

We just finished seven weeks of messages where we looked at the benedictions or blessings of the Bible. We looked at these as prayers offered up to God **for** us but also spoken **to** us. Fundamentally, these blessings are expressions of what God actually wants for us; things like joy, encouragement, peace, love, holiness and being equipped for every good work, all of which come through our relationship with Jesus. As God works in us, these are things he produces. This is what Jesus meant when he stated in what was the memory verse for Summer XP last week, *"I have come that they may have life. I want them to have it in the fullest possible way"* (John 10:10).

Today we're taking a right turn and moving from what God wants for us in terms of blessing to **how** this actually takes place in our lives. How can you actually experience, "life in the fullest possible way?" How can you grow into the kind of person who experiences and manifest these blessings in your everyday life?

One of the most basic things to understand is we can't really transform ourselves, but we **can** make choices to create conditions where growth will take place. It's like Paul said in Romans 12:2, *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* It is clear God does the transforming, but we can make choices, which allow Him to do his work in us. Spiritual growth is not automatic. It's a choice. You can choose to mature and grow, or you can choose not to.

Jesus emphasized this as he was with his disciples in the Upper Room on the night of his betrayal. He said to them, *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me"* (John 15:4). Again, we can't produce the fruit ourselves, but we can choose to abide in Him, so He can bear fruit in and through us. It's like we can't supply the water needed for growth, but we can choose to stay connected to the source. And the source is God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And, again, that requires choices, and choices can be hard, especially when they involve change. Most of us default to keeping the status quo, even if it's unhealthy.

And so, in this next series of messages, we want to explore what kinds of practices will put us in a position where He can do the work of spiritual transformation.

The main thing I want you to see today is spiritual growth requires more than just effort on our part; it also requires training. Growth requires you to lead and train yourself. Years ago, I decided to run a marathon. I knew I could go about it in one of two

ways. One way would be to just show up on the day of the race and try really hard to run the 26.2 miles. There are people who try that, and it usually doesn't go very well. But there's no lack of effort there. The problem is they didn't train. The other way to approach is to start training months in advance. The idea behind training is if you make the hard choices and put in the time and effort beforehand, the actual race will be easier. It will still require effort come race day, but it will be a far more productive effort. That's what I chose to do, and I'm glad I did. In the same way, when it comes to spiritual transformation, training is far more productive than just trying.

### **We Should View our Life and Ministry Like an Athlete in Training**

Take the apostle Paul for example. We think of Him as super-human, with a determination and commitment few have, but if you read his letters, it's clear he was just an ordinary man. He was often full of worries, fears, and confusion. He said there were times he *"despaired even of life."* He didn't want to go on. Paul's life ended in seeming defeat, having been executed by Nero.

However, we also know Paul was a man transformed by God. At one time he'd been a devout Jew, a Pharisee of Pharisees, and a persecutor of Christ followers. But after meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road, a process of transformation began, and Paul grew to become a changed man who made an enormous impact on the Western world for the Gospel. So now we name our dogs after Nero and our sons after Paul!

The question is how did that process actually take place? What was the secret of Paul's growth and transformation? How did he come to live in the fullest possible way? The secret is he viewed life like an athlete in training. Read what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

**Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.**

The image behind this is the Greek games. We live in a culture obsessed with sports. The Greeks weren't much different. We measure time backward and forward by the birth of Jesus, but the Greeks measured time from the start of the Olympic Games. The Olympics were held in Athens every four years, but every two years the Isthmian Games were held in Corinth. The streets of the city and the gymnasia bulged with athletes training for this event. They were required to swear by Zeus to follow ten months of strict training beforehand. Women normally weren't allowed to attend because the men were often naked when they competed, but men would flock to the Games. The noblest citizens would be chosen as judges. They'd be dressed in purple, sit on thrones, start the contest, and judge the winners. One of their jobs was to make sure no one broke the rules. There were usually five events. The footrace would come first, and then later the boxing competition.

It's interesting that Jews who lived in Greece would have nothing to do with the Games. They couldn't handle the nudity, and they suspected the athletes of immorality. But Paul, a former Jewish Rabbi, seemed to have an appreciation of the athletes and all it took for them to compete. He was impressed with their dedication and discipline. They'd given up everything to have the winners' wreath placed on their head.

Paul is saying, "That's the perspective I bring to the Christian life. I see myself like an athlete training for the games, competing for the prize." Think of the hours upon hours an Olympic marathon runner spends running trails and streets all alone. Think of a boxer in a hot and stinking gym, glistening with sweat and unable to lift his arms above his waist. Paul is saying, "That's me. That's the perspective I bring. I'm as passionate, committed and self-disciplined as that."

