

Good morning everyone, welcome to North Shore Alliance. My name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors on staff; today I have the privilege of preaching. This is the second week in our series entitled, *Cultivating Life*--we are looking at the spiritual disciplines and how they enable us to cultivate life with God. If I were to give you the Cole's notes on last week's sermon, I would offer these two thoughts:

(a) First, there is a reason you were born. You were made to be loved by God and to love Him in return. God loves you: utterly, completely, unashamedly. No other relationship, pursuit, experience, adventure, success, or drug will ever fill this vacuum in your life--you have been made to be loved by God and to love Him in return. Living with and for God is like finding your heart's true home.

(b) Second, the purpose of the spiritual disciplines is to open us to God's life-giving-love and His life-transforming-power; these disciplines open our minds, our hearts, our bodies to receive from God. As I said last week, the spiritual disciplines are the container for God's living water.¹

Let me briefly remind you what the disciplines are not. They are not a means of proving our devotion to God. They are not a means of earning God's favour. God will not love you more if you read your Bible more, or pray more, or fast more. God cannot love you more than He already does. God already loves you utterly, completely, unashamedly.

Life is a gift from God--we don't earn it, we don't generate it, we simply receive it as a gift. However, once we receive this gift--life in

Christ--we become active partners with the Holy Spirit in cultivating this life. The Holy Spirit is **the** ultimate Gardener, but our work is to cooperate with His work--to respond to what He is watering, fertilizing, and pruning.

This life of response is not something that just "happens" spontaneously--it's not like a Windows update that automatically downloads as we sleep. We cultivate this life of response through careful *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, that kept them alive and alert to the Holy Spirit's work. These training exercises have come to be known as the spiritual disciplines.

But before I outline what these spiritual disciplines are, I'd like to invite you to consider the importance of training when it comes to life and godliness.

Have you ever marveled at the graceful movements of a dancer, or at the pair of hands that plays masterfully on a grand piano, or the sheer athleticism of a professional athlete? What we need to keep in mind is that dancers, musicians, and athletes prepare themselves to excel "in the moment" through a lifetime of preparation and diligence.

¹ Gordon Smith, *Spiritual Practice* (class at Regent College).

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.”²

You might be shocked to hear that Jesus hasn't invited you to transform your behaviour. If try to muscle up the internal horsepower to serve selflessly, to love your enemies, or to give sacrificially, you will eventually break down and fail.

Jesus has not invited you to try, but to enter into a life of training that will make these things possible. Our training begins with deep relationship with Jesus--His love, His peace, His joy surrounds, sustains, and strengthens us. You might look at someone and admire how they respond “on the spot,” but I can guarantee that what you are seeing is a natural outflow of the life they are living when not on the spot. The action of Jesus flowed from a rich behind-the-scenes life-with-God that He cultivated. The same is true for each one of us. *Does that make sense?*

What I'd like to do now is move on to talk about some specific spiritual disciplines. For those of you who love lists, today might feel a little like Christmas morning. But before I get to these lists, I want to offer a possible strategy for listening this morning.

I'm going to move rather quickly through a significant amount of information, and if you try to capture everything I'm saying you are going to get lost. For those of you who are note takers, I want you to know that on Monday morning, I always post a full written manuscript of my sermon on our website. So, instead of trying to write everything down, I want to encourage you to listen for the voice of the Spirit.

Ask the Spirit, “*which discipline do I need to practice in order to receive Your grace and thrive in this season?*” Now to the list.

Most authors who write about the spiritual disciplines agree on *what* the major disciplines are, but they tend to organize them a little differently. The list I'm going to present to you this morning largely comes from Dallas Willard's book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*--what I like about it is the simplicity.

