

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

This last week, as I was preparing for this message, I came across some very interesting research. A biology professor named Mike Adams noticed a pattern among his academic colleagues that many of their students seemed to have an increase of deaths in the family right around the time that final exams are due. And grandmothers always seemed to fare the worst.

After 20 years of collecting data on the subject, Adams was finally able to publish a paper with some concrete findings on the subject.

As a point of statistical fact, grandmothers are ten times more likely to die before a midterm and nineteen times more likely to die before a final exam. Worse, grandmothers of students who are not doing well in class are at even higher risk. Students who are failing are fifty times more likely to lose Grandma than non-failing students.

It turns out that the greatest predictor of mortality among senior citizens in our day ends up being their grandchildren's GPAs.

So if you are a grandparent, don't let your grandchild go to college. It will kill you, especially if he or she doesn't do well in school.

Adams went on to speculate that the phenomenon is likely attributed to what he calls intrafamilial dynamics - which is to say, these students' grandmothers care so much about their grandchildren that they worry themselves to death over their exams.

Y'know, that, or the months of studying and burning the candle at both ends has caused some of these students to lose some of their morality and they're becoming liar, liars w/ pants on fire.

There's something about the strain of difficult situations that can cause people to bend the truth, or even outright lie, in order to make things easier for themselves.

Unfortunately, we live in a time where the prevalence of fake news and half-truths has so saturated our culture that it has become more and more difficult to discern truth for our lives, and more and more tempting to simply believe and rely on whatever is convenient - even if we know it to be false.

As we look to our scripture today, however, continuing on in the book of 1 Timothy, we'll see that this really isn't a new phenomenon. And the Apostle Paul has some helpful words of advice for his young protege as Timothy prepares to combat false teachings in Ephesus.

READING

1 Timothy 4:¹ The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ² Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³ They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by

those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴ For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

⁶ If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. ⁷ Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸ 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. ⁹ This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. ¹⁰ That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.

¹¹ Command and teach these things. ¹² Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. ¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

¹⁵ Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. ¹⁶ Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

A saying often misattributed to Mark Twain is, "A lie can fly halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its boots." The fact that this quote is fake (Mark Twain didn't actually say it) is a great example of how true the quote is.

You could summarize much of the struggle of our spiritual journey as the battle to patiently listen for the Truth.

In light of that struggle, Paul reminds Timothy - and us - of some key truths. The first is this:

I. DECEPTION IS A TOOL OF THE ENEMY (1-5).

This should be an obvious statement, but it deserves some reflection. Paul's teaching here reminds us that the reality deception shouldn't be surprising to us. God has already revealed through the Holy Spirit and through the Word that there would be an increase of falsehood in the last days.

And we know that the demonic spirits will try to do anything they can to lead people away from the truth - even using people as witting or unwitting agents in this deception.

This isn't new information. The Devil lies, and he sometimes uses people to spread his lies. Paul gives a specific example as he speaks to Timothy about leaders linking salvation to denial of the material world, but there are many other falsehoods to lead us astray.

Part of the power in Paul's statement is that it exposes deception for what it is - a feeble tool of the Devil to delay God's victory plan.

And what do we do with the tools of the enemy?

We rebuke them, pray against them, and trust in the Lord for provision.

We need not fear. For there is no fear in love (1 John 4:18). We need not pay it more attention than it deserves. For that only gives it more air time and publicity.

Even as Paul addresses these false teachings to Timothy, we've witnessed ourselves how difficult it is to tease out exactly what the false teachings are that he's addressing. He gives FAR more air time to the truths of the Gospel and the fruit that it's supposed to produce, because those are the things that matter.

After school shootings and terrorist attacks - the media used to spend hours and days of air-time talking about the identity of the shooter and their background and ideology. How could they have done something so heinous!?

THEN, we started shifting instead to outrage over issues like gun control or immigration that some folks perceived had enabled the tragedy to happen in the first place - and these traumatic incidents quickly became tools in polarized political debate.

But I think the much healthier shift we're seeing happen more and more is that when these sorts of tragedies occur, news outlets are beginning to cover the stories of those who were victimized, and those who courageously stood up to save others lives.

THOSE are the truths worth hearing. The truths that draw us to shared grief and hope - that unite us and draw us closer to God's heart rather than dividing us and plunging us into despair.

We know that there are times when we must confront false claims head on, but the bulk of our time should be spent nourishing ourselves on the truths of the faith.

