and had come back with Ten Commandments; Jesus goes up the mountain and comes back with Twelve Apostles. In some ways, that symbolizes and defines the difference between these two great leaders and the Movements they started.

The twelve who are chosen do not understand yet what is happening. That is, they do not comprehend the magnitude of it. It is too soon. There are too many dimensions that have yet to unfold. Though Jesus sees the connections with all that has gone before and constantly highlights them, there is still so much that is new in what He sees and does that no one else is tracking or understanding all of it. Sincere followers do keep catching on more and more as things unfold – from that day down to the present, and beyond. But at this point, the twelve are just trying to cooperate – to go along with whatever it is Jesus is seeing and shaping and doing. At this point, all they know is that they have been chosen. They live with Him, go about with Him, learn from Him. That is their full-time occupation now, whatever it may look like on the surface. Jesus' ministry spreads and keeps going deeper.

So for the time being, the twelve are apprentice apostles. Of all the ones who were on the list that Jesus prayed about on the mountain that night, these twelve make the first cut. They are to be the foundation of the new twelve tribes of Israel – what will come to be called “the Christian church.” Eventually they will learn to form Disciple Bands themselves. They will be shocked as the ministry goes on. They will be devastated when Jesus is killed, and they will even lose one of their number. Much of their awakening and transformation will come after the crucifixion. Sometimes we have to lose everything to gain what truly matters. That, along with many other things Jesus taught them, will not really come clear until they remember it looking back through the crucifixion. Of course, the Holy Spirit of the resurrected Jesus will be helping them all along the WAY.

It is interesting that yet again today, there is a group of scholars trying to tell us that Jesus did not do any of this, that Jesus was not aware of any of this – that Jesus had no sense of special identity and never intended to start the Movement we call “the church.” It is beyond belief, they say, that Jesus was genius enough to be thinking so far ahead. On the other hand, I think it is beyond belief to imagine that

groups of His followers were the geniuses who made it up, and so quickly and compellingly after His death. But each to his or her own surmises, I suppose.

In any case, I suspect that those of us who are serious followers today want to pay attention to what Jesus was doing and how He went about it. Jesus chose a Disciple Band. His purpose in this world could not be accomplished without that – it could not move forward apart from that. Choosing the twelve was the beginning of the church.

Thousands of people for thousands of years have talked about the crucifixion and the resurrection, and they have found faith, hope, mercy, grace. Their lives have changed, and they have discovered New Life, new values, new reasons for living, and new dimensions to it all that they had not even known existed before running into Jesus. Some of us are among that number. But absolutely none of them, or any of us, would ever have heard about any of it if it had not been for the twelve. (In my scheme of things, the Holy Spirit chose Paul to replace Judas, though we do not have time to go into it here.) If Jesus saves by His death and resurrection, He also saves because He chose the twelve. The night He spent on that mountain is one of the great turning points in human history. God in Jesus Christ said to the world on that night: This is not just about us – we are not doing this TO you. You have to be part of it. You have to get into the story, carry it, and be its messengers – *or it will be for you as if it never happened*. To not carry this Message will be the same as never having known it.

Jesus had Gospel and *was* Gospel (Good News). This Gospel became more and more amazing as He went. But who carried the news? News that is not carried is no news at all, no matter how incredible its content. And this news could not be carried as sheer information. This news could only be carried by a band of believers who themselves believed it and lived it. Jesus not only died and rose again, He also chose the twelve. One without the other is useless. To do one without the other means nothing will ever come of it. Jesus chose the twelve and trained them: taught them, talked with them, loved them, scolded them, argued with them, forgave them, commissioned them, sent them out. He never got anywhere near finished with their training before time ran out. But it was enough, as one of His parables suggested – enough for the seed to take root and begin to grow. And it is growing still. But God does not coerce. It will cease to grow, and even wither away, if no one finds it worth their time and life to carry it.

Jesus saves by His death and resurrection. He also saves by calling the church into being. The fifth discipline is the commitment to *be* the church. Not *go* to church – *be* the church. The missing piece for many modern Christians is that the church always has two parts or dimensions. It is the larger body – all the followers in general. But that quickly goes generic unless there are also Disciple Bands within the larger group. True “church” is not possible except in the company of people who really know you and care about you. That means people *you* really know and care about too. If you love everybody, you love nobody. Even the Son of God had to narrow it to twelve to get it real. And the main reason so many drift away from the church is because generic love – love in general – is a contradiction in terms. Or if you want it really clear: Generic love – love in general – is a lie. Would you even walk across the street to get love from somebody who loves everybody? Neither would I! It means nothing.

The truth is, Jesus bet everything on the power of friendship. Other great leaders have depended on military might or economic power, founded schools, learned to appeal to the masses, or had political clout. Jesus depended on none of these things. Jesus bet it all on twelve friends. If you are a Christian and you do not live in and out of a small group of true friends who are followers of His WAY, what are you doing? Who do you think you are following?

Lots of you are way ahead of me on this and have fully comprehended such things for years. But people new to the Path or who are still contemplating becoming followers are sometimes surprised or even offended by anything “institutional.” Of course! When we are just getting excited about the spiritual life, we do not like it to be mixed up with – sullied by – physical, pragmatic realities. It is such a disappointment when people go from contemplating the burning bush to sitting around with their calendars trying to decide when to have the next committee meeting. Even Jesus is grouchy for a while when He comes off the Mount of Transfiguration and walks back into the humdrum problems of everyday miracles and ministry.

But the fact is: if we want to help Jesus with His Mission, we have to be part of His church. Love is a concept, an idea, a vision; family is an institution. But love does not last for very long in any way that matters or makes a difference if it does not go to work in the real world – and that is institution.

Institute: to initiate, begin; to establish, organize,
set in operation.

Institution: a relationship or behavior **of importance**
in the life of a community or society.

“I don’t like institutional religion” means “I don’t want any religious principles to be set in operation. I don’t want it to make any difference in the real world – especially not in *my* life.” Of course. No mystery there. We have all felt that way from time to time. Being “spiritual” is easy; we were made that way – designed and created by God. But turning will and life over to God is a whole different matter. That is never easy for us humans. Yet that is what makes a difference. You can be as spiritual as you like – all day long, every day – but without turning will and life over to God, it will never make any difference.

Christianity is a concept, an idea, a vision; church is an institution. But Christianity is mere fleeting sentiment if it does not get embodied in a faith family – a church. Cyprian wrote: “He cannot have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother.” Augustine, referring to Cyprian’s comment, added: “No salvation exists outside the church.” Only, “church” does not mean a building with a steeple. It means a band of disciples, a fellowship of believers: two or three or more gathered “in His name.” Nobody was more of a loner than Augustine, but he knew there was no salvation outside the faith family. We are desperately in need of Jesus, but Jesus knows we also need each other. So He formed the church. And the church depends on and is made up of Disciple Bands. Without the larger church, Disciple Bands go self-centered and disintegrate. Without Disciple Bands, the larger church goes empty and meaningless.

You would never know I was raised Quaker, since Quakers do not have a high regard for talking. Like every community, though, the Quakers have stories to illustrate their truth. A Quaker farmer heard noises downstairs in the middle of the night. He quietly got up, picked up his shotgun (even Quakers hunted for food), went to the head of the stairs, and waited. When the shuffling noises got to the bottom of the stairs, he flicked on the light and, sure enough, there was a burglar with sack in hand, creeping along. “Friend,” said the farmer, “I would not harm thee for the world, but thee are standing where I am about to shoot.” But this is not a sermon about preaching ...

So here is the story for today, and it is about an actual incident. It also concerns a Quaker farmer. This one lived in Pennsylvania. He was an elder in the church and one of the pillars of the congregation. One day, the Meeting decided against things he really cared about, and the pastor (Hicksite Quakers have pastors) had also voted against him. The next Sunday, the farmer was not at Meeting – something that was unheard of. About mid-week, toward evening, the pastor showed up at the farmer’s house. The farmer opened the door, and the tension and animosity were thick in the air. But not a word was spoken. The farmer shrugged and stepped aside, and the pastor went in. They both sat down in front of the fire and did not say a word.

After ten or fifteen minutes, the pastor got up, stepped to the fire, took a pair of tongs and, with them, drew a large, red-hot coal out of the fire and set it on the hearth. Then he sat down again. The two men sat in silence, watching the glowing coal, until it turned cold and black. Then the pastor got up again and, with the tongs, set the coal back into the fire. He sat down again. Soon the coal was glowing as red and hot as it had before. Then the pastor got up and left. Still no word had been spoken. The next Sunday, and ever after, the farmer was back in church.

Do you think this is a commercial for the church? Do you imagine that Cyprian and Augustine were trying to offend other religions? Perhaps, if there was time, it would help to remind you of the rebelliousness and anguish of Augustine’s own path to God. At the moment, however, I will only say that Cyprian and Augustine and that Quaker pastor were trying to “tell it straight”: Nobody can walk the Christian Path alone. The Gospel cannot be honored in isolation. The Message of God’s love dies unless we carry it as a community of faith, not just as heroic individuals. But most of all, *Jesus calls us into His church* – into a Disciple Band, into a fellowship of believers. “*Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*” And the church (the *ecclesia*, the people – the people of Jesus) is the visible representative of the truth and the Movement that Jesus began. *Of course* it reeks of imperfections. *Of course* it needs constant renewal. *Of course* all of us who are part of it wish it could be a truer and better witness for our Lord, even as we wish we ourselves could be truer and better followers. But the fact is: for as long as we are the church and dedicate ourselves to its purpose – however imperfectly – that is how long the Message and Movement of Jesus the Christ will survive upon the earth.

