

We begin the second half of our summer series. In the first half of the summer, we explored benedictions and saw how God is at work for us. In the second half, we will discover several practices we can incorporate for us to cooperate with God in His work. These are practices of growth to help us become the people God created and called us to be.

Myths about Growth

There are myths about growth, particularly spiritual growth, that hold us back from taking steps forward. Here are three myths to spiritual growth that I've encountered, and perhaps you've heard or wrestled with. The first myth about spiritual growth is growth is inevitable. The longer you are around, in, or experience something, growth will inevitably occur. The reality is growth is a choice. Age isn't linked to maturity. Like me, you probably know people young in age who excel in maturity, and you know people advanced in age, who have never taken a step forward in their personal growth. You can choose to mature, and you can choose to not mature. Growth is a choice.

The second myth is people naturally want to grow. The myth is you and everyone you know and work with wakes up with an agenda to mature. The reality is growth is counterintuitive. We know from system theory, people, organizations, and families will default to keeping the status quo, even if the status quo is unhealthy because growth requires going through an uncomfortable transition (Edwin Friedman, Murray Bowen, etc.). That's why intentional living, or discipline, is essential. More often than not, we will champion the status quo of progress rather than take the difficult step forward, which is required for growth.

The last myth is discipline—what's needed to grow—is about the past. Discipline is often assumed to be about the past. For example, you ate a lot of food all weekend, so you discipline yourself by going to the gym on Monday. That's punishment. Punishment is about the past, but discipline is about the future. You go to the gym on Monday because you have your sights on new eating habits in the weeks ahead. To put it another way, the purpose of discipline is to pre-decide. You are practicing behaviors now, which will have a future impact. You get out of bed with an alarm, so you'll arrive to work on time. I spent a number of hours over the past week preparing this message, so I could deliver it today. You teach your children to obey not merely, so they do what you say today, but so they are people of integrity in the future.

Paul and Growth

Today, we're going to read the Apostle Paul's approach to growth. We're going to see that Paul combats each of these myths. Paul teaches the followers of Jesus that growth is a choice. Growth requires discipline. Paul teaches the purpose of discipline is something in the future, and God is doing something of which we can be a part. Here is a question I want you to consider through this discussion: What does tomorrow require of me today? What you do now shapes your character later. Paul argues practices, which grow our character in the way of Jesus, are better. You have choices of how you will develop. You will give your self to something or someone that will shape who you will be. Paul's argument to his audience—and to us—is Jesus, and His way is better.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (1 Corinthians 9:24–25)

Competition

Paul uses metaphors from Roman competitions to talk about growth. Paul was familiar with the games; he used metaphors often in his writings. Examples include racing (Philippians 3:14), the training required for games (1 Timothy 4:7), the rules of the games (2 Timothy 2:5), and the judge who awards the prize (2 Timothy 4:8). Likewise, Paul's audience in Corinth was familiar with competitions. Corinth was the site of the Isthmian Games, which was one of four major competitions in the ancient world, second in importance only to the Olympics. The Isthmian Games in Corinth included, among other events, both races and boxing.

Choice to Train

Everyone who competed in these games trained extensively. A competitor would train ten months under the direction of judges who themselves spent ten months immersing themselves in all aspects of the competition. A Greek philosopher exhorted potential competitors with these words:

"You want to win the Olympic Games...You must have discipline, eat by a diet, stay away from sweets, exercise when required, at designated times, in burning heat and in cold; you must not drink cold water, nor wine carelessly; you must plainly hand over yourself to your trainer as you do to your physician, and then compete in the games." (Epictetus).

If you trained for a year, disciplined yourself with great purpose, competed at the Isthmian Games, and won the race, what was your reward? After all of that effort, the winner of a race received a crown made of pine leaves. To which you and I respond, "Really?!" But the history gets better. After a while, they thought a crown of pine leaves wasn't sufficient, so they changed it...to a crown of celery! What?! Ten months of training, discipline, and effort and you get celery. Paul creates a contrast. He says that the athletes in the Games train extensively even though their reward was vegetables and pine leaves. But something better is available to you.

