



Core Seminar How to Grow Class 13: Perseverance

Welcome

Welcome to the final class of *How to Grow*. It's encouraging to see many here who have been attending these classes consistently over the last few months. We've spent the past 12 weeks thinking about the various disciplines we ought to cultivate in order to help us grow in our Christian walk.

Introduction

Godliness is the goal of all the spiritual disciplines. They are means to help us grow in holiness, as we actively practice them in our lives. One thing we've learnt from these classes is that we don't become more like Christ by remaining passive. Our sanctification is not something that we can leave to God to do all the work. The Bible says we are to be diligent in pursuing holiness with God's help. In the words of 1 Timothy 4:7, we are to, train ourselves for godliness.

As those who have been redeemed by Christ, all of us will desire to grow in godliness. This is because God has given us new hearts that seek to obey Him and to live for His glory. We would also agree that the practice of the various spiritual disciplines is critical if sanctification is to take place. And here is where the challenge lies: How can we persevere in our spiritual disciplines in the face of life's many demands?

We all lead busy lives. Whether we are married or single; studying, working or taking care of the home; our lives are filled with activity. Our daily schedules often feel as though they're about to burst at the seams. Then we arrive here on Sunday morning only to be confronted with a number of spiritual disciplines that we ought to cultivate. All this can be daunting, perhaps even discouraging. It can make the Christian life seem like a laundry list of things that we have to do.

We can be tempted to feel as though we need to practice the disciplines in order to meet a certain standard of "performance" in our Christian walk. How can we tell whether we've adopted such a "performance-based" approach to the Christian life? A tell-tale sign is when our joy and assurance seem to be more dependent on how well we practice the spiritual disciplines, than on the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Did I describe you? Are you resting in your spiritual disciplines? Or in Christ's finished work? Well, take heart. All of us are prone to this. How often we forget the basic truth that we have been saved by ***grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone***. God's acceptance of us is not based on how well we perform in the Christian life. No, we have already been reconciled to God and have already become His children through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The spiritual disciplines are not meant to be a form of bondage to shackle us. It is crucial, therefore, to realize that Christ has purchased our freedom by His death on the cross. He has freed us from the bondage of sin, as well as from the bondage of trying to earn our salvation through works.

Galatians 5:1

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Instead of regarding the spiritual disciplines as burdensome chores, we should see them as means of grace that God has kindly given to us for our spiritual good and His glory. We do not practice the spiritual disciplines in order to earn merit. We practice them out of love and gratitude for what God has already done for us in Christ.

At the same time, it is also helpful to consider how a godly person is usually a busy person as well. The godly person is devoted to God and to people, and this leads to a full life and a packed schedule. Consider some examples from the Bible.

Read Mark's Gospel sometime and notice how often the word "immediately" describes the transition from one event in Jesus' life to the next. We read of Him sometimes ministering all day and until after dark. Then he gets up before dawn to pray and travel to the next ministry venue.

The apostle Paul is another example. He speaks of being "poured out like a drink offering" and of "being spent" for the sake of others. If we were to compare his life to the so-called "balanced life" envisioned by many Christians today, he might be considered an unhealthy workaholic who neglected his body. Yet, as Don Whitney writes, "Scripture confirms what observation perceives: laziness never leads to godliness."¹

All this is to say that *the spiritual disciplines have always been practices which can make a **godly** person out of a **busy** person*. They aren't just intended for people with lots of time on their hands. It's foolish of us to put them off until we think we'll be less busy. No matter how busy we are, the spiritual disciplines are necessary for our growth in grace and holiness.

So how do we persevere in the spiritual disciplines? We'll be looking at the role of the Holy Spirit, the role of fellowship, and the role of struggle in helping us to persevere.

I. The Role of the Holy Spirit

All of us who have trusted in Christ for salvation have received the Holy Spirit. He dwells in us and is the Author of our holiness. *Wherever the Holy Spirit dwells, his presence creates a **hunger for holiness***. His office is to magnify Christ, and it is He who regenerates us and gives us a desire for godliness. Apart from the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible for us to please God.

