

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors at North Shore Alliance Church; it's great to see you.

The last two Sundays we've been talking about the spiritual disciplines. If you haven't been with us, and you've never heard of the spiritual disciplines, then think of them as training exercises for the soul: they train us for life with God. The difference being that we don't practice the disciplines in order to get a spiritual workout, or develop our soul's six-pack; we are after something else.

We all understand the importance of training. The graceful dancer, the brilliant pianist, the powerful athlete, each one excels "in the moment" because of a lifetime of preparation and diligence. What looks "easy" and "spontaneous" is result of carefully planned movements, practiced thousands of times, when no one was watching.

The same is true of life with Jesus. Dallas Willard writes, "Our mistake is to think that following Jesus consists in loving our enemies, going the 'second mile,' turning the other cheek...while living the rest of our lives just as everyone around us does...It's a strategy doomed to fail...We intend what is right, but we avoid the life that would make it reality."¹ Jesus has not invited us to try harder to be holy. Instead, He has invited us to enter into a life of training that will make this holiness possible.

As I begin this morning, I'd like to invite you to turn with me to Hebrews 12:1-3. **Read.**

"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, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

The life Jesus lived was not a life of ease. In His pursuit of God, there were distractions, temptations, and barriers. Some things Jesus had to endure, other things He brushed aside so that He could persevere in the race marked out for Him. It will be no different for us. As we follow Jesus, distractions and temptations will pop up along the way; there will be hindrances and entanglements to avoid.

Last Sunday I outlined a number of the spiritual disciplines and this week's sermon will be focussed on the barriers that stand in the way of our training. In other words, barriers that prevent us from receiving what God has for us.

I think it's important, as I begin, to distinguish between our *excuses* and what can properly be considered a *barrier*. I'm going to try and be gracious, but I don't want to let us off the hook--a life of training requires us to take responsibility.

illus: Do we have any teachers among us this morning? How many times have you heard an excuse from a student as to why they were unable to complete their homework on time? I did a little searching on Google and I came up with five of my favourite excuses.

¹ Willard, 5, 6.

1. You said we had to do questions 1-10; you didn't say we had to bring them in.
2. I left it in my shirt and my mother put the shirt in the wash.
3. We ran out of toilet paper at my house last night, and my Dad isn't feeling so good. He grabbed it in a big rush and I haven't seen it since.
4. One of the textbook's word problems offended me. I'm not supporting them by doing any more of their problems.
5. "Vernon, where's your homework?" Miss Martin said sternly to the little boy while holding out her hand. "My dog ate it," was his solemn response. "Vernon, I've been a teacher for eighteen years. Do you really expect me to believe that?" "It's true, Miss Martin, I swear," insisted the boy. "I had to force him, but he ate it!"

We all have our excuses don't we? And some of ours are just as flimsy. Why don't we engage in the spiritual disciplines?

Excuse #1: *I don't have enough time.* Let me state the obvious: no one has more or less time, we all have the same 24 hours every day. When we make this comment, we may be saying one of a few different things:

(a) *I have other priorities that take precedence over time spent with God. I would really like to grow in relationship with God but not enough to disrupt the important things in my schedule. I'll be sure to slot God in if my schedule frees up in the next few months.*

(b) *I want to re-prioritize my time but I don't know where to start.* When a person decides they want to lose weight, one of the best things they can do is begin to keep a food journal: *what are you eating? When are you eating?* When a person wants to re-prioritize

their time, it would make sense to keep a time journal: *how do spend your time? And, am I spending my time in keeping with my stated priorities?* What matters most always shows up in our calendar...always. When you look at your calendar, you may be surprised to discover what you really value.

Recommit to what matters most--make time spent with God a priority. Start by making small changes; subtract time spent from less important things. I'm sorry, but we can't bemoan our lack of time and then spend 5 hours a week on Facebook or watching t.v. --that's an excuse, and a lame one at that.

The spiritual disciplines are for ordinary people: people who go to school, people who have jobs, families, and other responsibilities. We don't have to be a full-time monk to train in godliness.

Excuse #2: *I'm too far behind.* Hebrews 12 reminds us that we are in a race, but we are not running against anyone else: we are running towards Jesus. The goal isn't to get ahead of anyone else, remember, the goal is to receive God's love, strength, direction, peace, and joy--all the things that we need. As we posture ourselves in God's presence, we begin to receive what He has for us. No one expects you to go from couch potato to Olympic marathoner in a week--get off the couch, put one foot in front of the other, and watch what God does.

