

Training v. Trying

2nd Sunday after the Epiphany – January 13/14, 2007

Sermon Background Study

Philippians 3:12-16 (The Message)

¹²⁻¹⁴I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

¹⁵⁻¹⁶So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (The Message)

²⁴⁻²⁵You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.

²⁶⁻²⁷I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

*What's the difference between making a New Years resolution and keeping one?
It's training versus trying.*

Warning. Sports metaphors lie ahead . . .

Poking fun at men's fondness for comparing life to football, baseball, golf, and every other sport has become standard Hollywood fare in recent years. But even 2,000 years ago, the Apostle Paul couldn't help himself. It isn't hard to find the catchy sports metaphor in Paul's letters. We don't know if Paul was an athlete himself or if he was fond of athletics or if he simply understood their importance in the Greco-Roman world. But Paul did know that there is much that we can learn about life, the Christian life, from the games we play. He writes, you've got to keep your "eye on the goal," stay "on the right track," make "a total commitment," "run the race," "run hard," stay in "top condition," and "train hard."

When trying is not enough

In his book, *Finding the Life You've Always Wanted*,¹ John Ortberg uses a sports metaphor himself. Suppose you woke up tomorrow morning and decided to run a marathon. You put on some running shoes, don the right apparel, and head out the door to begin your 26.2 mile run. Could you do it? What if you tried hard? Really, really hard? If you gave it the ole' 110%? The obvious answer is no, of course not. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't simply head out the door and run 26 miles. If I want to run a marathon, I'm going to have to train for it. Effort alone won't cut it. I once taught people to fly jet airplanes. There again, effort was essential, but it took a year of hard training to create an Air Force pilot. Nobody flies a jet by effort alone the first time they try, or the second, or the tenth. They train.

So it is with all the great endeavors of our lives. It takes learning and training and discipline. And what could be a greater endeavor than becoming the person God has created each of us to be, a loving disciple of Jesus with the power, as Dallas Willard puts, "to work the works of the kingdom." When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, Greece, he was training hard in the things of God. He knew that without training, our resolve to be trusting and obedient disciples dissolves into unkept resolutions.

Training for the fruit

Of course, it is one thing to say that we are going to train ourselves to be a mature disciple of Jesus, but it's another to know how. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells the Christians that those who are led by the Spirit will bear the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." But how do you train yourself to be gentle or to be joyful? I can try to be patient (boy, have I tried . . . and failed), but how do I *train* myself to be patient?

¹Ortberg's book is the basis of this sermon series. Copies are available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Ortberg knows that he needs to slow down if he is going to embrace the life God offers him. But he also acknowledges that he suffers from “hurry-up sickness.” I know just what he means. I make a careful and complex calculation as I arrive with my basket at the grocery store checkout. I scan the lines, estimate the speed of the checkers, note which lines have a dedicated bagger, and, after factoring in estimated tender times (how many check writers), I choose my line and then, too often, end up enormously frustrated because my “competition” (the person standing in my “place” in the line I didn’t choose) gets out faster than I do. Patti and I have been known to stand in two ticket lines at the movies. Whoever gets to the window first buys the tickets! Yes, it is a sickness. After all, what do I really do with those five minutes I might save? Surely less than I imagine.

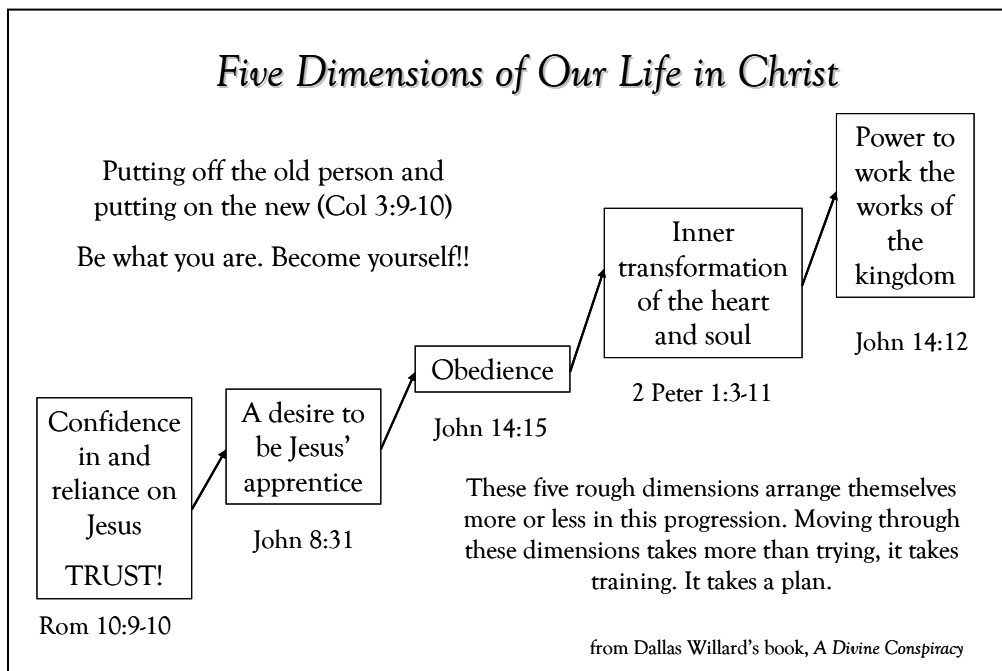
How do I possibly learn patience? How do I learn to slow down and catch my breath? Ortberg has tried picking the longest line on purpose, hoping he’d learn to like it. I haven’t yet worked up the strength of will to emulate his training method. But I do know that if I don’t actually train myself to be more patient, I won’t ever get there. Yes, God helps me in this, but I must still learn to be patient.

