

Some time ago, I walked into a counselling practice and sat down in the waiting room--I was a few minutes early for my appointment. There was a magazine rack beside me and I picked up *People Magazine*, beginning to turn the pages, but I quickly put it down. I wasn't there to read about other people's lives, I was there to talk with a counselor about my life. I sat there nervously, beginning to sweat a little--not enough to ask the receptionist for a towel, but enough that I noticed.

I was moments away from exposing the deep, shadowy parts of my heart, and I began to think about running for the door. *Maybe if I crawl along the floor--commando style--the receptionist won't see me leave? I reasoned to myself, even if the receptionist tries to stop me, I've got a good chance of outmuscling her to the door.*

Some of you have waited outside a similar door, thinking the same thoughts--I too know what it's like to be afraid. If I can use an analogy, it's like bringing your car into a mechanic, handing over the keys, and allowing them to lift the hood. You know there's something wrong with the car, but you're afraid of what they might find: what's the damage, and what's the cost to repair it?

When I sat down with the counselor, he lifted the hood of my life, and there was a brief moment in which I hoped he would like what he saw. But it was a fleeting moment. I was less concerned about impressing him, and more concerned about getting help. I was concerned about what was happening inside, concerned about who I was becoming.

At one point in our conversation, in response to a question he asked, I blurted something out that I didn't know was in me. It just came out, and once it was out in the open, I couldn't take it back. But I didn't want to take it back because it was true. I said, "*I don't really like who I am.*"

Sometimes our disappointment stems from trivial things: we wish we were taller, or shorter, we wish we were better dancers, better at fixing things, we wish we were more musical. As John Ortberg suggests, some of our disappointment is a product of our own self-absorption.¹ We're disappointed that we aren't more attractive, more successful, more impressive than we are. We are disappointed in our ordinariness.

But sometimes the disappointment we feel is more intrinsic--it's connected to who we are, not what we do. We look in the mirror, wishing that we were a better friend, a better son, or daughter. We look at our children and wish we were better parents; we look at our spouse and wish we were a better husband or wife.

Sometimes I'm disappointed by how much I sin and how little I love God. I'm disappointed by my jealousy over other people's successes. I'm disappointed by my impatience with those who don't adapt to my timeline. I'm disappointed by my lack of mercy, my lack of awareness; I'm disappointed by my pride. Have you ever been amazed by your own capacity for wrongdoing, and at the same time, amazed that you don't feel worse about it?

¹ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 13.

Deep within our soul there is an ache, for we are not the people we want to be. And perhaps we say to ourself: *I don't really like who I am.*

Ortberg writes, "Where does this disappointment come from? A common answer in our day is that it is a lack of self-esteem, a failure to accept oneself. That may be part of the answer, but it is not the whole of it...The older and wiser answer is that the feeling of disappointment is not the problem, but a reflection of a deeper problem--my failure to be the person God had in mind when He created me."²

We're only five minutes into my sermon, and I wonder, have I managed to make you feel worse about yourself than you did before you came this morning? Guilt is not what I want you to leave with this morning; there is a more powerful emotion I want you to experience: *hope*.

God is good, utterly, thoroughly good, and He has life in store for you. Come to Him with your dark shadows. Come with your wounds. Come with your longings and desires. Come and receive life. His life.

So there you have it: God's invitation. But I haven't really begun my sermon for this morning--I've only set the table, and there is still one thing missing: the centerpiece.

Unless we know where we are going, we will never arrive at our destination. I've talked with you about God's invitation to *life*--which

sounds like a good thing--but I haven't said anything about the goal. What is the goal of life? Why do we exist?

The Bible provides a simple, straightforward answer: the goal of life is to be in relationship with God. We exist to know Him, to live with, to live in, to live for Him. Union with God, communion with God--you were made to be loved by God, and to love Him in return.

This is the kind of life Jesus lived. As the Eternal Son of God, Jesus had always known endless, bottomless, boundary-less communion with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. When Jesus took on our humanity and was born into 1st century Palestine, he continued in the communion He had always known.

Before Jesus had done any public ministry, He was baptized. And as He was coming up out of the water, God the Father named Him and blessed Him. *Jesus, you are my dearly loved Son--that's who you are, that's your identity. I'm so pleased with You--you are priceless to Me.* God the Holy Spirit was there too, filling Him with love, with joy, with peace and strength.

What did Jesus feel, I wonder? Before He had done a thing, Jesus knew that He was loved and valued. How about you? Do you know that God has this same love in mind for you? This is what Jesus prayed for us in John 17; listen to verse 20-21.

"I pray also for those who will believe in me...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us"--Jesus was praying for us to be united to God, to experience

² Ortberg, 15.

communion with God. He continues praying, vs. 26, *“I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”* The same love that the Father had for Jesus...right now, Jesus is praying that you and I might encounter and embrace this same love.

Jesus knew that He was loved and valued. How about you? Do you know what you are worth to Him?