Ephesians 1:13-14 teaches us that we are sealed with the Spirit when we believe in Jesus Christ for salvation.

Ephesians 1:13-14

13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, **14** who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.²

The Holy Spirit is a deposit given to us by God to assure us that He will complete our redemption when Christ returns. The Spirit, therefore, plays a vital role in enabling us to persevere in our Christian walk.

The Holy Spirit leads us in our sanctification. We read this in Romans 8:13-14.

Romans 8:13-14

13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. **14** For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

¹ Whitney, Donald S.

² My emphasis.

From these two verses, we know that God's children are all led by the Holy Spirit. What does the Spirit lead us to do? He leads us in the work of sanctification. With the Spirit's enabling, we are to “put to death the misdeeds of the body”. In other words, the Spirit helps us to grow in holiness.

This truth should encourage us. Sanctification and perseverance in the spiritual disciplines require hard work on our part. But we do not labor alone. God gives us His Spirit to lead and strengthen us. It is the Spirit who enables us to press on in obedience to God.

The Holy Spirit produces within us both the desire as well as the ability to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness.

2 Timothy 1:7

[F]or God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

Therefore, what we are unable to accomplish in the weakness of our flesh, we are able to do so through the Holy Spirit, who supernaturally empowers us to obey God.

Hopefully, you’ve seen this in your own life. In areas where sin once reigned, the Holy Spirit has purified. Where you used to love the things of the world, you can now honestly say that you love and seek the things of God. Yes, we still stumble and fall, but we can be confident that God's Spirit will continue to help us to grow in conformity to Christ. If we are in Him, our final destination is certain.

Romans 8:29-30

29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. **30** And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

If we have trusted in Christ, we know that God has predestined us for glory. This means there will come a time when we shall be completely and perfectly conformed to Christ. The Holy Spirit enables us to persevere as we wait for that day. God, who began a good work in us, will carry it on to completion when Christ returns. As we read earlier in Ephesians, the Holy Spirit who dwells in us is the guarantee that this will be accomplished.

We should be encouraged! God has not left us alone, but has given us His Spirit if we have repented of our sins and believed in the gospel. Let us therefore be strong in the Lord. If we desire to grow in the disciplines, we must continue to pray for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Zechariah 4:6

Then he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.”

QUESTIONS

II. The Role of Fellowship

Christian fellowship also plays a role in our perseverance in the practice of the spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual maturity involves a deepening of our fellowship with other Christians. *God has placed us in a body of believers as a means for our growth, as well as for the growth of others.* Our fellowship is not just with God,

but also with His people. It is impossible to be in fellowship with God without also being in fellowship with His people.

1 John 1:3-4

3 [T]hat which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Some of the spiritual disciplines – such as corporate worship, united prayer, and serving – cannot be practiced without us being in fellowship with other believers. Furthermore, one of God's purposes of fellowship is to supplement the spiritual disciplines and to stimulate our growth in godliness through them.

Our pastor, Mark Dever, has recounted an incident to underscore the importance of joining ourselves with other Christians in a local church. He had friend in the UK who used to come just in time for the sermons at church and duck out during the closing hymn. One day, Mark asked why this was, and his friend responded, “I don’t get as much out of the rest of the service. I’m really just interested in the sermon.” Mark asked, “Have you ever thought of joining the church?” The response wasn’t very encouraging. “Join the church?” his friend asked incredulously, “Why would I want to do that? If I join the church, these people might just slow me down.” Mark replied, “Perhaps you could help them speed up.”

Mark's friend was, in many ways, a mature and godly Christian. He was actively involved in student ministry, gave himself regularly to Scripture and was faithful in the Christian life. Yet, his response reflects a rather selfish view of fellowship.