Excuse #3: *But I don't feel like it.* When it comes to the spiritual disciplines, don't wait for divine inspiration, it may never come. We position ourselves in God's presence because we need Him to nourish and sustain us. Food is to the body, what God is to the soul.

Apart from food the body withers; apart from God, our soul slowly starves.

Richard Foster writes, “Prayer is like any other work... We may not feel like practicing the piano, but once we play for awhile, we feel like doing it. In the same way, our prayer muscles need to be limbered up a bit and once the blood flow begins...we will find that we feel like praying.”²

Excuse #4: It's too hard! John Ortberg writes, “People sometimes think that learning how to play Bach...by spending years practicing scales and chord progressions is the ‘hard’ way. The truth is the other way around. Imagine sitting down at a grand piano in front of a packed concert hall and having never practiced a moment in your life. That’s the hard way. This need for preparation, or training does not stop when it comes to learning the art of forgiveness, or joy, or courage. In other words, it applies to a healthy and vibrant spiritual life just as it does to physical and intellectual activity. Learning to think, feel, and act like Jesus is at least as demanding as learning to run a marathon or play the piano.”³

Have you ever done anything of lasting significance that was easy? Anything significant that you do or undertake will be “hard” at least some of the time. Training for a dance recital is hard work--so is learning to play the cello. Training for a marathon will mean sore muscles. How about finishing a Bachelor’s or Master’s Degree? It

requires hard work doesn’t it? Working at your marriage, at friendships, or at parenting is all hard work.

The question, “*is it hard?*,” is the wrong question. Here’s the better one: “*is it worthwhile?*” I’ve never heard a mother talk about the joy of labour pains, but I’ve heard many talk about the joy of holding their newborn baby. That joy made the pain worthwhile. Because of the joy set before Jesus--the joy of completing the Father’s assignment, the joy of saving us from sin and death--He endured the cross. Was it easy? No. It was unimaginably hard. Was it worth it? Yes. **The cross was not His joy--you were.** And He would do it again if He had to.

The disciplines aren’t always easy, but they are worthwhile--they open us to receive from God.

In the time remaining, I’d like to walk through three barriers that prevent us from engaging in the disciplines. And the first barrier is one that many of you named in church wide survey we did a few weeks ago. The barrier in question is guilt, or, shame.

1. Guilt-Shame: Guilt and shame can be a gift from God--they tell us that something is wrong, that we’ve done something wrong, they remind us that there is a better way to live. It’s ironic that our guilt and shame keep us away from the One Person who can absolve us of guilt and heal our shame.

² Foster, 45.

³ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 48.

The disciplines open us to receive God's life-giving-love and life-transforming-power, but it doesn't matter what's in God's hand if we don't open ourselves to receive. I suspect the reason our guilt keeps us from God is that we're not sure we will be received--we wonder, "have I reached the end of God's patient, forgiving, love?"

This was the certainly case for the apostle Peter. Shortly after Jesus rose from dead, and Peter saw Him alive, Peter washed his hands of preaching, teaching, and healing ministry, deciding to take up the family fishing business once more. It wasn't Peter's passion for fish, it was shame and guilt--he had abandoned Jesus in His time of need and he couldn't forgive himself.

And, so, Peter did what so many of us do: he threw in the towel before Jesus could do it for him. It wasn't that Peter didn't love Jesus--far from it--it was that Peter didn't see how Jesus could still love him or have any use for him. But He was dead wrong.

Perhaps you are like Peter? Under the burden of sin, guilt, and shame you've thrown in the towel before Jesus could do it for you. It isn't that you don't love Jesus--far from it--it's that you cannot believe that Jesus still loves you.

The apostle Paul teaches us an important lesson flowing from the place of his own, very public, guilt and shame. Many of you know Paul's story. Before he was a church-planting-pastor and apostle, Paul put Christians in jail and voted for their execution. Paul writes, "**15 This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it:** *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"*—and I am the

*worst of them all. **16 But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life. (NLT)"***

There is nothing you could ever do that would put you outside of God's patient, forgiving, love. Don't let your guilt or shame keep you away from the One who can absolve you of guilt and heal your shame. The spiritual disciplines are vehicles that transport the mercy, forgiveness, and love of Jesus.

Guilt and shame are very real barriers--our sense of unworthiness keeps us wondering whether God could love us. At the opposite end of the continuum, there are barriers of a different sort--pride, willfulness--we stay away from the disciplines because they require the surrender of self.