Leading your self

As we follow Jesus, Paul calls his audience to model the intentional training of an athlete. "Training" has a lot of connotations, but in short, training means to manage your desires. You are not a victim of every thought or inclination, but rather you lead your self. Some people find the word "discipline" helpful; perhaps "intentional" is a better descriptor. Either way, when you lead your self, you give up privileges you might otherwise enjoy. You take up responsibilities you might otherwise ignore. You do those things because you are pursuing something better.

Paul argues a disciplined, intentional life, a life in which you lead your self is worth it because the reward ("the crown") will have the quality of eternity. What is the reward? Paul talked in his writings about several types of rewards, such as the experience of teaching the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:18), and a future gift he would receive in heaven (2 Timothy 4:8). I think the reward of intentional living in the way of Jesus is the development of character. In a letter to his disciple, Timothy, Paul wrote,

...train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. (1 Timothy 4:7-8)

In other words, do the work of developing your character. It connects you to God's future, but you also benefit now. You have a choice to live in this way. You have a choice to put in the work of growth. And you have the choice not to do so. Paul argues the way of Jesus is better.

Making Sense of Sanctification

Before going on to the rest of Paul's teaching to the Corinthians, we need to acknowledge the biggest objection many people have to what Paul is teaching. It may be an "objection" that you don't realize you have but will stop you from taking the next step. The objection goes something like this, "You're talking about how I live in relationship to God. Isn't my relationship with God based on what God does and not what I do?"

Theologians describe two terms that can help us: justified and sanctified. Justified is a legal act, which refers to our standing before God. We are made right with God through faith in Jesus.

There is nothing you or I can do; this is a gift and act of God. Whereas, justified is a legal act, sanctified is a re-creative act. It is the gracious work of growth in you by the Holy Spirit. What's interesting about sanctification is both God is at work, and you are at work (Philippians 2:12-13).

This is why the New Testament writers talked about being "filled" with the Spirit. To be filled with the Spirit is to cooperate with the God-work in you. One scholar put it this way:

"To be filled with the Spirit is to have the Spirit fulfilling in us all that God intended Him to do...To be filled is not the problem of getting more of the Spirit; it is rather the problem of the Spirit getting more of us"
(Lewis Sperry Chafer).

This re-creative work is what Paul has in mind in our passage. Growth and spiritual formation is learning how to cooperate with what God is already doing.

**Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.
(1 Corinthians 9:26-27)**

The rest of the passage carries different weight when viewed from that perspective. Paul says he "strikes a blow" to his body. The image is that of a boxer giving a black eye. Paul doesn't view his body as evil, but as something to train. Just as running in place doesn't prepare for a race nor shadow boxing prepare for the violence of boxing, Paul leads himself in a way in which he can participate in the character work of God in him.

In this way, discipline is about the future. The purpose of the practices of spiritual disciplines is to pre-decide. By pre-decide, I mean that what you do now shapes your character in the future. As you consider the disciplines for the next few weeks, hear them as a means for you to cooperate with the character-forming work God wants to do in you. The goal is not the practice, but to be the person God has created and called you to be. The practice is the means of developing the character.

Withstand the test

You can see this desire for a future character in Paul. He desires that he would not be "disqualified." The word refers to something, which has not stood up to the test. It was used in the Games. Paul is not referring to losing his salvation, but rather living a life, which doesn't match the life God created him to live. Growth is a choice, which requires training (discipline).

If you don't pre-decide, other things will pre-decide for you. The writer of Hebrews understood that if we are to grow, there are things we need to get rid of. Hebrews 12:1 says,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that

hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Some things hinder and entangle, but we are not victims of those things. We can cast them aside and live with a new intention: *“fixing our eyes on Jesus”* (Hebrews 12:2a).

That is what Jesus did, and in doing so, offers a new start to us.

What does tomorrow require of me today?

Growth is a choice. Growth requires you lead your self. The practices you do are for pre-deciding your character in the future.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to talk about six practices: Scripture, Prayer, Community, Service, and Celebration. We'll start next week with Solitude, Silence, and Slowing. I encourage you to consider each practice, listen to what resonates with you, and then make a plan to do it. Start this week by looking at every day as an opportunity to grow into the person you were created to be. Keep this question in front of you, “What does tomorrow require of me today?”

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1438-8S

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, July 22, 2018 at Central Peninsula Church South.

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