Willard classifies the disciplines in two categories: disciplines of abstinence, and disciplines of engagement. The disciplines of abstinence are: *silence, solitude, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice*. The disciplines of engagement are: bible reading,

² Willard, 5, 6.

prayer, worship, celebration, service, fellowship, confession, submission.³

Abstinence: We all understand the word abstinence. A life of training requires us to stop doing certain things--this is true of the professional musician or athlete, and it is equally true of those who commit to following Jesus. *We are in training for godliness, the goal being, that we grow in relationship to God. We were created to know God's love, and to love Him in return.*

In the discipline of *silence*, we stop the noise.

In the discipline of *solitude*, we step away from the crowd.

In the discipline of *fasting*, we stop eating.

In the discipline of *frugality*, we stop spending.

In the discipline of *chastity*, we place boundaries around sex.

In the discipline of *secrecy*, we stop self-promoting.

In the discipline of *sacrifice*, we stop self-indulgence.

In the disciplines of abstinence, we aren't saying "no" to illegitimate things--like sinful patterns, or destructive behaviour--that is a given. Instead, we refrain from legitimate desire or action in order to prevent them from running amok in our lives. Silence counteracts the noise in in our life. Fasting counteracts the tendency towards over-eating. Sacrifice counteracts the pull towards self-indulgence.

The question is: *how do these disciplines open us to receive God's life-giving-love and life-transforming-power?* Let's take a closer look at the first three, beginning with silence.

• *silence*: we seldom escape from the noise of our world--everywhere we go there is incessant sound. I wake up to the sound of an alarm, I walk down a flight of squeaking stairs, I heat up my blueberry muffin to the sound of a whirring, beeping, microwave. And eventually the sound of children's feet, pounding the floor, echoes through the ceiling above me.

When you get in your car, do you turn on the radio? While standing at the bus stop, are you looking at and listening to an electronic device? We have lost our familiarity with the sound of silence--noise pervades nearly every aspect of our lives.

Through the discipline of silence we bring an end to noise: music, t.v., telephones, even words. But when we stop external noise, we often discover that our souls are noisy. In silence we become aware of unanswered questions and unresolved pain. In silence we feel the sound of shame, guilt, and regret. Silence makes us painfully aware of unmet longings and desires. And so we often turn up the music, or crank up the noise--silence is too much for many of us to bear.

The discipline of silence makes us aware of the noise in our souls, but it does something else--in the absence of sound, we are thrust into the reality of God's presence. Silence reveals His nearness. In silence we are invited to surrender the noise in souls--what God reveals, He intends to heal and restore. Psalm 46:10 says, "*Be still and know that I am God.*" Isaiah 30:15 says "*In repentance and rest is [our] salvation, in quietness and trust is [our] strength*".

³ Willard, 158.

Every so often, someone will tell me that they don't hear God's voice. I often wonder: *how loud are the other voices in their life?*

Perhaps the noise is so great that God's voice is drowned out?

When the prophet Samuel was but a boy, he first heard God calling to him as he slept. But Samuel was so used to other voices that he didn't recognize the sound of God's voice.

In the discipline of silence, we put a stop to the noise around us, and become aware of the noise within us. In silence we become aware that God is near, and train ourselves to hear His voice.

- *solitude*: in solitude, we withdraw from others, in order to be fully present to God. In solitude and silence, God reminds us that we are His beloved child--we need to hear the word again and again--without this regular reminder we become dangerous in human community.

Ruth Haley Barton tells us why, "Because we will attempt to get from other human beings what only God can provide; we will demand that the community meet our needs for love, approval, a sense of self and whatever else we may be missing. Then when the community disappoints us, is unable to meet our needs or refuses our demands, we become frustrated ... We may even start projecting our inner lacks onto others in the community—blaming them for not meeting needs that are not theirs to meet... Human community can never fully meet the needs that can only be met by a rich and

satisfying relationship with God; it is a weight too heavy for any community to bear."⁴

Mark 1:35 says the following, "*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.*" It was this kind of training that enabled Jesus to live from His true identity as God's beloved Son. Our need is no different. We embrace solitude because we long to dwell in God's presence; we embrace silence because we long to hear His voice. Solitude and silence position us to encounter, His love, power, and transformation.

