

- We are in week 6 of a new series called “Spiritual Development Practices”
  - These are things that as we practice them, build them into habits, they change how we live. They will help us grow. They will draw us closer to God.
  - We call them practices because we are always growing in them. We never arrive.
  - We desire to practice loving God. When we love God increasingly it shapes how we see our life. It helps us lean into our identity as loved and valued people. We looked at how our prayer life thrives when we practice praying with trust and expectation. We learned how to approach our bibles like every time we open them we are one Holy Spirit moment away from encountering God himself.
  - We also desire to practice loving each other. When we practice doing this well in line with what Jesus modeled and commanded, it leads to more life giving and fulfilling relationships. We saw that every conflict as an opportunity to lean in and love like Jesus loved and last week Luis led us through his experience in learning to live as a servant in all things and at all times.
  - Lastly, we desire to practice loving the world. By that I mean those around us that do not know Jesus. When we do these practices well, it allows us to participate in God’s mission, to bring about his kingdom, and to help us live for something bigger than ourselves in a way that brings great satisfaction. We saw that you are the only person who is where you are, and how to engage in spiritual conversations.
  - But how do we get to the place where we actually can engage in spiritual conversations?
  - I want to introduce one more habit that, if we all practice, would lead us collectively into having a tremendous influence on the world around each of us.
  - It is the practice of asking, “What’s next?”
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- You have all done this.
  - On a vacation you get up, you are sitting on the beach soaking up the afternoon sun and it gets to around 4pm and you think, “OK, what’s next?”
  - You finally finish redoing the bathroom. You have put in a new counter, new sink, repainted, updated everything. It is beautiful. It is finally done. You sit down on the couch, and either you (or your spouse) says those words, “Soooo . . . what’s next?”
  - You are in your senior year of high school. There are all kinds of things being thrown at you and you are overwhelmed. Everyone is asking you, “What’s next for you?”
  - You have been in your current job for 5 years. It is getting a bit tedious and has an element of routine to it. You begin to wonder if this is all there is and so you ask “What’s next?”
  - It’s a question that can generate worry, pressure or anxiety.
  - But . . . it is also a question, that asked correctly, can lead you to less worry, less anxiety and help you live with increased purpose and fruitfulness.
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- There is an account that is familiar to many of you.
  - Paul, the man who preached, traveled and wrote much of what came to comprise our New Testament, did not start out as a Christ-follower.
  - In fact, he was the opposite. He hated Jesus and all those who followed him.
  - He wanted this movement of people stamped out and did everything he could as a good religious Jewish Pharisee to make it happen.
  - He chased them down, found them out, arranged for them to be imprisoned and executed.
  - One day when traveling to arrest a bunch more Christ-followers, a light flashed from heaven blinding him. It put him on his knees. He heard a voice telling him that he was actually persecuting God, not protecting him like he thought he was. It was an encounter with God

that left him blind and utterly shaken. He was led into town where he wouldn't eat and it was there that God told him about his future and gave him a mission.

- God sent a man named Ananias to help him.
- He did not want to. He was fearful. He knew Paul's reputation. He was going to argue with God.

*Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.*

- He healed Paul's eyes, and set Paul down a path very different from what he expected.
- Paul himself, when telling his story, talked about God's mission to take the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles.

*6 "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."*

- Paul lived approx. another 30 years from this point onward.
- He spent a decade in learning and training, even though he was already a fully trained Pharisee.
- Then, over the next 20 years he traveled an estimated 10,000 miles telling people about Jesus (amazing when you figure this was largely on foot, with some ship and horse travel in there as well).
- He planted many new churches (we know of about 15 but there were probably more).
- He specifically trained many other leaders who also started more churches.
- Depending on the way you evaluate it, Paul wrote letters that now comprise 25-35% of our New Testament.
- Paul appeared before emperors, governors, religious leaders and more.
- He healed people, cast out demons, even raised a man from the dead.
- He was whipped, beaten, stoned and shipwrecked (multiple times, with one of those adrift in the open sea). He was put in prison multiple times.
- In the end, around 62-64AD, he had his head chopped off in Rome under the reign of emperor Nero.
- Every student of history will tell you that this man was one of the most influential people in the last 2000 years.
- But HOW did this happen. It was not an accident. Neither did God give Paul the master plan of how to accomplish his mission. He did not map out what was next, which cities to visit, in what order and how it was to happen when he got there.
- When we look back, we can see how it all worked together, but before it all happened, none of this was apparent. I imagine he had the same questions we have.
- Go and make disciples . . . uh, how? What does this look like? How do I make a difference? How do I even have an impact? How do I connect with my co-workers? Neighbors? How do I make a difference when I feel completely unqualified to do so? Do I invite them to church? What do I say? When do I have a spiritual conversation?
- **WE MOVE IN GOD'S DIRECTION WHEN WE ASK HIM "WHAT'S NEXT?"**
- Let me show you an example from Paul's early years. He was still pretty new at all this. He was part of a church.

*1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.*

*2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and*

*prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. 4 The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.*

- This sent them on their first missionary trip. There were more. Even in these, God did not give them all their instructions at once.
- **WE MOVE IN GOD'S DIRECTION WHEN WE ASK HIM "WHAT'S NEXT?"**
- God will rarely (if ever) give you your entire assignment at once. God told Paul his overall mission, but not much more. Jesus when he left told us to make disciples without a lot of specific direction.
- In fact, he will rarely (might I say never) give you all of the steps in front of you in detail.
- First, it would be overwhelming. It would freak most of us out.
- Second, he is in the process of developing my relationship with him and my faith.
- This habit of asking "What's next?" actually applies to every area of life, but let's apply it to how we influence those who don't yet know Jesus.