2. Willfulness

David Benner writes, "In each of us there lives a two-year-old with clenched fists, gritted teeth and defiance blazing in his or her eyes. We only differ in terms of how much life this two-year-old still has and how she or he expresses that vigor."⁴

Benner tells the story of one such boy and his mother. This boy was wild with energy, running around the house, chasing the cat, jumping off the furniture, tormenting his brother, and driving the mother to the limits of patience. She told him repeatedly to stop running but he refused to listen. Finally she took him by the arm, sat him on the

⁴ David G. Benner, *Desiring God's Will*, 19.

floor and told him to sit still. “Crossing his arms, he looked up at her in defiance and said, ‘*I may be sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside!*’”

Most of the time we hide our inner two-year-old beneath the surface--the older we are, the better we are at disguising our defiance. But our willfulness frequently expresses itself in an attitude or behaviour that can only be described as “*my way or no way.*”

Benner writes, “willfulness is stubbornness and rigidity.”⁵ A willful, stubborn, rigid pursuit of our desires, our plans, our agenda is a major barrier between us and God. The whole point of the disciplines is to open us to receive from God, but we cannot receive if we stand before Him with clenched fists. And herein lies a principle of the Christian life: *we must release in order to receive.*

Benner writes, “When it comes right down to it, there are really only two possible prayers that can be prayed. One is entirely natural, one is absolutely supernatural...The prayer that comes most naturally for all of us is ‘My name be hallowed, my kingdom come, my will be done.’ This is a prayer of independence and willfulness.”⁶

The second prayer does not come naturally and requires the grace of God acting within us. Through the loving power of Jesus, we learn to pray as He did: *Father, Your Name be hallowed, Your Kingdom come, Your Will be done.* This is the prayer of willing surrender.

⁵ Benner, 23.

⁶ Benner 33.

⁷ Benner, 40-41.

Now apart from fear or punishment, no one voluntarily surrenders their will unless they surrender it because of love. I surrender to my wife’s wishes, and she to mine, because of love. 1 John 3:1 says, “*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*”

We have believed the lie that “freedom comes from the exercise of our autonomy. But true autonomy lies...in the absolute surrender of our self to God and the kingdom of love. Clutching destroys. Surrender restores and transforms.”⁷

Perhaps our willfulness is keeping us away from the spiritual disciplines--we’ve been unwilling to let go of desires, plans, and agenda. I want to say this as gently as I can, *is living with clenched fists working for you? Is there an abiding joy and peace in your life?* We all heard the definition of insanity--trying the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Perhaps it’s time we try a different strategy.

3. The final barrier that I want to talk about today is simply *a wrong understanding of the goal, or, application of the disciplines.*

So let’s return once more to the beginning, to the reason why we were born. We were made to know God’s love and to love Him in return. So, what is the goal of the spiritual disciplines? The goal is not discipline, knowledge, or behaviour modification. The goal is

relationship with God, the love of God, the power of God at work in us and through us.

I know some people who have latched on to one or more of the spiritual disciplines for all the wrong reasons. They look at their life and see weakness or deficiency, and they say to themselves, “*I'd like to be stronger*,” or, “*I'd like to change my behaviour*.” They see the disciplines as the training exercises that will allow them to transform themselves.

But we need to ask ourselves: *is this why Jesus practiced the spiritual disciplines?* No. Jesus embraced solitude because He longed to dwell in God's presence; He embraced silence because He longed to hear the Father's voice. And because Jesus regularly encountered the Father's love, because He knew the Father was utterly trustworthy, He could live in joyful submission. Benner writes, “Obedience was a family matter for Jesus. It was all about relationship. It was an act of love.”⁸ “Willfulness is living a stubborn no. Willingness is living a loving yes.”⁹

Practicing the spiritual disciplines will not make us stronger, or wiser, or more loving; they will not fuel us on a journey towards self-sufficiency. Instead, the disciplines open us to receive **God's strength, God's wisdom, and God's love.**

illus: Let me take a practical example and show we might apply the disciplines to areas of our life where we would like to see

⁸ Benner, 51.

⁹ Benner, 52.

transformation. Let's pretend that all of us have an addiction of some kind, something that is hindering us in everyday life, something we've been unable to break free from. You can take your pick--drug or alcohol addiction, food or pornography addiction, an addiction to constant spending--it could be almost anything.

But let's take pornography addiction as our example. No one wakes up one morning and says to themselves: “*I want to have an unfulfilling, guilt-ridden, shame-inducing, virtual relationship with a woman (or man).*” But many men, and women, end up in exactly this kind of virtual relationship and it destroys their ability to relate to God, others, and self in healthy ways.

I've known many people, desperate for change, who have committed to reading the Bible every day for 30 minutes in the hopes that their addiction will be broken. And while there are much worse things they could commit to, the discipline of bible reading is not a silver bullet.