- *fasting*: in the traditional sense, through fasting, we stop eating and/or drinking for a period of time. If you have ever fasted for any length of time, you will agree with Willard when he writes that fasting "reveals to us how much of our peace depends on the pleasures of eating."⁵

What happens in the physical realm mirrors what happens in the spiritual realm. What food is to the body, God is to the soul; body and soul, we are constantly in need of nourishment. Apart from food the body withers; apart from God, our soul slowly starves. Jesus said, "*Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* (John 6:35)" Fasting exposes our hunger and thirst, and we are put in touch with our need for God.

⁴ Ruth Haley-Barton, *Leading In Rhythm: Solitude and Community*, <http://www.transformingcenter.org/2013/07/part-3-leading-in-rhythm-solitude-and-community/>

⁵ Willard, 166.

There are all kinds of ways to fast--those that involve food and those that don't. You might want to try fasting from technology and entertainment for a time in your non-work hours. When your electronic device is locked up and put away, you might just become aware that your soul is noisy--fasting reveals our hunger and thirst; things that only God can satisfy.

The disciplines of abstinence can be frustratingly painful; at times they reveal our tendencies, expose our compulsivity, our fears, the idols we can't live without. But they are God's gift to us--they connect us in relationship with God and enable us to receive what is truly life-giving.

Engagement: A life of training requires us to stop doing certain things, but it also requires us to start doing certain things--this is what the disciplines of engagement are all about.

Can I offer a metaphor, borrowed from Christian history? Think about these two categories of disciplines in terms of breathing in and out. If I asked which of the two was more important--breathing in or out--what would you say? Perhaps we could conduct an experiment this morning--half of you are only allowed to breathe in, and the other half are only allowed to breathe out. It wouldn't be so bad...the whole lot of you would pass out in the next minute and I could go home early.

In training for godliness, we stop doing some things in order to start doing others. We abstain and we engage. Jesus withdrew from the noise and the crowd to be alone with the Father because He needed to encounter the Father's love, to hear the Father's direction, to receive the Spirit's power. But He didn't build Himself a house on

the mountain and retire to solitude--filled with God's love, direction, and power, Jesus re-engaged with the crowd. Breathing in and breathing out--this is the way we follow Jesus.

In the time remaining, there's two foundational disciplines I like to talk about: bible reading and prayer.

- *bible reading:*

Hebrews 4:12 describes God's word as living and active. In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul writes "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and **training** in righteousness*".

The Bible is less about *information* and more about *revelation*--it is the primary means through which God reveals Himself, His thoughts, His ways. Having said that, Christianity is not a religion of a book, but of a Person. We seek to know and encounter the Living Christ.

There are two primary ways to read the Scriptures: study and meditation. Many of us are familiar with the discipline of study, but fewer of us understand and engage in the discipline of meditation; both are important.

Study focuses on analyzing a passage of scripture--the goal is understanding. Let's take Jesus' words, recorded in John 14:27, "*My peace I give to you.*" If we were to engage in the discipline of study, we might look up every occurrence of the word "peace" in the New Testament. We would consult biblical dictionaries and discover that the meaning of the word "peace" goes far beyond "the absence of conflict"--it means wholeness, fullness, health, rest, abundance.

The discipline of study would open our minds to understand what it is that Jesus actually promises. This understanding is important, really important. I want to commend to you the class Pastor Keith will be teaching on how to read the scripture--sign up on line, you won't be sorry you did.

The discipline of meditation has a different focus: to internalize and personalize a passage of scripture--the goal is to hear a living word from God. We seek to know with our minds what Jesus promises, and, we seek to know with our whole being, the joy of experiencing the wholeness, fullness, abundance, and rest Jesus promises. In meditation, we enter the biblical story, not as passive observers, but as active participants. Saint Bonaventure once wrote, "*To know much and taste nothing--of what use is that?*"⁶

illus: On Wednesday morning I woke up at 6 a.m., and the moment I opened my eyes, my mind was racing with anxious thoughts. Have any of you had the same experience? I got up and got ready for the day but I was neurotically checking my watch every 15 seconds: *I have so much to do, how will I get it all done? What if I run out time? What if things don't go the way I've planned?* Some of the things I was worried about were things I could control, but a number of them I could not.