Now, suppose that you yourself, as an individual, are totally converted, totally in love with God, totally immersed in the teachings of Jesus, but you do not like organizations and cannot stand the institutional church. So you will do your best to live an exemplary Christian Life, but you will never worship with others, study with others, work in concert with others on any purpose or project. By the end of your life, will you have helped or hindered Jesus' purposes? You will have helped to destroy everything He came for. Love is about relationship. You cannot love "alone." That is a contradiction in concept and in reality.

In addition, suppose for a moment that all the other Christians in the world suddenly agreed with you and wanted nothing to do with being the church – none of them ever again worshipped with each other, studied together, cooperated in any projects or purposes. How long would any remnant of Christianity remain known upon the earth? It would all be gone in two generations, except for the museums. Had those who came before you thought this way, there would be no Bible. Who would have translated or printed it? Who would have suggested that any of the writings were worth preserving in the first place? There would be no church schools or places to gather and learn about any of it. In short, you would never have heard about any of it if people before you had not *been* the church.

Does anyone honestly suppose that it honors Jesus to live in such a way that, if we all agreed, His name and His Movement would disappear from the earth? And if you were really serious about not being the church, you could not even tell your children that Jesus had ever lived or any of the things He said or did, nor could you ever mention such things to your husband or wife? Do you think I'm being ridiculous? Hey, wherever two or three are gathered in His name, that *is* the church. Then the only question is: Do you want to try to be a helpful and effective church? It's like Pandora's Box: Next thing you know, several families are having fun talking together and praying together, the kids are getting to know each other, and pretty soon not everybody can fit into the living room – so you end up building a room that everybody can meet in. What if the roof leaks? Pretty soon you have committees because nobody has figured out a better way to take care of such things. Then you have Stewardship Sunday because otherwise there are no shingles to patch the leaky roof.

Now, I know at least as well as anybody here that if the committees run for very long without continual spiritual renewal, pretty soon we run programs and fix roofs and start forgetting why we were doing it all in the first place. That is the Achilles' Heel of any institution, and Satan loves to play with such issues. So it is hard. But after all, what do we expect from an orphanage? It is still true that if we love Jesus, we will *be* the church. We will do that the best way we can, and it will never be good enough. Yet it may still be the most important thing we do here. And I mean including and despite all the fights, disappointments, mistakes, and hurt feelings – and sometimes even *because* of them.

The early church tended to be small Disciple Bands, starting with Jesus and the twelve. Likewise, the churches we hear about in the New Testament were mostly house churches – small bands of disciples gathering together. As Christendom grew and became prominent and acceptable, the experience of being the church was often greatly diluted. Being an unknown individual in a sea of two or three thousand worshippers can have its moments, but psychologically it is not very different from being alone.

I would suggest that as followers in our time, we should take the hint from Jesus and, as part of our commitment to be His church, we make the promise that, one way or another, we will take on the discipline of being in a Disciple Band: a group of somewhere near twelve people who are our Christian “support group” – people with whom we study, pray, and share on a regular basis. To my mind and in my experience, that is the core of the church. I even think it is the *real* church. Apart from such Disciple Bands, I do not believe the church stays His church for very long.

CHOOSING YOUR SIX

Some church members are semi-bored with the Christian Life because they know so very little about it. Others, I suspect, are semi-bored because they have not invested very much in it. If this sounds judgmental, it is. But not in a condemning way; only as an evaluation. If we do not evaluate, we can never learn or improve anything. From my perspective, the church in most places no longer trains or teaches its people very much about the Christian Path or WAY, at least not with very much depth or clarity.

Christianity is not a “herd instinct.” Jesus is not your run-of-the-mill guru. The Christian Life is an intentional response to an encounter – an experience – of some magnitude that is personal enough to make us aware of the presence of the divine. Nearly always this comes in the context of some kind of crisis – something threatening enough or startling enough to lower our defenses. Sometimes we get self-sufficient and guarded again as soon as the crisis is past. But if we feel gratitude or wonder or even curiosity enough, we may begin exploring the interior life or the spiritual dimensions around us that are beyond our material realities.

Eventually this leads some people to a decision – a desire – to “follow Jesus”: an eagerness to walk a Path that the Holy Spirit of Jesus seems to be guiding us onto. “I am the WAY,” He said. Some of us are no longer content to merely talk about it; we do not just give intellectual assent to a list of beliefs. We *walk* a Path, and walking a Path requires us to *take steps*.

Many church members in the churches I have served have no disciplines. Forgive me; they have disciplines of their own, things they do to accomplish various things that they care about, but they have no disciplines related to their faith. If I mention disciplines of the Christian Life, they either look annoyed or start arguing with me. “We are saved by grace,” they say. “Disciplines would mean that we were trying to save ourselves.” God help me to be patient.

Jesus was not a “hippy,” no matter how many times you have enjoyed watching *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Luther was not a flower child. The Apostle Paul was not just “out there” for thirty years “doing what comes naturally.” Intellect is not everything, but it is difficult to have a meaningful conversation with people who know little or nothing

about the Christian story. That is why the second discipline is a commitment to read and ponder some passage in the Bible every day.

In any case, we have been looking at the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life. Not the fancy ones, but the basic ones. These are all disciplines which, if we choose them and work with them, will bring progress and experience and blessing to our pilgrimage on the Christian WAY. Guaranteed. No one has ever complained to me that they tried one of these disciplines and got no benefit. Lots of people have complained to me about the disciplines *before* they have tried them. That's like a priest telling me all about marriage. To be sure, sometimes it takes a little while – some sustained effort – to get one of the disciplines in place. But the disciplines themselves are solid. Of course, I do assume sincere intentions – a faithful desire to follow Jesus.

I suspect that all of us have realized already that we do not keep all of these disciplines, and that we have grown careless or neglectful of some of them which we used to keep more faithfully. Satan never sleeps.

So the seven Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life are not something we do to get saved or to earn God's love. How can we earn what we already have? The disciplines are something we do in response to God's love because we want to grow and make progress on the Christian WAY. There is no great hurry about getting perfect, you understand, or God would not have given us eternity. It's just that we get tired of our old ways – ways that do not fit right or feel right. So we choose to take on these disciplines because we want them in our lives. The five disciplines we have talked about so far: PRAY every day, read and ponder THE BIBLE every day, find and follow your VOCATIO, choose a MENTOR, get into a DISCIPLE BAND. Today is the sixth.

The sixth discipline is the commitment to be an EVANGELIST. Oops, I just used the "E" word, which is far more feared among liberal Christians than the "F" word. So much baggage hangs around the word "evangelism" that, for the most part, we choose not to mention it at all. Well, my friends, when evangelism dies, the church dies. That is a fact. There is no escaping it. Sometimes it takes a few years, but nevertheless, the fact is that a church which has no evangelists does not survive for very long. And we have scores of UCC churches all over the country proving it.

But mentioning the “E” word does open up several serious issues. Our problem with “evangelism” and “evangelical” and being “evangelists” is not with the words themselves, I think, but with some of the people we have encountered with whom we associate these words. My suspicion is that most liberal Christians have a mental picture of what being an evangelist means that is abhorrent to them. But we must stop letting others steal our best traditions and disciplines just because of the way *they* do things. So how can I get us to erase that picture and start over with an image that is faithful and beautiful? Also, I think a lot of liberal Christians are fuzzy about what the Christian Message really is. That makes it hard to carry the Message. Finally, I suspect that Jesus had a pattern and a plan for how we could help Him carry the Message that few of us have pondered or maybe ever even heard of.

So try to start over with me. What is the difference between an *angel* and an *evangelist*? Or an *evangelist*? In Greek, *angel* means messenger. An *evangelist* is one who announces or proclaims glad tidings – good news. In other words, if you want to be an *angel* – a messenger of God – you have to be an *evangelist*. Of course, you do *not* have to use the Greek words for it. I just think you should stop being afraid of them or of the concepts they stand for.

There is no escaping the sixth discipline if we care about the Christian Faith. We already know this somewhere on the inside. If we do not carry the Message, we lose the Message. That’s on the inside. If we do not spread the Word, we shrink and die. That’s on the outside. Think of the justice and rightness of that. If we are not turned-on enough to bring others into the Faith – and into the community that tries to walk it and support those who want to live it – then why should we go on taking up space here as a Christian church? Why would God *want* to support or bless us if we are not interested in spreading the Message or honoring the Kingdom? Why would God want to send people here if God knows they will never find any spiritual support or life or growth here? The bottom line is that if we lose the Message, a lot of those around us will lose it too, or only hear it in badly distorted forms.

If we are Christians, we are committed to carry the Message. Jesus was not fuzzy about this. He called twelve disciples to be apostles. All serious disciples eventually become apostles – ambassadors of the Kingdom and its Gospel. We learn until we can teach. If we do not carry the Message, either we do not know it or we have lost it.

The best way to learn is to teach – an old truism. But all logic aside: if we know Jesus and do not want others to know Him too, then something is terribly amiss, either with our love for Jesus or with our love for our neighbors.

So what is the *real* reticence? Are we unclear about the Message itself? The way some people have tried to push the Message at us is highly annoying, and we do not want to do that to others. Some people mix the Message with all manner of control motives, fear images, and insincere pretenses about how much they care about us.

We know that the Message is something about love – something about the love of God. But “love” is a very vague and imprecise concept in our time. “I love you” goes all the way from meaning *everything* to meaning nothing. It goes all the way from “I recognize you as a true child of eternal light” to “You are really sexy – how would you like to help me with some of my passing fantasies?”