Ortberg writes, “Your birthday is the day on which your sheer existence is celebrated, but you were never less competent on any day of your life than on the day you were born. On **that** day you were weaker, slower, dumber, slimier, uglier, less coordinated, had a lower IQ, and were a bigger nuisance than any other day of your existence”.³ And yet, on your birthday, people get together, give presents, eat cake, and celebrate the day you were born.

God is the unseen guest at every birthday party--He celebrates the day you were born, and every day in between. You were made to be loved by God, and to love Him in return. This is why you were born, this is the purpose of life: *to enjoy communion with God.*

Everything else you will hear me say today pales in comparison with this truth. Everything else I say today will not bring life apart from this truth.

You may not yet believe this truth, but before I move on, I want to make sure that you can repeat it. I’m going to ask two questions, and

I want us all to repeat the answer out loud--I’ve got the answers on the video screen.

Q: What is the purpose of life? A: To enjoy communion with God.

Q: Who is loved by God? A: I am!

We were made to be loved by God, and to love Him in return. Now that the table has been set, I can begin this morning’s sermon.

Over the next three Sundays, we will be preaching a series entitled, **Cultivating Life**. Life is a gift from God: we didn’t produce it, we didn’t choose it, we didn’t earn it--it’s sheer grace, it’s all gift. *But once we’ve been given life, what are we supposed to do? Are we to sit around and wait for heaven?*

The Bible makes it plain that enjoying communion with God is the result of sheer gift and intentional cultivation. Consider a vineyard. The gardener cannot create a vine, she needs a seed, soil, water and sun--without these God-given materials, there is nothing for her to do. But once God has given these raw materials, she can plant, water, fertilize, and prune--her cultivation is critical to fruitfulness.

In Philippians 2:12-13, the Apostle Paul has the following to say: *“continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”*

God is working in you to give you the desire and the power to do what pleases Him--your work is to cooperate with His work. This

³ John Ortberg, *The Cycle of Grace*.

work of ours, this cooperation, requires an ongoing encounter with His love, His courage and His strength. This cooperation of ours isn't something that happens in a moment of spontaneous inspiration--it's something we cultivate through training.

1 Timothy 4:8 says, *“train yourself to be godly. Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come.”*

Throughout the history of the church, followers of Jesus have recognized this truth and have committed themselves to a way of living, or, a kind of training (if you like), that kept them connected to God's life-giving-love, and His life-transforming power. These training exercises have come to be known as the spiritual disciplines, or alternatively, the spiritual practices.

Next Sunday I'm going to talk about what the spiritual disciplines are, but this morning I want to tell you what they're for.

Let me ask you, what comes to mind when you hear the word “discipline”?

How many of you immediately thought of punishment or correction? At times, the Bible does use the word “*discipline*” in this manner. Hebrews 12:5-6 says, *“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”*

When you heard the word “*discipline*,” how many of you immediately thought about a disciplined student, or athlete? In this

context, the word discipline means something very different. In Galatians 5, Paul describes the Holy Spirit as the ultimate Gardener, and one of the fruits He produces within us is the fruit of self-control, or self-discipline.

Some are attracted to the word “discipline”...there's something concrete about the word, something we can do, something we can check off the list, something we can control (if we do *a* and *b*, we can expect *c*). Jesus met all kinds of religious people just like this...they were legalists, moralists, rule-keepers--they appeared to be squeaky clean, but they were far from God.

Others are repulsed by the word “discipline”...it sounds too predictable, too rigid, too difficult. G.K.Chesterton once wrote, “Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried.”

Whether you are attracted or repulsed by this word, I want you to keep in mind that the word “*discipline*” comes from the root word “disciple.” You are a disciple if you are committed to following in someone's footsteps. The spiritual disciplines are about discipleship, that is, they are about following Jesus, listening to Jesus, and uniting ourselves to Jesus.

Hold that thought while we take a page from the life of Jesus. Is it safe to say that Jesus knew He was loved by God the Father? We already talked about God naming and blessing Jesus at His baptism--pretty incredible. A few years later, high on a mountain, Jesus had another encounter in which God almost repeated the very same words.

But here's what I want you to consider: were these two declarations of God's love enough to sustain Jesus through the many disappointments and rejections He encountered?

When Jesus' family thought he had lost His mind, when the religious leaders slandered Him, when the crowds turned against Him, when His disciples didn't listen, didn't learn, didn't follow, were those two moments, years before, enough to keep Jesus going? When Jesus was arrested, falsely accused, condemned, whipped, beaten, mocked, and nailed to a tree, did Jesus say to Himself: *"Well...I'm pretty sure the Father still loves me because 3 years ago at my baptism, He made it pretty clear."*

It's like the wife who complained to her husband: *"Honey, why don't you ever tell me that you love me?"* To which the husband replied, *"I told you I loved you on our wedding day...I'll let you know if I change my mind."* I've got four words for you: not--nearly--good--enough.

