

Discipleship 101: Making The Grade (Part 1)
By Jason Huff
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Hebrews 6:7-12, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, 1 Peter 5:8-11

Our final Scripture reading today comes from 1 Peter 5:8-11. Listen now to God's Word. "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen."

This morning, I want to tell you about Rosa. In Cuba, 74 Presbyterian churches planted before Castro's revolution still stand. For years, Rosa attended church uncertain if anyone else would join her. Sometimes a few others would come, but many weeks, it was just her. It didn't matter to Rosa. She sang. She prayed. She worshipped. She glorified God. For decades, this was her spiritual routine. Now, Rosa's church is thriving. There are families and children and an installed pastor. It's alive again. And they tell Rosa's story, how she disciplined herself to be in God's house every week no matter how many others might be there.

I'm humbled by the kind of discipline Rosa showed. Yet discipline is something that Jesus Himself displayed in various facets of his life, and once His disciples finally "got it" and were filled with the Holy Spirit, they did too. For us to learn what it means to be Jesus' followers, we've got to see what this discipline thing is all about.

Scripture sees spiritual discipline and self-control as deeply interrelated. It seems to me that discipline is the art of doing that which is not easy, that which isn't our first choice, so that we might honor God and ourselves. Self-control is just the reverse – it's the art of *not* doing that which *is* our first choice, not doing the easy thing. Instead, we make the faithful choice rather than following the path where our human nature would lead us. We're going to study them both over the next two weeks, starting with spiritual discipline – the more we understand God's teachings on self-discipline, the more we will be prepared to practice self-control as well.

So what does spiritual discipline for the Christian look like? It is the pursuit of those practices that put us in right relationship with God. It's the observance of those things the church has for centuries called inward disciplines – things such as prayer, Bible reading, confession of sin, and worship. It's also the regular practice of outward disciplines – giving to others, sharing our faith, seeking ways to serve rather than to be served. It's making not so much good habits as godly habits. It's becoming disciplined so that your faith is lived out daily and deliberately.

But why be disciplined? We often hear about disciplined Christians, giants of the faith, and we think, "wouldn't it be nice to live that way?" But then we think that discipline is out of reach of the common believer. But when it comes to spiritual matters, discipline is essential for all of us who believe. Let's take a look at our passage from 1 Peter 5. It says "discipline yourselves; keep alert." Discipline is a way of staying focused on God.

Why? It says our adversary the devil is like a roaring lion prowling around, looking for someone to devour. Our spiritual adversaries want us for breakfast. Those who oppose God know there is nothing more alive, nothing more powerful, than a son or daughter of God who will regularly and persistently follow Him through prayer and study and service. The easiest way to destroy someone's witness is to make them lukewarm, undirected, unfocused, undisciplined. That person's easy to devour with false ideologies and comforting platitudes. What does the Bible say to that? "Resist, steadfast in your faith." Steadfastness comes from discipline. Peter calls on us to withstand, to give no quarter, to hold firm – knowing that God, the giver of all grace, will Himself "restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

Paul is adamant in the same way. In 1st Corinthians, he encourages us, "run the race so as to win the prize." Go into strict training like an athlete heading for the Olympics. If someone can discipline themselves for the short-term glory of a foot race, how much more can we do it to gain the crown of life! Paul says that he has made his body his slave so that he might not lose out after preaching the gospel to others. Paul never thought that preaching alone would save him; he had to be disciplined in order to stay on the path Jesus walked. Paul wasn't about moderation; he was about being fully disciplined in order to practice what he believed.

The author of Hebrews admonishes us the same way. Be diligent in faith, not lazy – show patience and perseverance in your faith. We're told that discipline produces in us useful spiritual attributes just like a good and well-tended field produces a great crop. We receive the blessing of God through practicing the spiritual disciplines. But we're warned that the field that produces nothing but briars is in serious danger. We cannot expect to have the benefits of God, even salvation, if we are unwilling to seek after Him, if we are unwilling to grow and mature in the ways God intends for us. Hebrews goes on to say that God trains and disciplines those He loves. If we were not His children, He would not discipline us. In Hebrews 12:10 we read, "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness." Having discipline and being disciplined are signs of God's favor, that He is working in us.