Almost every addiction stems from the roots of broken identity. Perhaps we've been battered and bruised by others, cast aside and rejected--along the way we began to believe that we weren't smart enough, beautiful enough, or significant enough to be loved. Or, perhaps, the battering and bruising is the work of your own hands--you've not lived up to your own expectation and you've cast yourself on the ash heap of life. Perhaps I am describing you.

My dear people, we cannot think our way, or discipline our way out of brokenness--none of us can transform ourselves. We need God, and, we need the disciplines.

So how might the disciplines help the person trapped in sexual addiction? When we practice the discipline of **silence**, our unmet longings, desires, and wounds are exposed. But silence also reveals the nearness of Jesus--we come face to face with the One who can absolve us of our guilt and heal our shame. Transformation begins in silence.

In the discipline of **solitude**, we leave the crowd behind so that we can be alone with God--we need to hear from Him, the One who made us, because He's the only One who can tell us who we really are. Through the discipline of **bible reading**, we hear God's thoughts about us: we have been made in God's image¹⁰, we've been called, chosen, forgiven¹¹, and we are loved beyond measure--nothing can separate us from the love of God that is for us, through Jesus Christ.¹² Knowing this changes the way we think about our selves--it allows us to see that we have "settled" for something far less than what God intended.

¹⁰ Genesis 1:26-27.

¹¹ Ephesians 1:4-8.

¹² Romans 8:31-32, 37-39.

¹³ Ephesians 5:18.

¹⁴ Romans 8:14-16.

In the discipline of **prayer**, we repent of our pain-management-strategies, and we ask Jesus to deal with our woundedness. In prayer, we ask the Holy Spirit to fill us¹³--not that He isn't within us, but in so doing we are expressing our intention to surrender to His strength, His love, and His guidance. Through the discipline of **prayer**, we regularly listen for the Spirit's inner witness that we are dearly loved children of God.¹⁴

Do you see what I'm getting at? The disciplines don't eradicate our addictions--the disciplines open us to receive what we need from Jesus. Jesus rarely begins by addressing our behaviour, because the root of the problem goes deeper. Instead, Jesus exposes false desires, false ways of thinking, our false strategies. And as we receive His love, strength, and healing, our minds are renewed and our desires are reordered--Jesus is transforming us from the inside out.

But we're not done yet...not quite. All the silence, solitude, bible reading, and prayer in the world isn't going to root out addiction if we continue to visit pornographic web sites at 1 a.m., or download R-rated movies. Through the discipline of **fasting**, we stop feeding our addiction, and as a result, we find ourselves starting to feel hungry for other things: for authentic, non-virtual, relationships with God

and others. And through the discipline of **fellowship**, we invite others to walk with us, support us, and pray for us.

My dear people, we all need the Holy Spirit to work the fruit of patience in our lives--more often than not, transformation is incremental. Gordon Smith writes, “God’s grace works slowly. Do not abandon a practice before it has the opportunity to work.”¹⁵ Just because it doesn’t happen overnight doesn’t mean we should abandon the strategy--we may have the right strategy but the wrong timeline. Don’t give in to spiritual A.D.D (attention deficit disorder)--some things take time and hard work. There is no easy way to fast-track growth.

The question, “*is it hard?*,” is the wrong question. Here’s the better one: “*is it worthwhile?*” The disciplines aren’t always easy, but they are worthwhile--they usher us into an ongoing, life-giving-encounter with God.

As I conclude this morning, I want to set the stage for next week and beyond. In our fast-paced-world, we all need a way to slow down--we all need a rhythm for living. We’ve been talking the past three weeks about the spiritual disciplines, but it can be difficult to know how to organize our life around these practices. Next week, Pastor Mardi is going to teach on this subject, and the following Tuesday, October 1st, we will be hosting Ken Shigematsu, the Lead Pastor from Tenth Avenue Alliance and he will be teaching a seminar on how the disciplines can help us to find a rhythm for our lives.

Take a look at the video screen: **God In My Everything**.

¹⁵ Gordon Smith, *Spiritual Practices*.

When we hear the word “discipline,” we tend to think of a grim determination, a joyless perseverance. This is the wrong image for the disciplines. Instead, call to mind the graceful dancer, the brilliant pianist, the powerful athlete, each one fully alive because of their preparation. The disciplines connect us to life with God--to His love, His holiness, His transformation. Joy is the hallmark of the Christian life, and the disciplines train us in the kind of living that makes joy possible.

Prayer

Worship