The Greek word translated "compete" is *agonizomai*, from which we get our word agony. This self-discipline can be agonizing. It governs what you eat, how much you sleep, and what you do in your spare time. In his first letter to Timothy, he told him to "**train yourself to be godly**" (1 Timothy 4:7). That word "train" is the Greek verb *gumnazo*, from which we get our word "gymnasium." Paul was telling Timothy, "If you want to grow in godliness, get into the gym and train!"

Here he even goes so far as to state; "***I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave...***" Rather than pampering himself, he refuses to let his bodily desires control him. It's not that the body is bad; it's just that bodily desires need to be controlled and placed into the service of Christ. In Romans 6:12–13 he put it like this, "***...do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as***

***instruments of righteousness to God.***" It's in that sense that we "***strike a blow***" to our body.

So you have to manage your desires. You're not a victim of every thought or inclination, but rather you lead your self. When you lead yourself, you give up privileges you might otherwise enjoy. You take on responsibilities you might otherwise ignore. You do those things because you're pursuing something better.

I also can't help but think of Hebrews 12:1 where the writer said, "***Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...***" Notice it's not just sin that entangles us, but "every encumbrance." There are things we have the freedom in Christ to do or not do, but that's not the controlling factor. The athlete denies himself many lawful pleasures. In the same way, in running this race, we must avoid not just outright sin, but anything that hinders spiritual growth. And, of course, all of that requires self-control, which you may recall is one of the fruits of the Spirit.

And what keeps us going? What motivates us? Simply put, it's to win the prize. He wrote, "run in such a way as to get the prize." We're striving for so much more than an Olympic athlete strives for. In Paul's day, after all of that effort, the winner received a crown made of pine leaves. When I heard this, I thought, "Really? Pine leaves?" But it gets better. After a while, they thought a crown of pine leaves wasn't enough, so they changed it to, (Are you ready for this?) a crown of celery! That's right—celery! Ten months of hard training and you get celery!

Notice the contrast. Athletes in the Games trained extensively even though their reward was pine leaves or celery, which were perishable. Something better is waiting for us. We covet a crown that's imperishable and lasts forever. We don't run aimlessly or beat the air; we do all of this purposefully so as not to be disqualified for the prize. Paul isn't talking about our salvation, but rather a time in the future when our life and work will be evaluated and rewarded (see 1 Corinthians 3:12–15).

So let me just ask you, is that your perspective and approach to your life? Is that your approach to your spiritual formation? Do you take it as seriously and with the dedication of an athlete in training so that you will win the prize?

It strikes me there's a tension in the Christian life. On the one hand, we trust God to complete the work he's begun in us, and we rest in that. On the other hand, we strive for growth as Paul described here.

Athletes understand this better than anyone. Take a baseball player. All great hitters know you have to relax at the plate. You mustn't grip the bat too hard; you have to keep it loose. Watch

how their fingers move off the bat. The worst thing is to freeze as you wait for the ball. But while they rest those muscles, they're also torqued to exert tremendous force in their swing. So there's both rest and tremendous effort. In the same way, we rest in the faithfulness of God and his promise to work in us now and to finish that work later, but we also strive to live for him and serve him, so we cross the finish line well.

## **Our Training Must Include a Commitment to Spiritual Practices**

I want to get even more practical here. I want to take a closer look at how Paul lived this out. A closer look reveals Paul was committed to training through several spiritual practices or disciplines.

One of those practices was what we might call **solitude**. Solitude is a place in time we set apart for God alone, a time we withdraw from the noise of interpersonal interactions to be with him.

Paul shared part of his autobiography with the Galatians and described a period of time after becoming a follower of Jesus like this: *I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.* (Galatians 1:16b–17). Paul doesn't tell us what he did in Arabia, but as far as we can tell it was a time of being alone, of quieting himself and listening to God.

Usually, solitude goes along with silence. This is a very difficult thing to practice in an age where we're always connected. But it's a vital practice. It's a place in time set apart for God, a time we unplug and withdraw from people, noise, technology, and busyness. Before Jesus began his public ministry, he spent 40 days in the desert alone, and there's no doubt this time strengthened him for the temptations, which he experienced there.