God’s love is clearly at the center of the Christian Message, but in our time it is hard to imagine people getting excited if we go and tell them “God loves you.” It is the greatest news in the world, yet it is also the great-granddaddy of all clichés. How can our words take it from a “vague generality” to the individualized and mind-boggling reality of the care, guidance, calling, and inspiration of the Holy Spirit?

The sixth discipline is to be an evangelist – to carry the Message: to invite people into a faith family that shares and ponders and tries to walk according to what is revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. There is a lot of mystery in Christianity, but there is no mystery here. The Fifth Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous, for instance, states: “Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” They know what they are about and why. Do we know what we are about and why?

It is impossible to be in recovery from alcoholism and not want other drunks to find sobriety. I do not care how crass, selfish, mixed up, or confused a recovering person might be; if they see another person still caught in the wretched whirlpool, they cannot help but feel a deep yearning to invite that person into the program – into a different way of life. It is a logical and practical impossibility to know something wonderful and not want to share it. We have to carry the Message. If not, there is the strong possibility that we do not really know the Message. So back to the first and second disciplines.

If you see an absolutely marvelous movie, read a book that moves you greatly, or find an exceedingly pleasant restaurant, you tell your friends. It just comes out of your mouth. When any related subject comes up, all at once there it is, flowing over your lips. Of course, you pick the people and the times when it seems appropriate. That's how you are *supposed* to do it! When it comes to evangelism, some people in other traditions do not do this. They put it out there all the time, appropriate or inappropriate, and seem to have no other interests, as if God had not made all the rest of the world, just their little eight-by-ten-foot cubicle. They reach a lot of people we will never reach, by the way. Let it be. It is none of our business.

But we *will* reach a lot of people they can never reach – people they only offend. Accept that. Know it to be true. Learn your own truth and your own way to proclaim it. And I would like to suggest three precepts:

1.) The very first promise Jesus made to Peter as he became a disciple was that Peter would become a “fisher of men” – he would catch people instead of fish. In some churches, they fish with nets, trying to haul everybody in. We must not do that. It is not our way. It is not *supposed* to be our way. We are fly-fishermen. Think about that: It is an art. We have to practice. It is always one at a time. It never works the same way twice. Brochures and pamphlets and one-phrase formulas will not work with the fish we are after. And we must “be one” with what we are doing.

2.) We are never responsible for the results. If what we try *has* to work, it cannot work. God does not coerce. Our job is to get the offer and the invitation clear. What somebody does with it after that is up to them and the Holy Spirit. Sow the seed; do not keep digging it up to see if it is growing. The church in our time is full of the “business manager” mentality: goals, procedures, and control will make it happen; we should force productivity; if it does not work in two months, trash it. Does that sound peaceful, comforting, loving? Does that match the Message? It leaves no room for the Spirit. All we get that way is a human institution – an organization full of underlying fear and pressure. No, we just want to keep our disciplines and leave the results to the Holy Spirit.

3.) Evangelism is not head-hunting. Obviously evangelism *is* head-hunting in some traditions, as evangelism has often been turned into a numbers game. But I am suggesting that it must *not* be for us.

When it is, the method does not match the Message. If we fly-fish and the fish bite – and our analogy breaks down here, but nonetheless – they do not land in the skillet; they land in the fellowship of a faith family. At least that is what is *supposed* to happen. We are not out fishing for trophies or scalps. We are not in charge of the results, remember. But when it works – when the Spirit makes the connection and it “takes” – what we get are not fish, but brothers and sisters in the Faith: dear friends, fellow pilgrims with whom we share and walk the WAY. True evangelism will bring us some of the best friends we have ever known. How sad that Jesus is so mean to us.

Are we clear about this? If you do not want to love somebody, do not even mention the Gospel to them. After all, the Gospel is the word of LOVE. Do we want people to hear the word but know nothing of its reality? It feels that way in lots of churches. Do you think I am making this up? Paul beat me to it by two thousand years: “*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*” (I Corinthians 13:1) “Oh, was that about evangelism and the Christian Path?” Duh!

But please notice: That also means you cannot evangelize very many people. If somebody gets excited about the Message you carry, then you have a whole new relationship. You need to spend a lot of time with them. There is a lot to talk about, much to share. You have a new friend in Christ. How many sincere friends can you keep up with? We are not talking about theory, where you are supposed to love *everybody* but love them so little that nobody will ever notice it. We are talking about real-life relationships that take time and energy and make a real difference. Space and time are the two great limitations of life. You cannot be a significant friend to very many people at the same time. Humility, the highest virtue in the Christian Life, means (among other things) knowing our limitations.

Some of you can hardly believe your ears. Am I telling you that your evangelism must be limited to only a few people? That’s right! I am not saying that I am correct; I am saying that you heard me correctly. You do not have space and time enough to be a true evangelist to very many people.

I believe that Jesus invites us into quality, not quantity. If this is true, it changes everything. The impression I keep getting from the church today is that we are each supposed to save the whole world, love everybody, feed everybody, heal everybody, forgive everybody.

Since this is obviously silly, or at least after we notice that it is silly, *then* we are told that if we would just band together and coordinate our efforts correctly, we could build organizations that would actually be able to do this. That is even sillier. Sorry; let me rephrase: I think that is mistaken. I have been loved by some *people*, but I have never been loved by an organization. Perhaps you have been; I hope it was satisfying, but I doubt it. Jesus said, “*My yoke [the discipline] is chrestos [easy]*” – IT FITS RIGHT. The whole world and everybody in it who has any needs – *that* is who I am supposed to care about? That does not fit right. I cannot do that. Neither can you.

I also happen to believe that if we would stop being grandiose and instead do the simple yet profound things Jesus asks us to do, it would have far greater impact on the world in the long run.

The sixth discipline is to be an evangelist. If you want to be a real evangelist, concentrate on six people. Members of your immediate family do not count. (Of course they count greatly, but not as your six.) So you watch and pray and speak to people about your Faith and the WAY you try to walk, until six people have responded. Then you stay with those six, nurture the friendships, show them into the church – not to an institution, but INTO a true fellowship of believers. You can only do that, of course, if you know and keep the fifth discipline. Then you go on building your own friendships with them until they die or move away, or until you do. If you get a vacancy, fill it. Keep choosing your six. That is your primary ministry. If you find yourself with seven or eight or nine, you forgot to pray. You flunked “humility.” You think you are God? You are going to save the world all by yourself?

Never ever feel guilty about failing to do more than the Spirit asks you to do. If you keep faithful to your six and train them until they eventually choose their own six, eventually that will transform the world. You will do it faster, more authentically, and more deeply than everything all the churches are doing today – all put together. And you will not be nearly so stressed and busy. You will also have a lot more joy and fulfillment on the Christian Path than most people ever experience.

Jesus sent out the twelve to do what He had been doing. (Luke 9:1) It worked wonderfully. Then a little later (Luke 10:1), Jesus sent out a further seventy-two in the same manner, for the same purpose. Where did the seventy-two come from? Jesus chose twelve, and He was the all-time pro and was doing it full-time.

I am suggesting that He instructed each of the twelve to choose six. Six times twelve is seventy-two. Seventy-two additional disciples, each one in real relationship, each one personally cared about, each one part of the Movement and choosing their own six. What were the disciples doing with their time? Well, I think they were keeping up with Jesus on the one hand, and each dealing with their six on the other hand. Why do you think the Movement was spreading so quickly and powerfully?

Nothing, of course, ever works with precision. But suppose it takes a year to get things rolling. After that, let's suppose it takes three years for each new person to come into the Movement, learn something of what it is about, and then choose their own six. **In twenty-five years, there would be more than twenty million people in the Movement!** And not because anybody was trying to play hero or save the whole world, but because each person was paying attention to his or her own SIX. And because each new six felt truly included and valuable and knew they were also part of the Kingdom – and were one of its *evangels*. To love everybody is to love nobody. But if you choose your six, real love can transform lives.

Something like this is what must have happened with the early church, or they could never have engaged and won over the Roman Empire. The Empire, remember, had decided to exterminate them. The Christians won without lifting a sword. They won over the greatest Empire in the world in less than three hundred years. Twelve ... who chose six ... who chose six ... who chose six ... Keep it simple. Keep it real. And really mean it.

By the way, just as an aside: In both chapter nine and chapter ten, Jesus gives a string of instructions to the disciples He is sending out. They are not to carry food or extra clothes, they are not to stay with different people when they come to a village, and so forth. Based on this, I have heard many sermons explaining how spiritual and poor and humble and other-worldly Jesus wanted His disciples to be. Total bunk! At the time He gives these instructions, the Movement is in its last days, and Jesus and His disciples are in training but also telling everybody to meet them in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Herod wants to make sure they do not reach Jerusalem, so his soldiers are out watching for them. Jesus gives His followers these instructions so they will not be arrested – so Herod's men will not realize they are visitors in the villages they enter. That was probably too fast an explanation for some of you, but I get excited and forget to leave things alone.

Back to *this* sermon. One Saturday night, it must have been in late October, a pastor threw up his hands and said to himself, “There’s no way I can finish this sermon and face that congregation tomorrow morning. I’m going golfing.” So he phoned the associate pastor, told him he was feeling really sick, and asked the associate pastor if he could please put together whatever sermon he was working on and take the service tomorrow.

The pastor got up bright and early Sunday morning, put his clubs in the car, and drove off to a distant golf course where he thought no parishioners would see him. The sun was shining brightly; the day was crystal clear. It was beautiful, and the pastor felt wonderful. But up in Heaven, Gabriel nudged God and said, “Hey Lord, do you see what your servant is doing down there? And how he lied about it and everything?” And God said, “Mm-hmm.”

Gabriel said, “Lord, I don’t think you should encourage this sort of thing with beautiful sunny days and wonderful feelings and such.” And God said, “Don’t worry about it, Gabe. I will take care of it.”