We should not pursue the spiritual disciplines in a way that causes us to neglect contributing to the lives of other Christians. Instead, we are to pursue the spiritual disciplines in the context of proper biblical fellowship. Christianity isn’t meant to be lived in isolation. We’re not to fly solo. Remember that God has called us to be a *people* who are zealous for good works.

That said, *fellowship should not to be confused with **socializing**.* Although socializing is often both a part of and within the context of fellowship, it is possible to socialize without having fellowship. We can get together with other believers and talk about anything except spiritual matters. Socializing involves the sharing of human and earthly life, while Christian fellowship involves the sharing of spiritual life.

J.I. Packer defines fellowship as, “*a seeking to share in what God has made known of himself to others, as a means to finding strength, refreshment, and instruction for one’s own soul*”.³

The mutual encouragement we enjoy from Christian fellowship can help us to advance in holiness. As we meet up regularly with other believers – whether one-on-one, in a small group, or for corporate worship – we are exhorting one another to grow in godliness. Other Christians can encourage us to persevere in the spiritual disciplines.

Proverbs 27:17

Iron sharpens iron, and one man ***sharpens another***.⁴

³ Packer, J. I.

⁴ My emphasis.

As God's people, we all have a duty to meet together regularly for the purpose of encouraging one another to persevere in our Christian walk.

Hebrews 10:24-25

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

God intends such mutual edification to take place through the fellowship of Christians in a church. We have to be deliberate in our efforts to encourage others. Note how the verse says, “let us *consider* how we may spur one another on”. Mutual encouragement does not just happen on its own. We need to make the effort to get to know other Christians, as well as to open up our lives to them.

One of the biblical images of the church is that of a body, with each believer representing a different part.

Ephesians 4:15-16

15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, **16** from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Each one of us has a role to play in contributing to the proper working of the local church. And as the body grows, each individual Christian is built up as well. As we practice the spiritual disciplines, we help to strengthen the fellowship of believers in the church. Biblical fellowship, in turn, will strengthen our individual practice of the spiritual disciplines.

Without true fellowship, even the Christian who is ardently practicing the spiritual disciplines will not develop in a spiritually balanced way.

Hebrews 3:13

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

When we are outside the spiritual protection that God intends for us to get from fellowship in His church, it is much easier to be deceived by sin.

He is basically saying that if we neglect the local church in the our Christian life we are walking a path or living a life that is dangerously close to that of a non-Christian. It is possible that such a person is self-deceived and we might not be a Christian at all because he doesn’t have the help of the local church.

Puritan Thomas Watson stated that as we “*associate with sanctified persons. They may, by their counsel, prayers and holy example, be a means to make you holy*”.⁵ So we should examine our involvement with the lives of other believers. Consider whether more regular fellowship can help you be more faithful in the spiritual disciplines.

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS WE CAN ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER IN THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES?

⁵ Watson, Thomas

III. The Role of Struggle

A third means by which we can be encouraged to persevere in the spiritual disciplines is through struggle. This might seem rather strange. How does struggle help us in the disciplines?

We must recognize that there is necessarily an element of struggle in the Christian life. As those who belong to Christ, we find ourselves at odds with our old sinful natures, the world and Satan.

Listen to what J.I. Packer says:

So we need to remember that any idea of getting beyond conflict, outward or inward, in our pursuit of holiness in the world is an escapist dream that can only have disillusioning and demoralizing effects on us, as waking experience daily disproves it. What we must realize, rather, is that any real holiness in us will be under hostile fire all the time, just as our Lord's was.⁶

In other words, we should not be misled into thinking that the Christian life is easy. There is no magic formula to follow that will free us from the pain and struggle of combating sin and persevering in obedience. God means for us to be engaged in spiritual warfare, and He strengthens us for this.

Psalm 144:1

Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle;

The idea that practicing the spiritual disciplines and progressing in godliness will be accompanied by struggle is confirmed by the context of 1 Timothy 4:7. After exhorting us to *train ourselves for godliness*, Paul adds in verse 10 that it is *"to this end we toil and strive"*.