If discipline was hard in the ancient era, I believe it's far more difficult today. We have lost the habits that were necessary just to survive in previous centuries. About ten years ago, before the advent of "reality TV," Catha and I watched a PBS show called Frontier House. It followed three families in 2001 who, for roughly six months, attempted to live as if they were pioneers in 1883. The series showed the difficulties not only of adapting to a totally different lifestyle, but one where the families' lives were now dedicated to preparing for a brutal Montana winter. While there were a variety of responses to their predicament, all put in a huge effort. Yet when the experts came in and inspected the work they'd done, only one of the three families was thought to have done well enough in their preparation to survive the winter.

Discipline was something the people of Jesus' day understood was necessary. They knew it in their daily lives and expected it in their relationship with God as well. But we are in a very different time. We don't have to be disciplined in order to succeed. As a pastor, there are tens of thousands of free sermons on the Internet for the taking. Plenty of ministers take sermons they download and dress them up with their own jokes and style and call it a day. To me, that's deeply unethical, and at very least, undisciplined. But it would be easy to that rather than to be disciplined to write a message every week.

But discipline is declining throughout society. We've been taught to follow impulses rather than to discern and be disciplined. It's the reason that Americans are saving less money than any time in history. We eat out as much as we cook. If something breaks, it's cheaper to replace it than to repair it! We buy on credit, on a whim. And all of this is taking a toll on us. We have modern conveniences that should free up our time, but instead we work longer hours and are characterized by attention deficit disorder. We should have far more time to spend with God in the spiritual disciplines...yet the world is so distracting that we spend far less time in them than those who came before us. Truth be told, it's always been hard to do the things that God asks of us so that we might grow closer to Him, but it's even harder living as we do in an undisciplined age.

But in the midst of that decline, there is reason for hope. We've talked about practicing regular Scripture reading and prayer in the past few weeks; if you've tried them, you might have found them more difficult than you imagined. But this week, instead of a list of suggestions how to succeed, I have some encouragement for us on the road to spiritual discipline. Here they are: *Know that God is in your corner. Know that devotion feeds discipline which feeds devotion. Know that we can strengthen each other as we practice the disciplines together.*

The first: *know that God is in your corner.* Our faith is not about being better and trying harder. The spiritual disciplines aren't about that. God gave the law to the Israelites so we might realize that there's no way for us to achieve the perfection that God requires. God the Father sent His son Jesus to die on the cross not so we could try harder, but so we might enjoy the benefits of grace and salvation, of forgiveness and reconciliation. The effort we put forth in spiritual discipline is not to achieve our own merit but a way of becoming more and more like the one who we love, the one who first loved us and gave Himself up for us, even unto death.

We know that God is in our corner because Jesus put up with a lot of undisciplined behavior from His disciples. In Mark 9, His disciples couldn't drive out an evil spirit because they hadn't been in prayer. In Matthew 26, during Jesus' great trial in the garden of Gethsemane, the disciples keep falling asleep rather than praying. If those incidents weren't bad enough, look at the apostle Peter. Now Peter has genuine faith...enough to get out of a boat and walk on water while he keeps his eyes on Jesus – but then he sees the wind, gets distracted and frightened, and then, kersplash! When Jesus is arrested, He has to heal the ear of a man who Peter strikes with his sword out of impulse. Peter, who told Jesus he would die for him, not only doesn't have the discipline to stick with him during his arrest, he denies Jesus three times in a single night.

But Jesus is not into browbeating. He chastises the disciples, briefly, for their lack of faith, but He never tells them, "Go home." He tells them to continue following. And Peter's story should bless us all. You know, Peter's not Peter's real name. It was Simon. Jesus gave him the name Peter, which means "rock." Jesus says that it's on Simon's leadership, on Simon "the rock," that He will build His church. This quick-tempered man who talked big but doesn't have the discipline to back up his words – Jesus makes him into a strong tower. Even after denying Jesus, Peter is restored to his position. After all his failures, Peter is the first to proclaim Jesus on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the believers. He led the church in Jerusalem until his death. He became the man who wrote some of the words we heard today that we might be encouraged – "when you have resisted, God will strengthen and establish you!"

God is not out to get us! God is not waiting to say, “Well, my friend Tracy didn’t read her Bible today, I guess I’m gonna zap her.” God is not sitting around itching for the day Scottie doesn’t pray so He can pour out His wrath. God wants to bless us! God wants to pour out the riches of His love on us! And the way we experience those blessings is through regular, daily spiritual disciplines. In Romans 8:31, Paul writes, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died -- more than that, who was raised to life -- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” The spiritual disciplines are then not a way for God to judge who’s good and who’s bad; the spiritual disciplines are a means of grace God has appointed for us to use to draw near to Him. When we practice them, we get showered with that grace.