Just then the pastor stepped up to the tee. He teed up his ball and suddenly felt an incredible flow of peace and harmony. His energy and his consciousness flowed together, and he seemed almost to merge with the universe around him. When he was ready, his swing seemed effortless, yet he could feel the flow of power – and oh my, what a shot! The ball soared with the grace of an arrow, straight down the fairway – no wobble; a nice slow spin, like the sun hurtling through space. It was far and away the best drive the pastor had ever made. And as he watched in near disbelief, the ball landed on the green and rolled straight toward the flag. The pastor ran all the way to the green to see if the shot could be at all as good as it looked from afar. Sure enough, the ball had rolled straight and true and into the cup! He danced and whooped around the flag. His very first hole-in-one, and on a very difficult course, to boot.

Gabriel looked at God with a face not quite describable and muttered, “I thought you were going to take care of this guy.” God looked back at Gabriel with a steady, unhurried gaze and said, “Hey Gabe, who is he going to tell?”

* * *

CHOOSING YOUR SIX

There are those who believe that the Good News of God's LOVE and God's desire for relationship with us, news of the Kingdom and the spiritual dimensions unseen yet all around us, and having New LIFE in Christ Jesus are all far more exciting than any hole-in-one could ever be. The question is: Who are you going to tell?

The sixth discipline is to be an evangelist. Please allow me to suggest that it is time for you to start choosing and loving *your* six.

* * *

THE MATH

Do less – get more.

Or, how we can mind our own true business and still do more for the Kingdom than ever before:

1st Year	-	12
4th Year	-	72
7th Year	-	432
10th Year	-	2,592
13th Year	-	15,552
16th Year	-	93,312
19th Year	-	559,872
22nd Year	-	3,359,232
25th Year	-	20,155,392

28th Year	-	120,000,000
31st Year	-	720,000,000
34th Year	-	4,320,000,000

THE SERMON ON THE AMOUNT

One more Basic Discipline of the Christian Life to consider. It happens to be stewardship time for many churches, but that is not our focus. What we do with our money has to be of interest to any path or way of life. And naturally, Christians would expect to pray about how they use *all* of their money. In a complex society, some of our money goes for things we wish it did not have to go for. Some of our expenses really are not in our control. We do not get to decide what percentage of our income goes to pay taxes of various kinds. Most of us probably believe in our country enough to want to pay our fair share toward supporting it, but many of us do not believe the tax system itself is fair. And most of the people I know would change some of what our tax money is used for, if they had the final say in such matters. We pay lots of money for insurance and for protection we would not need if everybody was as kind and honest as they should be. So a lot of our money goes for things we wish it did not have to go for. But under the circumstances, it seems like the best we can do. And many of us have families, people we love, and people who depend upon us. After that, we have our own interests and needs and desires.

But what do we do about our faith? Some of us have great gratitude for God. Some of us have deep appreciation for faith families we are part of. Some of us think it is truly important to keep the Message of God's love alive and spreading on the earth. With all our other obligations, money is sometimes a hard thing to figure out. Of course, there are lots of people who never get around to considering it very seriously. Others are secretly ashamed of how little they give to what they claim is one of the highest priorities in their lives. You can tell that the shame is real and serious because our society is determined that what people give to their church must remain one of the most closely guarded secrets in our entire culture.

I hope you have enjoyed pondering the first six of the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life. I hope you will enjoy pondering this seventh one too. But some of you will not – unless you relax. Some people see discipline and commitment only as pain – obligation laid on from outside – instead of as vision and opportunity for a better life. Nobody is trying to *make* you do something you do not want to do. Nobody is trying to *make* you pray every day if you would rather stay

distant and estranged from God. It would do little good anyway, if that were the basis. Can you imagine the content of prayer time if someone were resentful and angry about having to pray?

Just so, what spiritual advantage could there possibly be in tithes or offerings given grudgingly or from an unwilling heart? But let us be clear: The concepts of tithes and offerings to God go back as far as we can trace human history. What was the problem between Cain and Abel? Abel brought the choicest of the firstborn of his flock as a gift to God; Cain could not stand it, so he killed Abel. He thought Abel was too self-righteous. He thought Abel either was trying to make him look bad or was doing it to get in good with God. It was all a figment of Cain's imagination, however. Abel loved God and merely wanted to show it. But it made Cain insanely jealous, and the problem has plagued us ever since. Cain decided that it was easier to kill Abel – to do away with the example that was making him look bad – than it was to check his own heart and motives and, God forbid, to repent. It is reminiscent of what would later happen to Jesus. And we have had that same problem ever since.

* * *

The seventh discipline is the commitment to TITHE – to give ten percent of your income to your church. If you tithe already, you *do* relax. And rejoice. And maybe remember your own struggles with the concept, and smile as you recall what happened when you finally made the commitment to this seventh discipline. But if you do not already tithe, then every word I utter is potentially difficult. That is, you must stave it off. You must find some way to conclude that I am telling it wrong. In your mind, it is either discredit me or go into poverty. That is what some of you will think, consciously or subconsciously. And if I am at all persuasive – if I say anything that appeals to you in any way – then that is threatening. Even if you are able to make it through the sermon genuinely convinced that I am in error, it leaves a residue of resentment that I troubled you with the notion of tithing at all. You managed to escape my clutches, but if you were not so smart and fast on your wits, I would have left you with a whole new load of guilt. That is how some people will think.

So relax. You know very well that I cannot *make* you do anything you do not want to do. And maybe you do not realize it, but I do not *want* you to do anything you do not genuinely want to do. You think I want to be minister of a bunch of guilt-ridden, resentful, hostile

people? That might sound like fun to you, but not to me. Tried it once; did not like it. Besides, our God is not like that. Our God is dangerous but not stupid. Our God calls us to incredible LIFE, but we are never supposed to respond until we would rather risk the consequences than miss the adventure. So relax. Maybe even assume I am going to tell you a bunch of bunk, at least to start out with. Yet it will be interesting. A lot more interesting than some other things you spend time thinking about.

As an aside, I was reminded of our human attitude of suspicion and hostility toward God in a light, almost humorous way while at a church retreat several years ago. Our Moderator was leading us in an exercise to heighten our awareness of metaphors, since dreams are so filled with metaphors. She had us working on the 23rd Psalm: “*The Lord is my shepherd.*” Both *Lord* and *shepherd* are metaphors for God in this verse, and we were instructed to find and reword the metaphors throughout the psalm. It was most interesting, and things were going well until we got to the second verse: “*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.*” We were in small groups scattered throughout the room, but suddenly the assignment was forgotten as people began to react to what was, for them, a much larger and more important issue: “*He maketh me*” I kid you not, the groups erupted into a resentful, sullen, rebellious attitude. “Nobody is going to *make* me do anything!” Interesting. Hey, stay lost; sleep in the rocks; get eaten by the wolves – it’s a free country. “Nobody is going to *make* me lie down in green pastures – nobody is going to make me do anything. Nobody is going to *lead* me beside still waters – I go my own way. I am on the road less traveled.” In our day, so many people are taking “the road less traveled” that it is now really crowded. Only a tiny handful walk the King’s Highway.

* * *

Anyway, here we go. First of all, let’s be clear about tithing. This is “The Sermon on the Amount.” If a person accepts the seventh discipline, they figure out how much money they make and then ten cents on every dollar of that goes to their church. This is really clear and simple to most of us, but it is genuinely confusing to some. Let’s slow down. I cannot clear up details, but I can clear the principle. By the way, checking it out with your Mentor is an excellent idea. That way you know well enough if you are just rationalizing things rather than taking the discipline seriously.

Money that you earn – money that is available for you to spend for any purpose – is what you tithe on. Every tither has to work through the wrinkles of their own situation. Every tither does it prayerfully. Classic situations: Some of the money you earn is going into a retirement fund or into Social Security. In many cases, your employer sends money you are earning straight to these places. You do not tithe on that money. You have not received it yet. If the day comes when you start getting checks from such sources, then you tithe on it; it has become income. Suppose your employer pays your health insurance. You tithe on that amount. It is working for you in the present, buying protection.

Let's not get snowed under with details here. We all have to work out the details until we think God knows it is a tithe. Just getting the concept clear: a tither is someone who gives one-tenth of their spendable income to the church to which they belong.

What is “the church”? The church is the covenant community of believers in Jesus Christ that you participate in – that you are part of. Its function is to increase faith on earth, to strengthen awareness of God's Kingdom, to invite people into a fellowship that tries to walk and live for that Kingdom. If you give a lot of money to a lot of various charities, that makes you generous, but it does not make you a tither. (Remember, you do not have to agree with this. I am just trying to be clear.) A tithe is ten percent of your spendable income, given to the church to which you belong.

There are many good causes upon the earth; that is part of our problem. Priorities constantly trouble us. One of the deepest meanings of this seventh discipline is that it names and sets the church of Jesus Christ as a top priority in our lives. That is what truly is at issue. Do we or do we not truly believe that Jesus is the light of our lives? Do we or do we not want His Mission and Movement to increase upon the earth? If you do not pay tribute to your King, you do not *have* a King.

Christians, like their Jewish forerunners, have always known that God is the true King. That is often muted upon the earth – often neglected or forgotten. But Christians have always known that what is most important here is usually not what is being *called* important here. The true and most important citizenship is citizenship in Christ's Kingdom. We tithe to the church because that is our true allegiance.

And when we can no longer live in this world in allegiance to our true King, then we will no longer live in this world. No hard feelings.

