

The Tools of the Master

Welcome back to Walking with Purpose! Last week we did some tough self-examination to find tumors of unholiness for our Great Physician to dig out! Let's take a few minutes to talk about the homework, and how it was an x-ray to what's inside us!



Fellowship

1. However you feel most comfortable, talk about the 3 areas you examined this past week: actions, words and thoughts. What areas did God show you need some work?



Discipleship

I don't know about you, but I don't like rain. When the weather is gray and gloomy, I feel that way inside. Almost everyone would rather have sunshine than showers. But just imagine what our world would be like if it never rained again. There is a place in Northern Chile like that! Rain never falls between the great Andes mountain range and the Pacific Ocean. Morning after morning the sun brilliantly rises over the tall mountains to the east; each noon it shines brightly down from overhead; and evening brings a picturesque sunset. Although storms are often seen raging high in the mountains, and heavy fog banks are observed far out over the sea, the sun continues to shine on this favored and protected strip of land. One would *imagine* this area to be an earthly paradise; but it's not. Instead, it's a sterile and desolate desert! There are no streams of water, and nothing growing.

You know, we're like that too! Often we long for lives of total sunshine and happiness. If only we could be rid of our burdensome responsibilities...or that one person who makes life so difficult! But, like this sunny, unfertile part of Chile, life *without* its burdens and trials would not be creative, productive, or challenging. We need sunshine *and* showers.

Have you ever noticed the similarity between the words "discipleship" and "discipline"? God's goal for His disciples is to make you like His Son! There is no "plan B"! From the time our Creator made man in His image in the Garden, His goal has been to see Himself reflected in us! It's not just a matter of "imitation" but one of "habitation". I'd like us to look at 2 passages today: the first is found in Galatians 5:22-25.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

I love to picture myself **having** all these qualities, but that whole process of “crucifying the sinful nature” doesn’t sound like a lot of fun! Turn with me now to Hebrews 12, verses 4-11 and let’s read it together:

“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

The word “discipline” can mean “punishment, or instruction”, but it also means “**training** that corrects, molds, or **perfects** the mental faculties or moral character.” And God has many different **tools** to instill discipline in His disciples. *Trials, troubles, and temptations* are a few we’ll look at today...and I pray **you’ll be encouraged** that there’s a great purpose behind it all!

First of all...let’s look at **trials**. I have a feeling you’re well-acquainted with this one. A “trial” is a difficult situation **designed by God** to draw us closer to Him.

Pastor Byron Yawn points out that for most Christians, even the **suggestion** that there could be **value** in our suffering is viewed as uncaring and insensitive. We have been conditioned by our culture to believe the opposite. We exalt **comfort** and view **personal happiness** as the end of all things...and it’s blurred our perspective. There is no place for **pain** in **our version** of Christianity. Let me repeat that: We exalt comfort...there is no place for **pain** in **our version** of Christianity.

Because of this distorted perception, we rarely stop to search for the “hand of God” in the midst of our trial. Seeking to understand God’s purposes in our pain is all but foreign. As a result, embracing pain’s **role** in our sanctification is usually the farthest thing from our minds. In fact, most people count it all joy when they **escape** trials. James said to count it all joy when we have them! We need to come to grips with a significant truth: *God’s will* is not always **our happiness**, but **His glory**. The two may, *or may not*, be directly related.

Warren Wiersbe writes, "Our **values** determine our **evaluations**. If we value comfort more than character, then trials will upset us. If we value the material and physical more than the spiritual, we will not be able to count it all joy! If we live only for the present and forget about the future, the trials will make us bitter, not better."

Next let's look at "troubles". Troubles are also unpleasant, but are **usually** consequences of our own sinful choices. Yet even though they are partly self-inflicted, they can also be a useful tool in the hand of our Master to make us more like Him.

The mother eagle teaches her little ones to fly by making their nest *so uncomfortable* that they are forced to leave it and commit themselves to the unknown world. Does that sound familiar? So, too, God will stir up our comfortable nests. He pushes us over the edge of them, and we are forced to use our spiritual wings of faith. Interpret your trials and troubles in *this* light, and see if you begin to get a glimpse of their meaning.

You know, Paul had **his share** of trials and problems. At one point, he even listed them for us! He was hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and was given over to death for Jesus' sake. He was under such incredible pressure he despaired even of life! He was beaten, imprisoned and worked hard. He had sleepless nights and hunger, was flogged and exposed to death again and again. Five times he received the maximum lashes allowed by law, 3 times was beaten with rods, was stoned, shipwrecked 3 times, spent a night and day on the open sea and was constantly in danger. He was cold, naked, felt an incredible burden for those he ministered to...and yes, even felt moral weakness.

Wow! My problems just seemed to shrink in size...how about yours?? But what amazes me is that we never hear him questioning the **love** of God when he was allowed to go through these things. In other words, the presence of problems does **not** equal the absence of God or His love! Did you catch that? The presence of problems does **not** equal the absence of God or His love! It doesn't even mean that you are **necessarily** out of His will! If Jesus Himself was made perfect through obedience and difficulties, why should we be exempt?

Yes, we live in an age of instant oatmeal and instant mashed potatoes...but there is no such thing as instant holiness or maturity. God will develop the fruit of the Spirit in us by putting us in situations where we are tempted to have the exact opposite qualities! He will teach me to love by putting me with people who are hard to love; when I pray for patience He will give me lots of opportunities to grow it! And joy? He'll teach me to be joyful when naturally it would be the furthest thing from my mind!