I drove to work, but before I began, I opened the Scriptures. I had been studying through 1 Thessalonians but with my anxious thoughts, I decided I needed to meditate once more on Jesus' words

in Matthew 11. "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul.*" That morning, I wasn't seeking new insight on what these words meant--I knew what they meant--I was seeking an experience of the peace Jesus offers

As I chewed slowly on Jesus' words, an image came to mind: a big, brown, burlap sack. I began to fill this sack with all the tasks I had to accomplish, all the things I was worried about--I named them one by one before Jesus and then put them in the sack; in the end it was pretty full.

When I ran out of things to name, I handed the burlap sack over to Jesus and it came to rest in His hand. Do you know what struck me about His hand? How enormous it was. The burlap sack I had been struggling to carry looked minuscule in His hand. Jesus picked it up between two fingers, and it looked so tiny. I began to thank the Lord and let go of my worries.

Then Jesus put my burden back down in His palm and flicked it with His finger--I watched it fly out of sight. In that moment, I said to Him, "*Okay...now you're just showing off.*" But as I sat in my chair, I experienced a wave of His peace.

I tell you this story, not to make you think I'm more spiritual than I am, and not to model *how* to do meditation, but to remind all of us

⁶ Saint Bonaventure, as quoted by Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 13.

that we find what we need in God's presence. His peace is real. His love is real. His joy is real. And they are available to us.

- *prayer*: Let me conclude by briefly talking about prayer.

Remember, the goal is not to pray--the goal is to enjoy communion with God. Prayer is our means of communication: listening and speaking. It was when God spoke that the universe came into being. God initiates and we respond; all prayer is answering speech.⁷

Prayer can take on so many different forms: the prayer of thanksgiving or the prayer of confession. In praying for guidance, we submit our plans to Him and listen for His direction. In intercession we pray for others. Then there is the prayer for healing, or the prayer of release where we transfer our burdens to Him, etc.

Eugene Peterson writes, "Prayers are tools, but with this clarification: prayers are not tools for doing or getting, but for being and becoming...Prayers are tools that God uses to work his will in our bodies and souls. Prayers are tools that we use to collaborate in his work with us."⁸

Even unanswered prayer is a tool in God's hands. Sometimes an unanswered prayer throws us headlong into a fiery furnace--we're in great pain, without any knowledge of what God is doing. But if we keep company with God, when we no longer have the strength or the will to fight Him, we realize that while we weren't looking, we were

being transformed. Our character was being chiseled, our faith was being deepened, and our desires were being refined.

This morning, I've given you only a small taste of the disciplines--30 minutes is not nearly enough time; we'd need hours to do justice to the content and practice of the spiritual disciplines. But as I wrap up this morning, I want to leave you with an invitation.

Let's cultivate a life of response to God through careful *training*. On September 29th, we are going to be calling the entire church to commit to practicing a few of the disciplines over this ministry year. I want to posture myself to receive all that God has in store for me; do you? Consider what you will commit to in the year ahead.

Now for those of you who are beginning to engage in Bible reading and prayer, we have two resources we can recommend. One book has a daily scripture reading along with some devotional thoughts, and the other book contains 100 key Bible passages that reveal God's heart and plan for you.

Prayer

Worship

Benediction

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, 32-33.

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*, 2.

Cultivation Life: What are the Spiritual Disciplines

September 15, 2013

I know a number of you love to read, and if you would like to dig deeper into the Spiritual Disciplines, I want to commend two books to you: *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, by Dallas Willard, and, *The Celebration Of Discipline*, by Richard Foster.

As you leave this morning, I want you to know that our Women's Ministry Team will be at work the foyer to extend an invitation to any woman who would like to attend their kickoff this Wednesday, September 18th.