This leads to the second key truth:

II. SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE LEADS TO LIFE (6-10).

Words like "spiritual discipline" and "training for godliness" can be tricky because it almost sounds like working to earn your salvation. But that's not what Paul is talking about.

Paul says, "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."

This isn't about earning your way into relationship with God - Jesus already took care of all that through the cross and resurrection. We've been made right in God's eyes.

This is about being built up in Christ through the power of the Spirit so that we can begin to take hold of that blessed life with God.

The glorious restoration work of the Gospel isn't just about life after death - it's about real, restored life in the here and now.

Just as Paul emphasized character over competency for leaders, he now states that the best way to prepare against false teaching is to invest in spiritual formation (training in godliness).

Study is an important aspect of knowing truth, but knowledge without thriving relationship with God will not suffice. There is no further proof needed than to see the prevalence of academics and bible scholars who drift into unbelief themselves.

When asked about the "greatest commandment" Jesus replies that it is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind" (Lk 10:27). He wants ALL of your love and devotion. Loving with our minds is just 1/4th of that equation!

Another way of talking about this is the pursuit of the 3 Orthos - Orthodoxy, Orthopathy, and Orthopraxy. "Ortho" in Greek, simply means "right" "correct" or "straight." And these terms refer to "right belief," "right feeling," and "right practice."

In the church, we often focus most of our energy on Orthodoxy - right belief, or "loving God with all our minds." It's the easiest one for us to try and tackle. Just study the bible enough and learn to draw lines where to need to about what is right and what is wrong. We're all set!

"Loving God with all our strength" - Orthopraxy, or right practice - is a little bit tougher because we're often inconsistent and we end up doing all sort of things we don't really think is right but we want to do anyway. Just try harder though, right? You'll be OK.

Orthopathy - right feeling...loving God with our whole heart and giving Him our whole soul... well, what does that really even mean? We end up kind of just contenting ourselves with latching on to brief moments of intimacy and hope that it's enough.

THAT'S WHERE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES COME IN. The value of spiritual habits as a means to position yourself to be filled, healed, and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. That wording is important, because there is no amount of works that we can perform that will produce righteousness or healing in our lives. Only God, through the work of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, can produce real change in us.

The fundamental problem of sin is NOT that we do not do enough good works to please God nor that our "bad" deeds displease God. The problem of sin is that we have rejected God and His covenant love. And the problem is not on God's end: He's already proved that He is beyond willing to restore the relationship. The problem is our brokenness, fear, distrust, and anxiety that keeps us running to anything but God in our times of distress.

And if we don't address THAT - then it doesn't matter how much scripture you've memorized or how much doctrine you've learned, you will still be susceptible to deception and destruction.

Spiritual Disciplines, are practices that help to teach our bodies and souls to hunger and thirst for God's presence. It's that simple.

The point isn't to check off a list of actions to accomplish. The point is to spend time with Jesus, because He's the one that saves us. That's it.

PRACTICING YOUR FAITH HELPS TO POSITION YOU FOR LIFE CHANGE.

My wife talks about it like making bread: You can't actually *make* bread rise, but you have to be intentional about putting the right ingredients together in the right environment for the appropriate chemical reaction to take place.

It's the Holy Spirit that makes us holy, but we do have a responsibility to bring ourselves before God with a humble heart if we truly want to receive what God has to offer.

And if we're rooted in Christ, abiding in the Spirit, it will be way harder for us to be tossed off track by doubts or by strange teachings, because we'll know the voice of our God, we'll remember His goodness, and we'll know what's not of Him.

Finally, Paul gives Timothy some very practical steps to combat false teaching - AS YOU ARE ROOTED IN THE HOPE OF CHRIST AND HIS SALVATION - LIVE IT OUT.

This is really some unconventional wisdom when it comes to combating the tools of the Enemy.

It's not fight fire with fire...and it's not even fight fire with water.

The NT says III. FIGHT FIRE WITH FRUIT (11-16).

Let the character produced in you by the Truth of God's Word speak even louder than your words.

In Matthew chapter 7, when Jesus addressed false prophets in the Sermon on the Mount, he said: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

And what are the fruits of a good tree? Paul tells us in Galatians 5:

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

If you want to win others over to the truth, do so with conviction, love, and integrity.