And that brings me to my next thought: *devotion feeds discipline, which feeds devotion.* For nearly five years, I played racquetball three to four times a week at 6am. I’ve always been a night owl, not a morning person. The idea of getting up at 5:30 in the morning is simply wrong. While I never liked the early hour, it wasn’t a sacrifice...because I loved playing racquetball. I was devoted to it, and that made the discipline of getting up so early that much easier. Now that racquetball is off the table for me for several more months, I find it a lot harder to get to the gym. I don’t know anybody who’s deeply devoted to riding a stationary bike. It’s just not the same.

Many of us have found the same thing true in our spiritual lives. We have a hard time taking time out for God, but we manage to catch every Tigers or Lions game. We struggle with prayer or service to others or speaking about our faith, but we can plow through the latest mystery novel. It’s really not so much an issue of discipline as one of devotion. If I am devoted to something, discipline not only comes more easily, but that discipline leads to even greater devotion. They feed off each other. When we find ourselves fighting with either part of the equation – our devotion to God or our spiritual discipline – rather than wondering what’s wrong with us, perhaps we simply need to focus on the right balance between the two.

In 1738, a young Anglican priest named John was close to despair. He had just returned home to England after an unsuccessful chaplaincy in the colony of Georgia. He was disciplined spiritually, yet he felt he had no real faith in God and questioned his own salvation. He had just about given up on being a pastor. That year, John met a man named Peter Bohler. Peter took him through the Scriptures that teach us that God saves us through faith alone, not by works. Peter advised him to stay disciplined in his preaching through this dark time, telling him, “Preach faith until you have faith...and then because you have faith, you will preach it.” John did so, and where once he only had discipline, his devotion to God grew. A short time later, John went to a church meeting where Martin Luther’s commentary on Romans was read aloud. At that meeting, John realized he did have faith, that Jesus had saved him and had delivered him from his sins.

As Paul Harvey might say, that's the rest of the story...the story of John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement that spawned not only the largest denomination in the United States but many of the revivals that have spread the gospel throughout the world in the last two hundred years. His name stands with Luther, Calvin, Aquinas, and Augustine as one who has shaped the Christian landscape. And all because when God got ahold of him, his devotion informed his discipline, and the two worked together to make Wesley a giant of the faith.

Friends, God has made us so that our love for Him will not just grow but snowball. There are times when our devotion runs cold and our discipline will see us through and vice versa. But God desires that our passion for Him flame our heart to know Him more, and for that knowledge to make us all the more passionate for Him, knowing that He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ, who loves us, who died and rose again and who reigns now and forevermore. If your life in Christ isn't growing, check your discipline *and* your devotion.

Finally, know that *we can strengthen each other as we practice the disciplines together*. When the letters we read from today talk about holding fast, practicing spiritual discipline, being diligent, running for the prize – they aren't addressing individuals in the church. These commands are addressed to the church. In English, we don't have a second person plural. All we've got is "you." "You" in English stands for both "you" in the singular sense, you personally, and what down in Kentucky my friends used to call "y'all." Now before this gets bogged down in an English lesson, what it means is this: Paul and Peter and the author of Hebrews all meant for the church to practice spiritual disciplines together, in unity. When they say, "Be faithful, be diligent, be disciplined," they aren't pointing the finger at you and you and you...they are telling us our calling together.

We who are believers, who are the church of Christ, have the privilege of helping one another practice the spiritual disciplines. We don't need to think we can or should do it all alone. I encourage us to talk with one another, with those who are closest to us in the church, and ask for accountability, for love and guidance on becoming spiritually disciplined people. It doesn't matter if we've not done it before. We're told that iron sharpens iron. When we know we will be accountable to each other, we are more likely to do that which God asks of us. It's a simple reality. This morning, I talked about Rosa in Cuba. Her story is one of great courage and faith. And yet thankfully, God has given us each other as friends, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as people to whom we can be accountable. I ask you, find someone you trust, someone who will guard your heart and your trials well, and partner with them so that you might find greater accountability to the discipline God calls us to practice.

God is calling us to be disciplined in our words and actions, following Him faithfully, practicing love and good deeds regularly, showing the world His love through who we are. It's not an easy task. Yet God is good and God is faithful. He is in our corner, and He has made us so that when we are devoted to Him, we will find the strength to be dedicated to His ways. He has given us each other so that we may not fail or fall but stand strong together in faith. Let us dare to be disciplined in Christ, the One who encourages, strengthens, and defends us.