The church in our time gives very mixed messages about allegiance. The church is very important, but not *as* important as soccer or Monday Night Football or a thousand other things. In former times, people sacrificed jobs, mates, homes, friends, health – life itself, when it became necessary – in order to keep their allegiance to Jesus Christ. What are we to make of it if the people of the church in our time believe that it is too much to ask if God inconveniences us? How much can God ask of you before you decide it is too much?

* * *

Money is an item of interest – and more than that, an *issue* – for almost every human being on earth. For many people, down through the ages, money has been of interest because it can be used for religious aims and purposes. But where is the line between greed and devotion? Between responsibility and pride? Between stewardship and stinginess? Humankind has stumbled, and sometimes broken, over such issues from the dawn of time. Socrates proclaimed: “If a rich man is proud of his wealth, he should not be praised until it is known how he employs it.”

I remind you again: This is The Sermon on the Amount. I get to cut through the confusion and tell you that a tithe is ten percent of your useable income. God does not want you poor. Ninety percent is for you to use faithfully in your own life. Ten percent is for the church, which represents the Kingdom here on earth. You get to hear this message and decide whether or not you will live by it. Isn't that clear and simple? It should also be a delight! “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” Or so said Winston Churchill.

Which reminds me of a story. It is about a British family that journeyed to Scotland for a vacation. The young son went wandering through the woods by himself and came upon a swimming hole. It was a hot day, so he stripped down and dove in. But the water was far colder than he had expected, and soon he was doubled up with cramps. Unable to swim ashore, he yelled and flailed and was about to go under, when suddenly he felt strong arms reach around him and haul him to the side of the quarry. It was a Scottish farm boy who, working in a field nearby, had heard the yells and dashed over to dive in and pull the English boy to safety.

Next day, the English boy's father sought out the Scottish farmhand and, with deep emotion, thanked him for saving his son's life. He asked the Scottish lad what plans he had for his own life. "I suppose I will be a farmer like my father," the boy replied. "Is there anything else you would rather do?" asked the English father. "Well, secretly I have always wanted to be a doctor," said the boy, "but we are common folk and my parents could never afford such schooling." "It would please me to help with your dream," said the Englishman. And he pledged to pay the boy's way through medical school.

Years later, in 1943, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was in North Africa, dangerously ill with pneumonia. Sir Alexander Fleming was summoned to fly down with a new wonder drug he had developed called penicillin. Fleming administered the new drug, and Churchill made a remarkable recovery. Thus the Scottish farm boy saved the English lad a second time.

Churchill's father, in gratitude, had given Fleming the astounding gift of a medical school education – thinking it was a "thank you," and perhaps a reward, for saving his son's life. But in fact he was saving his own son's life at a later time – in a future he could not yet see. Of course, he was also saving many other lives in the process. Do we really imagine that if we tithe to God, we are rewarding GOD? Or do we recognize that we are saving our own lives, and the lives of those we love, a second time ... a third ... a fourth?

* * *

Some years ago, there were a number of cars running around with bumper stickers that read "Honk if you love Jesus." And for a while, some people were honking and waving. I guess they were having fun. I could not tell if my irritation was because of the extra noise or because of the shallowness of it. But I do remember my delight, some weeks later, when I spotted a different bumper sticker that read "If you love Jesus, don't honk – tithe!" If you love Jesus, don't just make noise – strengthen His church, build it up, help it to become what it is supposed to be.

In the Judeo/Christian tradition, we have been tithing for four thousand years. Jacob, fleeing from Esau and seeking a wife, headed north to Haran (Turkey). On the way, he had a strange, mystic encounter. And there he made the commitment to the seventh discipline. This encounter – what we call "Jacob's ladder" – changed his life. He had been a mama's boy, a cheat, a liar, and a thief.

Genuine changes are hard and take years, but they have to start somewhere. Like Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, Jacob stole a blessing and found out the blessing was stealing him. His life was being transformed. Jacob made a vow: “*Whatsoever thou givest me, I will give a tenth to Thee.*” That is the vow of all tithers.

Some people are always trying to denigrate the principle of tithing or to pretend that it does not really matter, but it is a fool’s errand. The stories of Abraham and Jacob cannot be ducked. The pattern of Israel’s life has been shaped around sacrifice, firstfruits, firstborn, and tithes. One entire tribe among the twelve was set apart to take care of the Tent of Meeting and the feasts and sacrifices – to care for the holy things – so that God would remain central to Jewish life. Why does it take ten families to form a synagogue? Because if they tithe, they can hire a rabbi. And tithes from *twelve* families leave enough to start saving up for scrolls and the other needs of a synagogue community.

The Bible is replete with stories of falling away from commitment and discipline and with stories of returning to faithful patterns. Over and over God gets neglected, and things go from bad to worse. Often there is also renewal – great joy as the community returns, rededicates itself, and decides to take God seriously once again.

Among other things, I am reminding you that tithing is not *my* concept. I preach about it to stay faithful. Over and over I have trembled when certain parishioners decided to tithe. I was afraid it would ruin them. I thought the discipline would be too much for their circumstances. Yet over and over, some unseen things would connect and, instead of ruin, the blessing would flow and life would take off. Life likes to be dedicated to the true King. Things straighten out that nobody even knew were not integrated. When all the particles of the magnet face in the same direction, the power is surprising. I guess it’s not really a miracle; it just *seems* like one.

Early in my ministry, I dreaded Stewardship Sunday. I did not want to preach about money or try to persuade people to increase their pledges. The Trustees, however, were always adamant that this needed to happen. I was already a tither; my father taught me the principle when I was growing up. I liked it for myself, but I just did not feel right talking about it to others. Then Herman Kibble and I became friends. He was the pastor of a black Seventh-Day Adventist church that was using our church facility in Altadena, California while they

were building their own new church. I knew that on average his parishioners were not making as high an income as mine were, yet they were giving far more to their church than we were.

Herman and I shared more and more with each other, and one day I asked him, “Does it ever bother you to ask your people for so much money when you know they are struggling to make ends meet?” He looked at me in utter amazement. “If I tried to tell my people not to tithe, they would pay no attention to me,” he said. “Tithing is one of our best blessings. We do it because we love our Lord, not because we have to – not because anybody tries to make us.”

I have loved Stewardship Sunday ever since. I now want the blessings of tithing for my congregation too. It no longer seems caring to keep quiet about such blessings or to keep the knowledge of them all to myself. Humans love to be dedicated to what they really believe in. And I have now seen enough people blessed by tithing that I want everybody to know about it. What they do about it *after* they know is not my problem. But if nobody ever tells them, I do not want that to be my problem either.

* * *

What do you suppose the church would be like if all of its members tithed? Obviously the financial resources would increase dramatically. We would have four or five times as much money to be faithful with. Do you think God would like that? Instead of squabbling over every line item in the budget or arguing over which of our most basic programs deserve to take the cut – instead of feeling stingy, acting poverty-stricken, or wondering if we can afford even the necessities – we would be trying to figure out the next most joyful and faithful step to take. If we all suddenly tithed, we would be trying to figure out what to do, as a congregation of faithful stewards, with more money than our church has ever imagined before – and I mean *after* already fully funding our requested budgets. And we would be facing such problems *every year*. In time, that would change who we were, what we were able to accomplish, and how we felt about the church. Do you think God would like that?

Be that as it may, this I can promise you: We will never be the church any of us wants us to be – and, more importantly, we will never be the church the Holy Spirit wants us to be – unless we become a tithing church and a church of tithers. Jesus and His church have to become that important to us – that high on our priority list. And no,

it is not just the money. It would change how we feel about coming here, how excited we are about what we do here, how we feel about each other – it would change everything. Do you think God would like that? How much can God ask of us before we decide it is too much? As usual, pleasing God would benefit us far more than we can ever imagine.

Only, that brings us to what tithing is really about. It is not a scheme for making more money. It is not about raising a budget. *It is a spiritual discipline.* Its purpose is to bring us closer to God. While it would benefit the church if members became tithers, the benefit that matters most is the benefit to the tither. Tithing clarifies priorities and announces a clear and genuine allegiance deep within. Tithing changes the level of our relationship with God; it changes the nature of our participation in the church; it changes the experience of what it means to walk the Christian Path or WAY. To be very clear: The true reason and purpose of tithing is for the spiritual growth it brings. Otherwise, it would have no place among the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life.

I do not believe that any person is able to make the commitment to tithe simply because they think the church needs more money. There has to be more smoke than that to cause a fire. Motive has to match commitment. The discipline of tithing is much too great to be fueled by mere economics. The only people I have ever known who tithed were people who came to see it as part of the spiritual Path – part of the Christian WAY. It is an allegiance thing: A way we pay tribute to our King. A way we keep saying, in all our labors each day of our lives, “Lord, whatever I do, whatever I am about, one-tenth will always be for You, because I love You.” That is very close to what Jacob said after his experience with Jacob’s ladder.

Here are a few quick items, none of them fully explained:

1.) If you decide to tithe, then claim freedom from guilt. It does not matter how much you make – a tithe is a tithe. Isn’t that beautiful? If God does not think it is enough, let God increase your income. You do your part and God does God’s part. When you tithe, you have a right to be peaceful and content with what you have given, no matter who asks what or thinks otherwise.

2.) Many people are able, and choose, to give to various things beyond the tithe. Well and good. Free choice – no obligation. If you tithe and wish to do more for your church, it should be in the form

of a special, designated gift of some kind. Never give more than ten percent of your income as a regular pledge to the operating budget of the church. It will mess things up in the long run.

3.) I do not know why the following item is true; it makes no earthly sense to me. I only mention it as an item of interest, and perhaps someone here will bring me information to the contrary. There seems to be an operative principle that kicks in when we give ten percent that does not work at six percent or eight percent or anywhere short of the ten percent. I only report that many people over the years have told me that it changes at ten percent – that the blessing, though perhaps it was *trying* to operate, was quite muted until they reached the ten percent. You can do with that whatever you like. I am not trying to argue you into anything; just telling you what I know.