Jesus was accepted once and for all by the Father, but, He engaged in all kinds of practices (spiritual disciplines) that allowed God's life-giving-love to replenish Him every day, every hour, every moment. *So what kind of disciplines did Jesus practice?*

The Gospel record tells us that Jesus prayed, He studied and memorized the Scriptures, He worshipped with friends, He sought quiet places to be alone with God. For Jesus, these disciplines weren't obligations or chores--He didn't practice them to prove His

devotion, keep the Father happy, or earn His love. These disciplines postured Jesus to receive God's love, His direction, and His power.

If we think of the spiritual disciplines (practices) as obligations or chores--we've got it all backwards; even if we practice them, they won't connect us to God's life-giving-love or life-transforming-power.

Let me offer the following analogy--something I gleaned from Gordon Smith.

illus: I want you to imagine that it's a hot day, you've been outside in the sun, exercising, and you have a burning thirst. You ask me for a drink of water and I oblige--I go inside, pour a glass of water and bring it out to you. Now imagine my surprise when I hear you say, *"Mark, I don't want the glass, I just want the water."* Can you see the puzzled look on my face? You and I both need the glass, otherwise I couldn't transport the water.

Gordon writes, "The spiritual disciplines are the container for the living water." My dear people, what we are seeking from God--His love, His joy, His peace, His strength, His direction--these are not things He downloads as we sleep. All that we need can be found as we foster relationship with Him.

Richard Foster writes, "By themselves the spiritual disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done...God has ordained the disciplines of the spiritual life as the

means by which we place ourselves where He can bless us.”⁴ God doesn’t prefer to bless us at a distance; He likes to bless us up close.

illus: That day in the counselor’s office, my words betrayed me--I blurted something out that I didn’t even know was in me. Once the words came out, I couldn’t take them back: “*I don’t really like who I am.*”

I sat there for a moment, and so did my counselor--neither of us said anything but the silence was deafening. After a time, one of us spoke--I don’t remember who--and our conversation carried on, but something had broken with my confession.

At the end of our session, the counselor took a few moments and shared his observations with me--one in particular stood out. “*Mark, as you talked, the word that came to mind was “malnourished.”*” I chewed on that observation for months. He was right of course; I was malnourished. But following that appointment with my counselor, the most incredible thing happened--I began to re-engage the spiritual disciplines.

I began to pray in a new way. I began to to chew slowly on small pieces of Scripture. With the Spirit’s help, I began to position myself in the place where God could speak, heal, and forgive--I drew near and God nourished me.

I can remember one particular morning that I was sitting before the Lord--I wasn’t praying any specific request, I was just enjoying being quiet before Him. The Holy Spirit brought a scripture to mind:

Matthew 11:28-30. In it Jesus says, “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*”

I read it once, twice, three times, and the Lord gently rebuked me. “*Mark, you are are malnourished. Why haven’t you brought your burdens to Me? Can I not carry them for you? Do I not have what you need? Why do you persist in turning to things that will not satisfy?*” I didn’t have an answer, at least not a good one.

I told the Lord how sorry I was--the mess I was in, in large part, was a mess of my own making. After asking for forgiveness, I repented--with the Lord’s help, I made a decision to bring my burdens, my shame, my wounds to the cross through prayer. Over the course of the next couple of months, I continued to hear the voice of Jesus: “*Mark come to Me with your burdens, learn from Me, and find rest for your soul.*”

Now, it’s not as though everything changed over night, but slowly, things began to turn. As I met with God, that lingering voice of inadequacy became more quiet, and God’s words of affirmation became louder. God began to ask me to let go of wounds I had been carrying and rehearsing, and I began to feel a greater measure of freedom.

God was at work within me, and I began to cooperate with His work--the spiritual disciplines made it possible for me to drink His

⁴ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 7.

living water. If you are feeling malnourished today, if you are in need of God's life-giving-love and His life-transforming-power, let me encourage you to come to Jesus--in Him you will find what your soul craves.

Pray

The Lord Supper

“The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “*This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.*” **25** In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.*” **26** For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.⁵

This morning, we are going to gather around the Lord's Table and partake of this Bread and this Cup--they are physical reminders of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus.

Romans 5:8 says, “*But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” The feeling of disappointment we all carry is not the problem, but a reflection of a deeper problem--our failure to be the people God had in mind when He created us. The same could not be said of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man.

In the wisdom of God, Jesus died on a cross, shouldering our sin, our shame, our disappointments, and our wounds. Three days later, Jesus rose triumphantly from the grave. He now stands at the Father's right hand, can you hear Him calling? “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*”

Come find rest in His forgiveness; it is for you.
Come find rest in His love; it is for you.
Come find rest in His strength; it is for you.
Come find rest in His healing; it is for you.

When we come to this table, we do not come seeking bread or grape juice--we come seeking Him.

As the band begins to play, let me encourage you come prayerfully and expectantly. Please tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup and then eat with thanksgiving.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.