Another practice is that of **reading and meditating on the word of God**. Many believe, out there in Arabia, Paul went through the Old Testament to find how his discovery about Jesus related to the Scriptures he'd trusted ever since he was a child. As a Pharisee, he'd been convinced Jesus was a fraud. Now he knew better, but he needed to see this in God's word. So into Arabia he went, the scrolls of the Old Testament tucked under his arm, and he found Jesus on every page. That's why, throughout his letters, Paul referenced Old Testament scripture. Three of his favorite words were *"It is written."*

The spiritual practice of reading and meditating on God's word is crucial to spiritual formation, and it requires saying no to other things, which contend for our time and interest. Peter wrote, *"like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation"* (1 Peter 2:2).

We don't immerse ourselves in Scripture simply to gain knowledge or to prove to others how much we know, but to hear from God. Bonhoeffer wrote,

The Word of Scripture should never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long, just like the words of someone you love. And just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart... Do not ask, 'How shall I pass this on?' but 'What does it say to me?' Then ponder this word long in your heart until it has gone right into you and taken possession of you.

A third practice is **prayer**. Paul's letters are peppered with prayer. He was always telling people how often he prayed for them. Sometimes he just broke out in prayer right in the middle of a letter! On one occasion he even said to *"pray without ceasing."* How's that even possible? Right now, I'm speaking to you, so how can I be praying at the same time? This forces us to redefine prayer. It's more than just talking to God, asking him for things, although that's part of it. But there's also a sense that prayer is simply communion with God, and living in his presence. Prayer is like breathing in and out, moment by moment looking up in our hearts to him. It's like a married couple who have loved each other for many years; words are important, but they're not everything. Two souls can converse with a single loving glance. One thing I know for sure, developing a robust prayer life takes discipline. It takes enduring hard days and months of dryness and feeling like there's no one on the other end.

Then there is the spiritual practice of **community**. By this I mean intentionally being in close relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ. Think of all the "one anothers" Paul exhorts us to in his letters:

- Be devoted to one another in love (Romans 12:10)
- Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:10)
- Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16)
- Accept one another (Romans 15:7)
- Greet one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16)
- Serve one another humbly in love (Galatians 5:13)
- Carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- Forgive each other (Ephesians 4:32)
- Submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21)
- Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)

So we're not just talking here about going to church, although that's an important part of this discipline. We're talking about intentional Christian community. We talk about this a lot around here. Being part of a community of believers is being part of a family. Can you imagine a family where you only saw each other a couple of times a month, and when you did see

each other, you smiled and said hello but never really interacted at a deep level? Why then do we accept this as our experience of Christian community?

Let me mention one more spiritual practice in Paul's life, and it almost goes without saying. It's that of **service**. In fact, in the context of 1 Corinthians 9, that's what Paul was talking about before he gets to verses 24–27. Paul, of course, was called as an apostle, a sent one, in order to win people to Christ.

Throughout chapters 8 and 9 he's made it clear he'll give up any right or level of comfort to win someone to Christ. He was willing to give up the freedom he had to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Paul knew there were people whose faith could be damaged by that. So he said if that's the case He won't do it. I don't think Paul had a problem with drinking wine, but there might be others who came out of a lifestyle of drunkenness who did. Paul said, if that were the case, I wouldn't drink around them. In chapter 9 he said as an apostle he has the right to financial support. But he also knew there'd be some in Corinth who might question his motives. So he said, "I'll support myself by making tents so no one will question my motives" He even went so far as to say though he's free from all men he becomes a slave to all.

We're not all called to serve as an apostle like Paul did, but we're all called to serve. We're all called to offer up our time, talents, and treasure to him. Paul pictured the church as the body of Christ, with each member of the body playing a crucial role. You have a part to play in the body of Christ; you have a special gift to employ. And, yes, like Paul, you must bring to your service

something beyond convenience; an attitude that says, "I'll give up any and all rights to serve my Master well."

This is not an exhaustive list of spiritual practices needed for spiritual formation and growth, but it's a start, and we'll be diving deeper into these practices in the coming weeks. But I hope you can see spiritual growth and formation will require that we have the same perspective and practice the same disciplines as Paul.

In C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, Uncle Screwtape, representing the Devil, reproaches an apprentice demon, named Wormwood, for permitting his "patient" to become a Christian. Nevertheless, he said, "There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the enemy's camp and are now with us. All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favor." Screwtape had deep understanding of how we grow. If a convert's habits remain the same, they will realize little of the life in Christ.

And I would just ask you to take some time this week and examine your habits. Examine your habits by asking yourself, "Do I view my life in Christ with the same perspective as an athlete in training, or have I become lazy and flabby as a follower of Him? Have I placed myself under a rigorous discipline of training, which includes habits of solitude, scripture, prayer, community, and service, or do I see those things as optional?"

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*