

The Way of a Servant (Outward Disciplines)

John 13:1-17

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We're considering ways that God has given for us to grow in grace, to be formed and conformed and transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Salvation is the transformation of all of life by God's Spirit. God's goal is to make a new world. As God's new people, God allows us to be in on that. Some of the means of spiritual formation are called spiritual disciplines.

We're using Richard Foster's outline from his book *Celebration of Discipline*, which was published forty years ago. Last week I introduced the spiritual disciplines related to the inner life: Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, and Study. Today we'll look at disciplines that relate to outward expression: Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, and Service.

We need to remind ourselves again that these disciplines aren't attempts to earn God's favor and they're not legalistic rules that bind us. When we're already convinced of God's favor shown to us in Jesus Christ and God's commitment to us seen in the covenant he makes with us, we use these disciplines as ways to deepen our experience of God's grace and our commitment to Christ. God gives us ways to grow as disciples and to express our discipleship in everyday living.

Steve Harper suggests this prayer: "Lord, what would You have me to be doing at this time in my life to grow in Your grace?" (*Embrace the Spirit* 144).

This puts the focus on *the Lord* as the center of our life. It reminds us that God gives *us* something to do. It highlights the dynamic, growing aspect of life in Christ—"at this time in my life to grow." And it helps us recall that growth is not all up to us. It's growth *in grace*. We depend on God's mercy, love, and power in all our practices of discipline. Grace is the basis for our relationship with God, and growing in grace is how that relationship is strengthened, sustained, and developed. "The disciplined person is the person who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done" (Foster 99).

But we don't have to do it all at once. God starts where we are. God accepts any commitment we give. He begins with that and then leads us higher and deeper. And, God's acceptance of us isn't based on how well we practice spiritual disciplines. They help us grow in our awareness of God's acceptance and make us more effective in living as God's people, but God's love is always unconditional. The disciplines are ways of receiving and sharing that love more fully.

Our families need to hear us say often that we love them. They need to experience repeated expressions of that love in a variety of ways, in various situations. That helps them know that our love is constant and dependable—feeble as it may be.

God loves us—and God's love isn't feeble. Spiritual disciplines are ways for us to hear God tell us that he loves us again and again. They're opportunities to experience God's love in many ways, to share that love with each other, and to love God in return.

Simplicity

The first of the outward disciplines is *Simplicity*. Simplicity is a transition from inward to outward because it's an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. Simplicity is freedom from duplicity or being double-minded (James 1:8). It begins with inward focus and unity. It's centered in Christ. In simplicity we live *from* the center, not *at* the center. The goal of simplicity is whole-hearted devotion and single-minded commitment to God.

Jesus said to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, then everything necessary will be given. When we live in right relationship with God as people of God's kingdom, God provides all that we really need. When God becomes our heart's desire, all our other desires are purified. When we love God with all our heart, we can love others more purely and freely. When our ultimate loyalty is to Jesus as Lord, all our other loyalties take their proper place. When God is our priority, he guides how we set our other priorities. This is the heart of simplicity.

Tennis pro Vic Braden says beginners come to a match with a dozen complicated strategies. Intermediates come with six. At the height of his

career Bjorn Borg had only two: "I hit deep in the middle and sometimes go cross-court" (James Tonkovich, *Leadership Journal* no date).

As we seek, in Christ, to simplify our lives we find the inward reality of freedom from anxiety because we know God is our source, all we have is a gift from God, and it's all available to God to use as he chooses.

The inward reality of simplicity results in the outward expressions of simple speech and simple lifestyle. Our speech becomes more truthful and honest—letting our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no." We speak the truth in love.

Our lifestyle is also simplified. We're set free from the need to grasp and accumulate. The lust for status and position fades. We discover that we can be rich in few wants rather than in many possessions.

Solitude

Solitude is another inward reality with outward results. Solitude isn't loneliness; it's the answer to loneliness. Where loneliness is inner emptiness, solitude is inner fulfillment.

Henri Nouwen says that one of the major movements of spiritual life is the movement from loneliness to solitude. When we develop this solitude of heart we're no longer pulled apart by the various appeals of the surrounding world. We become able to perceive and understand the world from a quiet inner center. We respond to the outer world with love instead of reacting with anxiety (*Reaching Out* 34).