4.) I am often amused that the church never preaches about “blessed are the poor” on Stewardship Sunday. If you are going to tithe, then the richer you are, the better I like it. I wonder if God feels the same way. “The more you tithe, the more I can bless you, and the more we can accomplish together.” Have you pondered the parable of the pounds lately? (Luke 19:11-26) Those of you who are pragmatic realists would probably want to make clear to God that there is genuine incentive for blessing you – that if you do well, the church is going to benefit. If you are competing for a promotion and the record of performance is just about equal but you tithe and the other person does not, whose side is God going to be on? God gets ten percent one way and nothing the other way? Well, everybody knows, or thinks they know, that God does not care about such things. I am sure there is no truth to such an implied favoritism. But are *you* sure?

5.) Okay, I was having fun with that last one. Now I am in dead earnest. Some of you might accuse me of trying to use reverse psychology, but I do not think you are foolish enough to be moved by silly tricks, so do not think I am stupid enough to try them. Please listen and hear this: *It is important not to tithe before it is time.* The one arena of life where we can never cheat or take shortcuts is in spiritual matters. Faking faith does not work. When it comes to money, giving money on the Christian Path is an act of praise and devotion. Any other motive makes it counterfeit money. God is not a beggar. The issue here is not about God’s needs. It is about our awareness of God’s presence and God’s Kingdom, and about our desire for fullness of Life in Christ Jesus.

Some people think they can bring any old gift they want, whenever they want, and the poor old doting Creator of the Universe will feel lucky and grateful to get it. All spiritual people have always known two things: The first is that we never appear before God empty-handed. Sometimes we can only bring remorse or a broken heart, but we never come with nothing to lay before our Lord. (Exodus 23:15) The second thing we have always known is that the gift must be pure or true or right in some way, or God will not accept it. (Remember Cain from earlier? Remember the lamb without blemish?)

Giving to God must be in praise and devotion. The gift must be “without blemish” – without ulterior motive or insincerity or resentment. Christians must be very thoughtful and prayerful about what we bring to God’s altar. I do not mean that God will break out and smite us. The gift will simply be rejected. Nothing that matters will come of it. We will go home unblessed. And the church will wither and go dry.

If you do not know what your gift should be, it is better to give nothing. Pray and wait until you do know what your gift should be. If you resent the giving, it is far better to give nothing. God is patient. God will honor your honest intent to find clarity and authenticity. The Board of Trustees may be less enthusiastic about such a comment – but then, who do you want to please, them or God?

I care about your spiritual health and growth. I know the interior difference – the difference in a person’s personal relationship to their Lord – when they do not carry their commitment and devotion to the level of tithing. I want you to give. I want you to tithe. I am eager for you to know the blessings of the full spectrum of the Christian Life. I am eager for us to experience it together as a faithful people. But not before it is time. If you try the discipline of tithing before you are ready and willing, it will backfire. Look in your own life and in your own situation for “the lamb without blemish,” and when you know what that is, bring it with a grateful heart and full devotion. Then the blessing will flow for you and for your church, and the Kingdom will prosper.

Life is like a game of chess. Every move you make reflects the position of your King. If you have a true King, it is a joy to pay tribute. If you do not pay tribute, you have no King. In any case, the seventh discipline is the commitment to tithe.

ATTENDANCE

Sometimes I ask myself if I have learned yet to come when I am called. What is good for the dogs and the children is good for me too, as long as I know my true Master.

In this season of history, the world seems to be spilling over with fanatics. Across the world, in every society and religion, there has been a strong shift toward extremism. Fanaticism can shade quickly into terrorism, and terrorism has taken the place of communism as the bogeyman of our time. One of the ramifications of this reality is that many people are more suspicious than ever of any religious commitment. In a world that has endless defenses against commitment, this adds a handy wild card to the game. People can feel noble about staying uninvolved on the grounds that they are fighting fanaticism. That is quite a fantastic stretch, to be sure, but many people seem able to make it. The truth is that fanaticism's only antidote is a genuine, committed faith. PEOPLE OBEDIENT TO JESUS DO NOT KILL PEOPLE WHO DISAGREE WITH THEM. People obedient to cult leaders who *talk* about Jesus *do* sometimes kill people who disagree with them; idolatry is always dangerous, especially when mixed with ignorance.

In any case, just as love is the only antidote for lust, just as faith is the only antidote for fear, just as humility is the only antidote for pride – a deep and studied religious commitment is the only antidote for fanaticism. To suggest that fanaticism can be cured by being irreligious or staying neutral is like fighting fire by doing nothing. It is an invitation to more fire. Humans do not like living *without* hope; the choice is between *false* hope and *genuine* hope. To try to stay irreligious – or hopeless – is an invitation to emptiness. And if you leave the emptiness there long enough, it creates a vacuum, which is precisely the condition for a “blowup” that invites the fire of fanaticism. (Matthew 12:43-45; Luke 11:24-26)

That's a strange introduction to a sermon, don't you think? But we are in strange waters. As I have said before, I believe that the best way to grow a church is to BE a church. It's not the fastest way. It's not the biggest way. It's the *best* way, because then, no matter what else happens, we get to concentrate on what we really care about. We get to experience what we really want to be about all along the way. So we are never going to concentrate on promotion; we are going

to trust in attraction. I am not going to find fancy ways to talk or cajole anybody into coming here; *you* are going to draw them by the way you live – by the way you think and choose and pray.

So we must look to our faith more than to our techniques. That is, we must restore and, where necessary, renew our *discipleship*, our *covenant* bonds, our *commitment* – all the concepts that those who have experienced them love most, and those who have not experienced them hate most. Moreover, I am the one who needs to line it out because I am the preacher. Hence the series on the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life.

So I thought I had better start this sermon by talking about fanaticism. Some of you will want to use that as a way to duck. If you want or need to duck, I want you to be able to. But right now, I am looking for the people who do not want to duck, who are maybe even tired of it – who are eager and longing to move on as a church. There is no church without commitment.

As I have been saying throughout this series, the Christian WAY of Life is made up of a series of spiritual disciplines. That is why we are called “disciples.” (A disciple is one who keeps the disciplines of the Master.) Today I want to talk about ATTENDANCE, one of the oldest and most basic of all the spiritual disciplines: Show up. Come when you are called. Be there when the faith family gathers.

We started mocking and deriding and laughing at this discipline way back in the 1950s. In the '60s, we threw it out entirely as unworthy of free and free-thinking individuals. In the '70s, we tried to survive the mayhem of having lost this critical part of the covenant. In the '80s, we started trying to bring back, in new forms or with new words, some of the principles and precepts that light our WAY. Each decade seems to bring its own issues and its own attempts at solutions. Where we are now, it's too soon to say.

Attendance was a big, moral issue where I grew up. A Catholic who did not go to Mass on Sunday was in trouble. It was a matter for serious guilt, and it needed confession and absolution. “Father forgive me, for I have sinned. I did not go to church last Sunday.” We have laughed at this and derided it since, but it was no laughing matter back then. When I began my ministry in the late 1950s in Paxton, Massachusetts, I could hardly go anywhere in town without finding myself embroiled in the “Protestant Confessional.” Everywhere I went, the first thing out of anybody's mouth, if they had not been in church

last Sunday, was their excuse. I got sick of it. I wanted to talk about more interesting things. It made me feel bad that all these grown people would assume I was judging them and felt guilty enough to lie to me on a regular basis. The point is, everybody felt guilty if they did not attend church. They knew it was an important spiritual discipline. They knew the church could not be strong and faithful if they did not show up. Many at that time did not feel guilty enough to get faithful, but they felt guilty enough to feel bad about it. It was, remember, near the time when all such disciplines would soon be shattered. Shortly afterward, we moved into a new era: those who felt like it should come if and when they felt like it.

That makes perfect sense in a society of free and independent individuals, if each one is acting as a free agent. If, within that context, we are constrained only by the laws of economics or the courtesies that sometimes cause us to announce our intentions or our whereabouts, then well and good; those who feel like it should come if and when they feel like it. If you are married, with children, you are not a free and independent agent in the same way. You have covenant bonds. You are a free and independent agent who has *chosen covenant bonds* on purpose as a way to accomplish things that nobody can accomplish alone. It is the great dilemma of all civilization from the dawn of history: Do I live alone, or shall I make alliance? My choices and my strength are extremely limited if I live alone. But if I make alliance with anybody, what if they betray me? Then I am worse off than if I had stayed alone. The terror and the hope of all society everywhere are in alliance – in covenant. We can do amazing things if we get together, but what about betrayal? Once made, covenant bonds cannot come and go at whim. Their very function and purpose are dependent upon them being in effect and on our being able to count on them.

Do you and can you count on your fellow members in this church for anything? We must make and keep some commitments or we are nothing to or for each other. No Christian is ever a free and independent agent. That would be a contradiction in terms. A Christian has allegiance to a different Kingdom and has sworn obedience to a Leader/Lord considered greater than any human on earth. Every baptized Christian, by definition, is under covenant bonds that swear allegiance unto death. Surely you have struggled with it: All true Christianity is fundamentally fanatical – *unless, of course, JESUS REALLY IS THE CHRIST*. In which case, Christianity is merely the sane and logical response to recognizing Jesus' identity. *“Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”* (John 20:28)

In any case, once the pressure for attendance eased up, our society stopped attending church in droves. I loved it! It was wonderful to preach to people who were there because they *wanted* to be there. The atmosphere of the church was dramatically improved. We could feel and taste what was wrong with a system trying to run off of guilt and fear. If anything I say today makes you think I want to return to those “good old days” when the churches were filled but for the wrong reasons, you are very much mistaken.