How about prayer? Christians with deep and meaningful prayer lives didn’t arrive there by accident. They learned to pray. They trained to pray. They were disciplined, praying even when they didn’t feel like it or thought they had nothing to say. The same for Bible reading and study. Those who completed the *Thru the Bible* reading program last year did so because they were disciplined and determined, reading even if they didn’t feel like it, learning a method that would get them to their goal. Have you ever taken a Bible study with other Christians or are you still just trying on your own to discover the life-changing power of Scripture?

Doing v. Being

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard helps us to see that this training is not about so much about doing as it is about being. Our goal is to be evermore Christlike. In our training and our trying, our aim is not just to control our behavior, but to be transformed. My goal is to *be* a patient person, not just to behave patiently. We want to *be* joyful. We want to *be* loving. We want to *be* kind. It is transformation we seek, not merely better performance. We can never live Sermon-on-the-Mount lives by reducing Jesus’ teachings to a list of rules. The life we seek is a transformed life, we need a metamorphosis.

This chart illustrates the way we progress from one dimension in our life with God to another and then to another. As we grow from one level to the next we are growing in Christlikeness, we are becoming the persons God created us to be. Spiritual disciplines are practices that change the inner-self, that help us toward the inner transformation of heart and soul. Thus, these disciplines are the training tools that Christians have found to be necessary: the disciplines of celebration, prayer, Bible study, servanthood, confession, and more. There are many different lists of disciplines, but they all share a commitment to training for God’s kingdom, not merely striving. They are the practices that create the life we seek.



Reading With Heart & Mind

January 14 ~ 20

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Genesis 18:16-33 Abraham negotiates with God over the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. How would you characterize the relationship between Abraham and God? What does this tell you about God?</p>	<p>Monday Genesis 22: 1-19 God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Spend some time with the details of this carefully-crafted story. What does this tell you about the nature of faith? About God? About Abraham?</p>
<p>Tuesday Genesis 24 A wife is found for Isaac. What does this story lead you to expect from Abraham's family? Why is so much time taken with this story? This is the longest chapter in Genesis.</p>	<p>Wednesday Genesis 25:19-34 Abraham and Sarah have twin sons, Esau and Jacob. What sort of future does the birth story prepare us for?</p>
<p>Thursday Genesis 27:1-40 Jacob and his mother scheme to steal Esau's blessing. Who comes out well in this story? Poorly? What is the moral to this story? Why would the Israelites pass on this story from generation to generation?</p>	<p>Friday Genesis 28:10-22 After fleeing Esau's wrath, Jacob has a dream of a ladder linking earth and heaven. What is the place of dreams in the Bible? In your own life?</p>
<p>Saturday Genesis 29 – 30:22 A long passage telling the story of how Jacob ends up with twelve sons. They will be the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. Why did Jesus choose twelve disciples and why did the disciples feel compelled to replace Judas Iscariot?</p>	

Sermon Notes

Several of the winter St. Andrew Academy classes begin this week!

On-line registration is available at www.standrewacademy.org.

It is NOT too late to register!

Many classes began this week, but the *Power of the Prophets* and the classes on Daniel are beginning on January 15. It is not too late to join us for any of the classes we are offering this winter.

January Book Recommendation

***The Life You've Always Wanted*, by John Ortberg**

"What does the true spiritual life look like? What keeps you from living such a life? What can you do to pursue it? If you're tired of the status quo – if you suspect there is more to Christianity than you've experienced – John Ortberg points to a road of transformation and spiritual vigor that anyone can take." I highly recommend this book. It is one of those rare books that is easy to read and richly rewarding. The sermon series is a good start, but there is much more here.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this year. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In his book, John Ortberg describes a spiritual discipline as "any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it." Make a list of such activities. Can you identify 10? 20? It is going to have to be broader than prayer, worship, and Bible study. Try to think outside your "religious" categories. Our spiritual life is our whole life – not just part of it.

Ortberg writes that a "disciplined person" is "someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way and with the right spirit." Do you consider yourself to be a disciplined person? How would your own definition differ from Ortberg's? What is missing from the definition? How about rigid and organized? What is the danger in thinking about "disciplined" in that way?

Ortberg defines a "disciplined follower of Jesus" as "someone who discerns when laughter, gentleness, silence, healing words, or prophetic indignation is called for and offers it promptly, effectively, and lovingly." What do you make of this definition? How would you put it in your own words? Is there anything you think Ortberg should have included in his definition? Note that he does not define a disciple as someone who has mastered a lot spiritual practices. Look at the diagram in the study. How would progression through those dimensions of living lead us toward Ortberg's definition of a disciple of Jesus? Would you use the word "Christlike" to describe someone who meets Ortberg's definition of a disciple of Jesus? Why?