Solitude as a spiritual discipline cultivates the quietness of mind and heart that gives God room to dwell in us and work in us. Sometimes we need to get away from people to practice solitude, but we can know inner solitude when we're with people. Earlier writers described this as a "chapel" or "sanctuary" in our heart where we continually seek God's face and worship him.

Lord prepare me
To be a sanctuary
Pure and holy, tried and true
With thanksgiving

I'll be a living
Sanctuary for you
(John W. Thompson and Randy
Scruggs. ©1982 Whole Armour)

From this still center flow compassion, sensitivity, and “words fitly spoken.”

Silence is closely connected with solitude because it always involves listening—to God and to each other. We’re often uncomfortable with silence. But if we can get quiet in God’s presence we’ll hear from him and if we can maintain this inner stillness we’ll learn when to speak and when to keep quiet.

We can practice solitude by taking advantage of solitary times: reading, praying, listening; finding a quiet place; letting our words be few and full—that is, having something to say when we speak; speaking plainly.

Foster says the fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others and a new freedom to be with people. How many times are we with people but our mind and attention are somewhere else? Solitude enables us to be truly present when we’re with people. When we really give people our attention and really listen to them, it blesses them; it shows them that they’re valued.

Submission and Service

All of these disciplines interrelate. They depend on each other and support each other. *Submission* and *Service* are especially close.

Submission gives us the freedom to lay down the terrible burden of always having to get our own way. In the Bible, submission primarily deals our spirit or attitude in relating to people. It’s an inner attitude of mutual subordination. Ephesians 5:21 says, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Not only our commitment to Jesus, but the example of Jesus is our reason for submission. Foster says, “Jesus not only died a cross-death, he lived a cross-life.” He chose the way of the cross, the way of a suffering servant, for his life and ministry (*Celebration* 115).

And Jesus says, "If you want to be my disciple, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Denying ourselves doesn't mean putting ourselves down and devaluing ourselves. It means surrendering to God and being free to value others.

That's the basis for service. Again, Jesus is our example. As the *cross* is the sign of submission, the *towel* is the sign of service. John 13 records some of Jesus' actions on the night before his death. Jesus knew the time—it was nearly time for him to go to the Father. He loved his disciples to the very end and showed them his love. Jesus knew his authority and power. He knew who he was, he knew where he had come from and where he was going.

Knowing all this, Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet. Jesus, the Lord, the Master, the Teacher, did the slave's task. Jesus, in very nature God, emptied himself, humbled himself and became a slave (Philippians 2:6-8).

A man named Al Webster devoted himself to using computer technology to help people. He developed software and programs that preserved Cherokee and other Native American languages. You've probably heard this story before. Greg Tolle went to college with Al and wrote about him in one of his books of illustrations.

Al saw computers and other technologies as tools for ministry. And he was eager to help anyone use these gifts to proclaim God's love. But to him, computers were only tools. Love was what mattered most. Not just talking about love—demonstrating love with action, living it.

One day Al was visiting a teacher at a Native American school. He showed her the software he had developed. She told him it'd be wonderful if she had the program, but her school couldn't afford it. "We don't even have a computer," she said. Al stood quietly for a moment. Then he handed the teacher his Macintosh Power Book, and told her he'd like to give it to her. She and her students were thrilled. When someone asked why he had given his computer away, he explained, "They needed it more than I did," as though giving away his prized possessions was no big deal.

Greg says that another time a homeless Cherokee man stopped in Al's church and interrupted a men's meeting. The group helped the homeless man and then he left. At some point, they noticed that Al was no longer there. They thought he'd gone home, but as they were leaving, they found him outside the church with the homeless man. Al was softly singing the Lord's Prayer in Cherokee with the man—feeding his spirit as well as his body (*UM Review Contact*, Sept. 19, 1997; Gregory L. Tolle, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: Series IV, Cycle A* 69-72).

God invites us to Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, and Service. May our response be something like this: "Lord, what in the world do you want to do through me today?"