It was not only the church, of course. The family also lost the precept of attendance. People no longer showed up for family meals or for family gatherings in the way they had previously. At first it felt freeing. People could come and go without all the old obligations dogging their steps. People would actually get up from the table without asking permission from whoever sat at its head. Then there became fewer and fewer chances to build the family. They were never together. The bonds weakened; the honor was neglected. Everything else came first. Soon parents had less and less authority, even over the affairs of their own homes and children. And the scattering and disintegration spread like a plague across the land. Oh, not all of it was due to a lack of attendance, but a lot of it was. If you do not have to be home for dinner every night or be accountable to your family for your day, it makes an enormous difference in attitudes and actions across the board (or lack of a “board”).

The repercussions of the loss of the principle of attendance were felt everywhere. It became acceptable to be late. That is, it was now okay to squander each other’s life and time. A late term paper used to be an automatic “F.” I mean five minutes late. Now many term papers can drag in six months to a year late and not even be marked down a grade. Some classrooms have become a shambles. I hear people bragging about getting a passing grade in a course without ever attending a single class. That makes sense if the classroom is no longer a place of learning, which is frequently the case. But the loss is troublesome. The fact is that a classroom can be a place of enormous, even transforming excitement. But not if the class never forms into a class – and that requires steady attendance.

Does it matter if you come to church? I know you know it does. You even know some ways it matters that I will not mention. Even one of the most important reasons of all, I will not mention. But on a very simple, realistic level: Does it matter if you come to church? Does your attendance matter?

Jesus tells this parable about a man who invites people to his banquet. They do not have to do anything; they do not have to bring anything; they just have to show up. Failure to show up means no banquet. Then nothing can happen. Often, a banquet has a purpose; something important comes out of it. We are never told the purpose of this banquet. It is lost in all the excuses – in all the competing purposes and activities. We know Jesus' parable style well enough to suspect that this man giving the banquet is representing God inviting us to some extremely important gathering. It will be the beginning of something amazing. From other teachings and parables, we suspect that this banquet is going to announce the coming Kingdom and invite us into the whole affair: pilgrimage, spiritual warfare, assignment of tasks, the sealing of friendships – the whole business.

However, the parable is accurate in never showing us any of the real purpose or dimensions of the banquet because that is all cut off by our excuses and our preference for our own affairs – by our lack of attendance. This is a parable about nothing happening *because* we would not show up. The parable says quite eloquently that we will never know what we missed. That is, in fact, the whole point and message of this parable: We will never know what we missed if we do not bother to show up. Most people in our time will never experience Life in Christian community because they cannot find a group of people willing to take on the disciplines of the Christian Life. (Well, the parable is also saying that if the Jews will not show up, God will find Gentiles who will. But if we apply that message to our time, the implications are so heartbreaking that I cannot even talk about it.)

In any case, this parable is all the more poignant because Jesus is working to put together a Movement that must culminate in a confrontation in Jerusalem at Passover time. If those who believe in Him do not show up in Jerusalem in time to support Him, then all will be lost. NO LEADER CAN ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING IF THEY CANNOT GET ATTENDANCE. You do not have to jump to Jesus to figure that out. Think of a mother trying to shape a home of loving support, but nobody shows up when they are supposed to. Think of any business. Do not be fooled by telephones and computers. They have only given us new ways to be in attendance. Even if you own a dog who will not come when you call, you can comprehend the principle.

“Others will be there, so it doesn't matter if I show up. They don't need me. Nobody will miss me.” I have used this excuse a thousand times. The only times it ever feels okay is when I truly do not consider

the event important in the first place. It would be more honest (clearer) to just call it that way up front. If a thing is important to me, it is important for me to show up. Who misses me or does not miss me misses the point. I will be absent if I do not attend – *that* is the point. I will not be part of it – *I will miss it* – if I do not show up. If I do not want to miss the banquet, I have to show up. If the banquet or the meeting is about Kingdom business or about building up the fellowship of Kingdom people – and if I love the Kingdom – then I do not want to miss it.

Having said that, I think we need to add – in our time when it is so often forgotten – that it does matter whether or not YOU show up. No matter how many others come, it still matters whether or not *you* show up. Christianity is never about crowds. Christianity is about individuals. No matter how many individuals gather together, Christianity is still about individuals – and every single one of you counts. Every single one of you is irreplaceable. The church on earth – and the Kingdom beyond – can and will survive without any one of us, and even without all of us. That does *not* mean we can be replaced, that we will not be missed, that anybody else can fill the spot if we leave it empty, or that God is not upset when any child is missing or will not respond.

Well, that’s getting too close to Gospel, and I said simple and practical. Here is simple and practical: Does it matter if you go to church? Here are three points:

1.) Your attendance is bearing witness to what is important in your life. It does not mean you like every sermon or agree with the words of every hymn. It means you believe that God’s people gathering to worship – that the Life of the church – is important enough to command your life and time. I know it sounds elementary, but it is actually elemental. Every person who heads for church on Sunday morning (or any other time) is making an announcement: *Somebody thinks this is important. They are here instead of somewhere else.* That matters. That makes a statement. And some people will always hear that statement, though you will seldom know who or when.

Just when the opportunity to witness might get more interesting, many people opt out. “My relatives are visiting, so I will not be in church this Sunday.” “I have friends here from out of town, so I will not see you in church Sunday.” Hey, I am intelligent enough to know there are legitimate exceptions to every rule. I do not even want you

to *try* to carry a witness that is too heavy for your commitment. That will backfire every time. But have you thought it through? If God's people do not act like worship and the Life of the church are truly important to them because friends and relatives show up, then when and how are you going to tell them? It's not like they are going to throw you to the lions. It's not like they cannot come with you. And if they do not want to come to church with you, say "fine" and give them a piece of paper and a pencil, tell them that while you are gone they can write down a list of things that are as important and valuable to them as Jesus and His church are to you, and when you get home you can compare notes. Wouldn't that be fun!

2.) You have to be together to be known – and to get to know each other. Jesus works out of the power of friendship. We cannot just get closer to *Him*; He requires that we also know each other.

3.) On this third point, I want to save you any harangue and skip over all the eloquent and irrefutable persuasion, even though I think I have such arguments ready and waiting. Instead, let me tell you what I wish:

I wish that every single Sunday morning, when you get into the car, before you start the engine, you would pause for a moment of reflection. Some of you will be alone; some of you will be in a family group. That does not matter. Whoever is driving is responsible. Before you start the engine, you get everybody quiet. Then you say:

Lord, we are doing this – we are going to church – because we love You. We ask You to be with us and to help us to both worship and learn. But we also know that You call us to church for a reason. We believe that You are sending some other person to church today just because You want us to talk to them. Help us to be watchful and alert today, that we may spot that person. And give us the willingness to go talk to them.

If every single one of us comes to church every Sunday with that agenda fresh in our minds, do you know what would happen to us? We cannot begin to imagine it. But one thing is certain: Jesus would start sending people here because He would know we would pay attention to them.

* * *

ATTENDANCE

I am just getting warmed up, but I have to wrap this up, so two more things:

A.) I want to appeal to you to make and sign a thirty-mile covenant to each other and to Jesus for the rest of this year. You will pray about it first, I hope. You may have to modify it to match your own situation. It says:

I will be in my church to worship and to learn and to participate every Sunday morning, unless I am more than thirty miles away. This, my Lord, is my pledge of attendance, and I make it because I love you and want to be part of Your People.

Some of you will need to make the miles longer or shorter to fit your circumstances. Some of you may need to add health considerations. I just want to see how many of you are really willing to help “push up the sky.”

B.) And finally, speaking of attendance, what about the people who are not here today? I do not mean to imply that they are recalcitrant; some of them attend as much as any of us, and maybe they are more than thirty miles away right now. Nevertheless, we need and want them to consider these things and to make the thirty-mile covenant along with us. How will they hear about it? Well, they will hear about it if you note their absence and take or send this sermon to them. Thank you.

Hebrews 10:19-39
I Corinthians 12:26

THE EASIEST DISCIPLINE

This sermon is not appropriate for anyone not already a church member and in some fashion committed to living the Christian Life. Christianity by coercion is a contradiction in terms and can never be more than a charade built on a false foundation. We *choose* the Christian Life. Those who have not chosen it can in no way be expected to live by its promises or its disciplines. Some who have not chosen the Christian WAY do sometimes nibble at bits and pieces of its disciplines and the promises, but it only confuses things and accomplishes little.

However, those of us who *do* choose to follow Jesus as our Savior – well, I see I hit a chord there; some of the old familiar phrases have been overused and abused, but underneath the offense, they say it straight: those of us who *do* choose Jesus as our Savior and who really want to live the Christian Life find ourselves facing the disciplines that match the Life. Without discipline, there can be no disciples. Moreover, the longer we stay on the Christian Path, the more we realize that the disciplines are our friends. That is, the disciplines open up the joy and the promises for us. So we speak about daily prayer, constant Bible study, finding our vocatio, tithing, finding a Mentor, being part of a small disciple band, choosing our six (being an evangelist). Each of these seven disciplines opens up whole new worlds to us. Each of these seven “costs us” a lot, in one way or another. But they also organize and align our lives in ways that no amount of talk or pretense can duplicate. If we take on the disciplines in gratitude to Jesus and we trust the Holy Spirit to guide us in working them, they lead us into a very different kind of LIFE. More and more we realize that the disciplines are for our benefit, full of blessings and full of wondrous adventures and rewards.