Read scripture publicly, preach it, teach it, use the gifts the Holy Spirit has given you! Be careful to watch your doctrine and your behavior, because people are watching!

All of this is true for pastors and leaders like me in an amped up sort of way, but this is critical for every single believer.

Our speech and our behavior matters, because people are watching. What we say, how we say it, and how our words ring when set next the rest of our lives matters.

- Don't spend so much time giving glory to falsehoods.
- Read scripture. Read it often. Read it with others.
- Share the Good News you've found in the Gospel.
- Teach others the truths you've learned from God's Word.
- Use every resource that the Holy Spirit has given you.
- Abide with Christ so that the Word may dwell in you richly and produce a life of integrity.

This can be scary and somewhat paralyzing - man, can I even do or say anything without it reflecting badly on Christ?

But it doesn't have to be scary, because Christ has equipped us with the Helper - the Holy Spirit. Rely on Him as your strength and guide, but be diligent.

It's not your job to defend God. It's your job to defend your heart and pursue God to the best of your ability. Each small step of faithfulness in that direction matters, and where you give an inch, God will stretch it out to a mile.

CONCLUSIONTo close this morning, I want to share 2 stories with you.

STORY NUMBER ONE

Many years ago, the famous mobster Al Capone virtually owned Chicago. Capone had a lawyer nicknamed "Easy Eddie." He was his lawyer for a good reason. Eddie was very good at his job!

In fact, Eddie's skill at legal maneuvering kept Big Al out of jail for a long time. To show his appreciation, Capone paid him very well. Eddie lived the high life of the Chicago mob and gave little consideration to the atrocity that went on around him.

Eddie did have one soft spot, however. He had a son that he loved dearly. Eddie saw to it that his young son had the best of everything: clothes, cars and a good education. And, despite his involvement with organized crime, Eddie even tried to teach him right from wrong. Eddie wanted his son to be a better man than he was. Yet, with all his wealth and influence, there were two things he couldn't pass on to his son: a good name and a good example.

After years of crooked deceit, Eddie finally got a chance to rectify wrongs he had done. He decided he would go to the authorities and tell the truth about Al "Scarface" Capone, clean up his tarnished name and offer his son some semblance of integrity.

To do this, he would have to testify against the Mob, and he knew that the cost would be great. But, he testified. Within the year, Easy Eddie's life ended in a blaze of gunfire in a lonely Chicago Street. There are some who believe even then, Easy Eddie only turned state's witness because the timing seemed opportune. But in his son's eyes, he had given his son the greatest gift he had to offer, at the greatest price he would ever pay.

STORY NUMBER TWO

During the course of World War II, many people gained fame in one way or another. One was a fighter pilot named Butch O'Hare. One time his entire squadron was assigned to fly a particular mission.

After he was airborne, he looked at his fuel gauge and realized that someone had forgotten to top off his fuel tank. He wouldn't have enough fuel to complete his mission and get back to his ship, so his flight leader told him to leave formation and return.

On his way back, he noticed a squadron of Japanese aircraft heading toward the fleet to attack. And with all the fighter planes gone, the fleet was almost defenseless. His was the only opportunity to distract and divert them. Single-handedly, he dove into the formation of Japanese planes and attacked them.

He shot until all his ammunition was gone, then he dove at enemy aircraft trying to clip off a wing or tail or anything that would make them unfit to fly. Finally, the Japanese squadron took off in another direction, and Butch O'Hare and his fighter, both badly shot up, limped back to the carrier.

He told his story, but it was the film from the gun-mounted camera that really showed the extent of Butch's daring attempt to protect his fleet. His single plane had destroyed 5 enemy aircraft and sent the rest running.

This took place on February 20, 1942, and for that action Butch became the Navy's first Ace of W.W.II, and the first Naval Aviator to win the Congressional Medal of Honor.

A year later Butch was killed in aerial combat at the age of 29. His home town would not allow the memory of this WW II hero to fade, and today, O'Hare Airport in Chicago is named in tribute to the courage of this great man.

THESE 2 STORIES HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON - AND IT'S NOT JUST A SETTING IN CHICAGO.

Butch O'Hare was Easy Eddie's son.

Until the day that Jesus returns, there will yet be deceit and brokenness in greater measure in our world - and there will always be temptations to lure us away from truth.

But if we'll turn and repent - that's it - and set our foundation on the truth, God can build something incredible and inspiring out of our lives.