The words "labor and strive" tell us that becoming like Christ involves a lot more than merely "letting go and letting God". Paul has no theology that suggests we are to be passive individuals in the pursuit of godliness. We get our English word *agonize* from the term rendered here as *strive*. It's a strong word to use. The sense is that for the sake of godliness, we are to *agonize and labor* until we are weary and spent. Nothing in these verses suggests that this pursuit will be an easy process.

This in no way diminishes the role of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification. There is a balance involved. *Progress in the Christian life comes not by the work of the Holy Spirit alone, nor by our work alone. It comes by our responding to and cooperating with the grace the Holy Spirit initiates and sustains.*

This balance is summarized well by Paul:

Colossians 1:28-29

28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. **29** For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

We need to grasp this balance between our effort and the Spirit's work in us if we are to correctly understand the biblical way of growing in godliness. This keeps us from swinging to either extreme. If we attempt to rely too much on our own strength or sit back and expect Holy Spirit to do all the work, we will not make progress in our sanctification.

⁶ Packer, J. I.

As long as we are in this life, our sinful flesh, the world, and the devil will constantly wage war against us. We face enemies both within and without. Galatians 5:17 speaks of our war against the flesh, that indwelling nature that we have towards sin.

Galatians 5:17

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

There are days when our greatest joy is to spend time in God's Word. There are also times when we enjoy such sweet prayer that we yearn for more uninterrupted communion with God. Yet, there will also be dry times when it is a battle to engage in the spiritual disciplines regularly.

But even though disciplining ourselves is sometimes difficult and involves struggle, self-discipline is not self-punishment. It is an attempt to do what we actually desire in our hearts to do when prompted by the Spirit. As those who have believed in Christ, God has given us new hearts that delight in doing His will.

Lest we be overwhelmed by all this talk of conflict and struggle, we need to remember that Jesus Christ has already won the victory for us. He reigns victorious over Satan, sin and death. We are more than conquerors through Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us! Paul realized this glorious truth, even as he struggled to fight sin.

Romans 7:24-25

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? **25** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

So do not be surprised or discouraged by the struggle of persevering in the spiritual disciplines. Trust that because of Christ's accomplishment in His substitutionary work on the cross, our struggle will not be in vain. The victory that we actually experience over the forces opposing our progress in the disciplines will come, practically speaking, through the practice of the disciplines. In other words, it is through perseverance in the spiritual disciplines that we will most consistently experience true victory.

And let us also look forward to our Lord's return, when our struggle will be over and we shall be like Christ.

1 John 3:2

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

We are not what we ought to be or wish to be, but with our minds fixed on the glorious hope that awaits us in Christ, let us face this struggle with Spirit-ignited resolve.

QUESTIONS

IV. Moving Towards Godliness

A. Practice the Spiritual Disciplines in the Light of Eternity

It is said that Jonathan Edwards used to pray, "Oh God, stamp eternity on my eyeballs!" Imagine how differently we would spend our time and make our choices in life if we saw everything from the perspective of eternity.

1 Timothy 4:7-8

7 Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; **8** for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

To see the spiritual disciplines only from a temporal perspective is shortsighted. Since the weight of eternity – in the words of Puritan Thomas Brooks – hangs upon the thin wire of time, let us use our time and spend our energies in ways that are profitable not only for this life, but will also for eternity.⁷

B. Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines Is Necessary for Godliness

Over the past 12 weeks, we have made it plain what the path to godliness includes. There are no shortcuts in the Christian life. The sinful flesh seeks a life of ease, but the Holy Spirit leads us down a narrow, rugged road to eternal life. So will we be diligent in cultivating these spiritual disciplines in our lives? Will we resolve, with the help of the Spirit and Christian fellowship, to begin striving today?

Galatians 6:9

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

Let's pray together.

⁷ Watson, Thomas