The annoying thing for both of us is that I get put in the embarrassing position of sounding like I am trying to lay the disciplines on you. And if you are not careful, you get put in the uncomfortable position of feeling like I am scolding you to do more. If you prayed more, a whole lot of you would *do* less – and accomplish more. Constant prayer sifts and changes our priorities. I am always told that you do not have time to really pray. Of course not! If our lives are used up by false idols and all the dreams, desires, and motives of

a secular society, how could we possibly expect to have time for God? Never mind time to do anything about the assignments, the inspiration, or the guidance that come when we *do* spend time with God. And secretly, that is exactly why we do not pray more: we know instinctively that God will interfere with our lives, change our priorities, and take us off paths we think we want to walk – and move us onto paths we have never heard of and cannot control.

I am simply saying that I understand the problems with the seven disciplines. None of us work them very well. Or more accurately, none of us work all seven with thoroughness or consistency. That is why we need to remember the mercy and the grace. We are not trying to *work* our way into God's good graces. That is a contradiction in terms. Love and grace and eternal life are gifts no human can ever earn. But that is not the point. The disciplines are *our response to gifts already received*. And then we find out that working the disciplines is just more grace, and that they set us up to receive more blessings and to taste more of the Kingdom in the here and now.

So I do keep talking about them. I do want you to know that the disciplines are there when you want them. Most mainline churches have not talked about them for years. I think that is sad. Actually, I think it's a lot worse than sad, but we will not get into that now. However, it is very difficult to mention the disciplines without making some of you feel guilty. Of course, if you know the disciplines, understand their purpose, and still do not work them, then you deserve to feel guilty. But most people who shun the disciplines do not understand them yet; they do not see past the rigorous part, to the blessings that come with them. And the truth is, I think I am *inviting* you into them, not trying to lay them on you.

To be sure, if you do not work the disciplines, it hurts the church. But you *are* the church – *you* are the ones who get hurt, even when you do not realize it. And frankly, I am quite used to hordes of people play-acting at Christianity. While we are on the subject, that is less true of this congregation than of any other I have ever served. It is a rare privilege to be among you. I feel, sense, and see your faith constantly. I watch you making choices, changing priorities, and growing in the ways I think matter most. It makes me want to be more faithful too. But it also makes me aware that if we could just get another breakthrough – if we could reach for the next level of faithful commitment – it would triple the joy and the blessings as well.

So how do I know that you are not all working the seven disciplines? Can you believe anyone would be naive enough to ask me that? How long do they think I have been at this profession? Can a doctor tell if you have a broken bone or tonsillitis? Do you think religion is a private affair and that I cannot possibly tell if you are all faithfully working the disciplines of the Christian Life?

I know most of you are not “choosing your six,” or we would have severe space problems. The sick part of me is glad we do not have them, but it is sick not to want the problems that go with faithfulness. We have wonderful participation in Bible study and other small groups, but about seventy-five of us have no participation in a disciple band. I know our budget, and it is no mystery that many of you are not tithing. I am delighted with the ever-increasing familiarity of this congregation with the Bible, but a lot of you are moving toward familiarity with the Bible about as fast as you are moving toward tithing. No doubt both are my fault, but the disciplines are not easy. You have to want them a lot. Twenty minutes on Sunday, by themselves, will never get there.

But today I want to remind you of one of the lesser disciplines. It does not rank among the seven. I call it the easiest discipline, but that may be misleading. Like any worthy discipline, it has its price. And if accepted, it has the power to accomplish great things. I talked about it once not long after I came here. But perhaps it is time for a reminder. It is the discipline of attendance. When the congregation you belong to gathers for worship – show up. It is the simplest form of bearing witness. It would make a huge difference in the Life of this church if all our members showed up whenever we gathered for worship. Or as the Scripture reading from Hebrews says: *“... not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another”*

But what sounds simple at first glance is not easy – just easier than the seven. It requires a choice – a serious prioritizing. Can the faith family claim a high place on your calendar? I wish I had kept a record of all the excuses people have given me for not coming to church. Some of them have been very creative. Among the most frequent are the need to sleep in and relatives or friends coming to visit. How little it takes to sidetrack us from God or from bearing witness to what matters in our lives. But the infringements – the things we allow to interfere with our purpose – are what make us weak and ineffective.

You need to be here to support and encourage each other. You need to be here to welcome visitors. You need to be here to worship – and in that very act, to remind yourself of whom you belong to and what your life is about. And have you considered what none of us can deny: the result, the atmosphere, and the camaraderie that would result if all of us knew that all the members of this church were committed to being here, barring accident, illness, or being out of town?

Some of you remember when I tried years ago to request a commitment: That those of you who were willing would sign a pledge that if you were not sick, laid up, or more than thirty miles from town, you would be here on Sunday morning. Two people signed the pledge. Twenty-five of you, or who you were back then, were angry that I would even suggest such a commitment. “Who did you think you are?” seemed to be the gist of the comments. But that is not the real question. “Who do you think *you* are – and to whom do you belong?” That is a far more important question.

“But we don’t have to go to church to worship God.” That is correct. You do not *go* to church – you *are* the church. But that is not the implication of the oft-repeated phrases of our time: “I can be a good Christian without belonging to any church.” Or “I’m very spiritual, but I don’t like organized religion.” To be sure, if most of you felt that way, you would not be here. But some of you also feel nonplussed by such statements. You let your neighbors and friends get away with them regularly. Do you really think that the church is a sad mistake? That we would all be better off if we closed all the churches and only worshipped God in the mountains and on golf courses? If I believed all the comments I have heard about worshipping God on the golf course, I would think the golf course the holiest and most spiritually inspiring place on the face of the earth, and golfers the truest saints in the world. It is amazing that we are not giving some of our mission money to golf courses. Or maybe that’s why we should tithe: so that eventually we can buy or build a golf course and then design a clubhouse in the shape of a church.

And what about all the “unreligious” people who are good moral and ethical friends and who try to be responsible and do good by their own light? Don’t they live just as well as we do, but without all the prayers and Bible stuff? And think of all the time and money they save by not being involved in a church.

Do you know how many times I am asked that question, with the assumption that there is no reply?

Truly we should appreciate people who are conscientious and responsible and who try to do good rather than harm. And I am always amazed that anybody would think Christians should automatically be morally or ethically superior to any other group, individual, or religion. *That* is what you think we are about? Or are *supposed* to be about? Ethics and morals are written and unwritten standards set by every society. Every society would be wonderful if all of its citizens abided by the standards. And it is always pleasant to meet people with integrity, who live by a code of behavior that is admirable and helps the society to prosper.

But “the church” is made up of people who choose to turn life and will over to God, as God is revealed in Jesus Christ. Being “moral” does not touch that. People can be very moral, from society’s perspective, and still be very prideful, aloof, and unwilling to let God have any part of their lives. So their behavior can be beyond reproach, from society’s point of view, yet still totally irrelevant to God’s Kingdom. They can be “good-living,” kind people, yet still make no effort whatsoever to be faithful to God or to help build God’s Kingdom.

Suppose you are trying to build a house. You have many workmen: a contractor, a blueprint from a great architect, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, masons, roofers, etc. All of these skills are important, but coordination, timing, and following the blueprint are *essential*.

Now, suppose you have a neighbor who is a very good-hearted fellow and also a very skilled craftsman. Perhaps technically he is even more skilled at carpentry and plumbing than anybody on the hired crew. And this neighbor – good-hearted and helpful – comes over when he has some time, works really hard, and does what he does really well. But he pays no attention to the blueprint because he does not believe in organized building. He pays no attention to your scheduling and coordination of tasks because he wants to keep his independence. So you keep coming onto the site and finding rooms that are framed exceedingly well, but not where you want them. Foundations have been poured, but the plumbing and electricity have not been built-in yet, so you will have to jackhammer the foundations out and start over.

The good-hearted neighbor – if not stopped – will cost you enormous amounts of time, money, confusion, and delays, and what he accomplished will often have to be torn out and rebuilt. How grateful are you for his skill and generosity? How grateful do you think God is when, out of the goodness of our hearts, we run around doing good and being helpful but will not pay attention to the Holy Spirit, will not turn our lives and wills over to God's instructions, will not learn obedience or faithfulness, will not study the blueprint?

Pride is the problem – trying to go it alone, trying to do it apart from God. Our good intentions, without humility and obedience, are no help to the Kingdom. That is why we need to be converted first. Until then, we do not want to have a Savior – we want to *be* the savior! Except, of course, in brief moments of great personal need. Which is why most conversions occur in moments of great need or personal bankruptcy.

Jesus revealed the three great temptations from His experience in the wilderness:

- 1.) To be the Good-Guy Humanitarian.
- 2.) To be the Leader/Conquering Hero.
- 3.) To be the Miracle Worker – the saint of superior spiritual development and power.

They all lead us straight into Satan's traps, where we are either destroyed or neutralized as far as belonging to the Kingdom is concerned.

So we abandon playing the part of the Lone Ranger. We become part of Jesus' church. We learn humility. We learn obedience and faithfulness. And we rejoice in being part of His people, even though our old nature would rather be superior, aloof, and independent.

Rejoice that you are His church! It takes no genius to realize that we are not perfect and that we have problems. That is part of the LIFE we choose. It is even one of the reasons we have to trust Jesus more and more to lead us, to save us, and to take us where we truly belong – and where we really most want to go. And when our church worships – show up! If you are not sick or laid-up or more than thirty miles from home – show up. Encourage each other. Build the Life together. Write it in your covenant so that you know you made the promise. And if you make the promise, make it to God. Even if it is for *your* benefit.

*Behold,
I am
making
all things
new.*



Revelation 21:5