## **I. Listen with spiritual ears.**

- We grow in hearing God's voice as we practice listening and asking the question.
- Notice that they did this in community. They were all praying when they heard from the Holy Spirit about what they should do next.
- In order to hear what God says when we ask "What's next?" we must be listening and listening in our hearts and spirit. We must pay attention to that small voice from God that is quietly speaking to us. If we can't hear him, it is rarely because God is not speaking – it is far more likely that we are not listening.
- How do you know if you are hearing God? When you read that the Holy Spirit spoke to them to send Paul, what do you picture?
- Asking "What's next?"

### **A. Pray specifically for others.**

- The more specific you are in praying for specific people, the more likely you are to tune in to what God is saying to do what's next.
- *Example: Praying for a friend who had lost their job, all of a sudden you get the idea to text them to let them know that you are specifically praying they find a job that fits their abilities and passions.*
- *Example: You are praying for someone who had a family member become sick. They are traveling home and are heading for the airport and you are suddenly prompted to offer them a ride.*
- In light of what is going on in my life. . .
- In the context of the relationships that I currently have. . .
- Based on what has happened up until now. . .
- What's next?

### **B. Pay attention.**

- You must be watching for what God might be doing.
- It does no good to pray for what's next and then put your head down and don't pay any attention to anyone or anything else.
- Many "What's next" opportunities come as you go through your life.
- *Example: Paying for someone's groceries in the line in front of you. You can miss it if you are obsessed with your phone.*

### **C. Don't overthink.**

- Many Christ-followers miss opportunities by overthinking. Was that God? Was that me? What should I do? I need to pray about it more?
- If it is in line with what God has already said, do it. I decided a few years ago to err on the side of grace and generosity.
- Seek the welfare of others, both physical and spiritual.
- Love others. Be kind. Encourage. If what you are thinking does this, then do it.
- Act towards them in a way that reflects how Jesus loved them.
- How does God want me to love that person?
- **WE MOVE IN GOD'S DIRECTION WHEN WE ASK HIM "WHAT'S NEXT?"**

## **II. Do it.**

- This is where the rubber always meets the road. When you ask God "What's next?" and he gives you something, do it.
- There was a time later when Paul was traveling on one of his missionary journeys and here is how this looked for him.

*Acts 16:6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8 So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

- Paul was always asking "What's next?" He had plans but then God stopped him from this direction. He then tried the next and the Spirit stopped him again.
- Once he heard God, off he went. Some amazing things proceeded to happen.

### **A. Do it right away.**

- Then he got some specific direction from God and he we read that he went "at once."
- *Example: I have been prompted to call someone, to text them. I have thought about it but I was busy and so I put it off. I ended up forgetting about it. Later I found out that it would have been perfect had I done what I felt and I missed it. Other times I have listened. I made the call. I offered to pray. I spoke up about the hope I have. And the timing was perfect.*
- God knows what he is doing. He knows where he is at work. We are just being invited to participate with him.
- Make the all. Send the text. Speak up. Make the invitation.

### **B. Always do a little more than you are comfortable with.**

- If you desire spiritual growth. If you want to make a change with the people around you. Do not stay in your comfort zone. Your next level of effectiveness and growth will happen outside your current level of experience and comfort.
- When you read the record of Paul's life, it is a litany of experiences that kept pushing the bounds of what he had already experienced.

### **C. Don't own the results.**

- If you judge how to develop your practice by the results, you eventually be disappointed.
- If God is leading you to what's next, he is responsible for the results.
- You will often not know the full ramifications of helping someone, being generous, saying that word, praying for them, making that invitation.

- Don't be discouraged by apparent lack of results.

### III. Repeat

- Make it a regular, if not daily, habit.
- Do it over and over.
- We grow in obedience and faith as we practice.
- If you are disobedient and don't do what you should have, don't fret. Simply own it, repent and go at it again.
- Your "what's next?" will not be the same as the person next to you.
- If you remember, we said a couple of weeks ago that you are the only person who is where you are at. That means that you are uniquely positioned for your "what's next?"
- **WE MOVE IN GOD'S DIRECTION WHEN WE ASK HIM "WHAT'S NEXT?"**
- Here's my challenge.
- Consider who you come in contact with that doesn't know Jesus.
- Consider your hobbies, your practices, your interests.
- Ask God, "What's next?" in the midst of those things.
- Pray specifically. Pay attention and don't overthink it.
- Then do it! Don't delay. Go a little past where you are currently comfortable. Let God take care of the results.
- Most of the time it is small things. Small steps of obedience. Occasionally it means something larger. Whatever he sets in front of you, run with it.
- A young man met with a very successful business man that was retiring and he was taking over for. He asked him.
- "What have been the keys to your success?"
- The older gentleman looked at him and replied, "Young man, I can sum it up in two words: Good decisions."
- To that the young man responded, "I thank you immensely for that advice, sir, but how does one come to know which are the good decisions?"
- "One word, young man," replied the sage. "Experience."
- "That's all well and good," said the younger, "but how does one get experience?"
- "Two words," said the elder. "Bad decisions."
- When we ask God "What's next?" and do it, we move in his direction. We won't always get it right. But we will more than we won't. And as we practice, we will become better at hearing him, at trusting him, at taking risks, and when we look back, we will be amazed at what has happened.
- Almost every story of every Christ-follower who changed the lives of many, leading them to Jesus, follows the same path. Mother Teresa who worked with the poor in India. George Mueller who worked with orphans throughout Europe. Those in our own church who feed the hungry and help those in need.
- It simply comes from asking God, "What's next?"
- What is your "What's next"? When we do this and obey, we will, individually and collectively, more in God's direction