Lastly, let's take a look at "temptation". Temptations are designed by the **Devil** to draw us **away** from God and actually **destroy** our character! Yet the Bible says that God cannot be tempted by evil nor does He tempt anyone. Yes, we live in a fallen world, and for the time being, He allows evil to occur...**with the promise** that He will use it together for good if we love Him. We will be tempted! Yet there is no situation in life you can't learn and grow from **if** you'll respond the way He wants you to.

Now, *I love cake*...probably *too much*! But think about the individual ingredients and it's pretty unappetizing: raw eggs, flour, oil, sugar, baking soda, and salt. I can't imagine eating raw eggs by themselves, or a half cup of oil...and I've never fought a craving for plain flour! Yet combine those otherwise unsavory ingredients together, mix them up in the proper measurements...and you've got something delicious! No one I know would *choose* the crippling disease of cancer, or the death of a loved one. Who would ask for the wayward years *before* the prodigal son returns home? Yet in the loving and skillful hands of the Master, even the worst things this world has to offer can be used for His glory.

George Mueller spoke adamantly of the obstacles in the Christian's life: "Trials, obstacles, difficulties, and sometimes defeats, *are the very food of faith*"

Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote about the making of a pearl: "The most extraordinary thing about the oyster is this: irritations get into his shell. He does not like them. But when he cannot get rid of them, he *uses* the irritations to do the loveliest thing an oyster ever has a chance to do. If there are irritations in our lives today, there is only one prescription: make a pearl.

Billy Graham had a friend, who during a time of great financial stress lost his job, a fortune, a wife and a home. But he tenaciously held to his faith – the only thing he had left. One day he stopped to watch some men doing stonework on a huge church. One of them was chiseling a triangular piece of stone. "What are you going to do with that?" asked the friend? The workman said, "See that little opening way up there near the spire? Well, I'm shaping this down here, so it will fit in up there." Tears filled his eyes as he walked away, for God had spoken through the workman to explain his own painful molding process: "I'm shaping you down here, so you'll fit in up there."

The highest school of learning in God's arsenal is the Graduate School of Affliction and Suffering. All of God's greatest workers had to attend this graduate school. If you're a chosen vessel and have a work to do for God...you *will* attend and learn in God's schools. Many of the most important lessons of life come by trials and tribulation.

A little girl walking in a garden noticed a particularly beautiful flower. She admired its beauty and enjoyed its fragrance. "It's so pretty!" she exclaimed. As she gazed on it, her eyes followed the stem down to the soil in which it grew. "This flower is too pretty to be planted in such dirt!" she cried. So she pulled it up by its roots and ran to the water faucet to wash away the soil. It wasn't long until the flower wilted and died.

When the gardener saw what the little girl had done, he exclaimed, "You have destroyed my finest plant!"

"I'm sorry, but I didn't like it in that dirt," she said. The gardener replied, "I chose that spot and mixed the soil because I knew that *only there* could it grow to be a beautiful flower."

Often we murmur because of the circumstances into which God has sovereignly placed us. We fail to realize that He is *using* our pressures, trials, and difficulties to bring us to a

new degree of spiritual beauty. Contentment comes when we accept what God is doing and thank Him for it. Yes...at times we *can choose* to extricate ourselves from the growth process...to the detriment of our spiritual maturity. By choosing our own way rather than God's, infidelity over conflict resolution, refusing to love the unlovely, harboring unforgiveness, giving free reign to our frustration rather than controlling our tongues...all of these are examples of ***running away*** from the tough process of discipline. It's extricating ourselves from the soil God has mixed in order for us to reach our ***maximum potential*** for fruit-bearing.

As a minister was addressing a group of men, he took a large piece of paper and made a black dot in the center. Then he held the paper up before the group and asked them what they saw. One person quickly replied, "I see a black mark." "Right," the preacher replied. "What else do you see?" Complete silence prevailed. "Don't you see ***anything*** other than the dot?" he asked. A chorus of no's came from the audience. "I'm really surprised," the speaker commented. "You have completely overlooked the most important thing of all: the sheet of paper." Then he made the application: in life we are often distracted by small, dot-like disappointments or painful experiences, and we are prone to forget the "bigger picture" of what God is doing. It's like the advice that says, "Keep your eye on the donut, and not upon the hole!"

After all, when God wants to make a mushroom He takes only 6 hours...yet when He wants to grow an oak tree He takes 60 years. Hmmmm...a fungus or an oak tree? Which would you rather be?



Ministry

2. Read 2 Corinthians 3:18. What is God doing right now in your life to transform you into His likeness?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-11. How can you relate to the problems of the early Christians?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. How are our problems described? How are our feelings about them not necessarily in accordance with their usefulness?
5. Re-read Hebrews 12:4-11. How can you relate to verse 11?

How does the Father's discipline resemble that of an earthly father? How does it differ?

6. Read James 1:2-4. How have you seen your perseverance grow through trials?



Evangelism

7. Talk about next week's Celebration Week and who you would love to see get involved and benefit from Walking in Purpose!



Worship

8. Rejoice in how God deals with your tears! Read the following:

Psalm 56:8

Psalm 126:5

Isaiah 25:8

9. Close in prayer for each other and your individual trials and growth.