

Keep Pressing On

Philippians 3:12-14

Before we get started I wanted to give an update on the preaching plan for the next couple of months. Today I will be wrapping up the last sermon that goes along with the book: Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life by Donald Whitney. Then, with the way the preaching calendar looks, I'm planning to preach a few more sermons during the month of August related to this same theme of seeking a deeper relationship with God. In September we have several missionaries that will be speaking in the first few weeks, and then in late September we will begin our fall series that will go for 6-8 weeks. We really want to encourage you to join or put together a small group for that series for deeper growth and to build relationships, so more information about that will be coming out in late August.

Throughout this series we've been following the themes of the chapters in the book and each chapter has focused on a different practice or spiritual discipline that we need to incorporate into our lives in order to grow deeper in our relationship with God. As I read the chapter this week about the final practice he writes about I noticed that it's essentially the same as meditating on God's Word which we covered several weeks ago, so I decided not to preach on that same theme again. But I do want to look at what he covers in the last chapter in the book because it contains some encouragement I think many of us need as we pursue a deepening relationship with God. So the outline for this sermon comes from that chapter and I'll pull in some key supporting scriptures.

If you've been following this series I want to ask you, how is your relationship with God? Do you feel like you're growing deeper? Have you been able to set aside time in order to seek the Lord and do some of these practices we've been talking about? Meditating on God's word, prayer, worship, fasting, silence and solitude, spiritual journaling... all of these can be very helpful and the promise we've seen in Jeremiah 29:13 that still applies to us today is: *"You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart."*

So I think we all want that to come true in our lives. And after the first few sermons I could see the desire in many of our hearts to go deeper and to make it a priority to seek more of God and put these things into practice, but

as the weeks have passed I've also been aware that the realities of life have come up and had a sobering effect. We try to make changes to our schedule and we try to set aside time to meet regularly with God, but it feels like it's never enough because stuff keeps getting in the way.

During the summer it might be a family vacation, or visiting family members, outdoor projects that need to get done, staying up late, different schedules, and so on... The same thing is going to happen in the fall and again in winter because every season has its unique set of circumstances that make it hard to make time to seek God and be consistent.

So I think the desire is there to go deeper, and we know what we need to do for that to happen, but it's really difficult to make it a reality because as much as we may try to make these things a priority, there are just so many things that keep coming up that it feels almost impossible sometimes. How are we supposed to do these things on a consistent basis and be able to concentrate and not be distracted? What hope do we have of making any progress?

Whitney writes about three biblical realities I think we need to remember to give us hope in the struggle so we don't give up but keep pressing on.

The first thing we need to remember is awesome reality that the Holy Spirit is working in our lives. Our ability to pursue God and experience a growing relationship with him doesn't depend solely on our ability to consistently practice the things we've been talking about. In fact, it depends primarily on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has the power to bring us into a deeper relationship with God, our role is to position ourselves for his power to flow more freely in us, around us, and through us. So we have an important and necessary role to play. We aren't going to grow deeper with God without seeking him. Like I've said before, there are no shortcuts. But the ultimate power and reason we can have hope of growing deeper is because of the work the Holy Spirit is doing in us.

Paul writes about this in the book of Philippians. As he opens the book and expresses his thoughts and feelings related to the people he's writing to, he says this in Philippians 1:3-6: *"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until*

now. ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Paul was confident in their spiritual growth, not because of their efforts to grow, but because of the ongoing, never-failing work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In the same way that the Spirit began that good work, he would carry it to completion.

He comes back to that same idea in the next chapter. After telling them of the ultimate authority that was given to Christ and that one day every knee will bow to him, he says in Philippians 2:12-13: “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” So they had a vital role to play in their own spiritual growth, just as we do, but there was much more to it than that – God was already at work in them so they would will and work for his good pleasure.

In Ephesians 1:13-14 Paul writes: “*In him (Christ) 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.*” Why is he the guarantee of our inheritance? Because he is working within us, doing that good work that he will bring to completion.

So you may feel frustrated and discouraged as you field the realities of life and struggle to make time to consistently seek the Lord, but you can have hope because the success of experiencing a deeper relationship with God doesn’t ultimately depend on your ability to seek him. Do your part to the best of your ability to cooperate with him but know that you’re not going to bat 1000. You’re going to be busy at times; there are going to be distractions, there will be days when you’re just not feeling it. That’s reality, but that doesn’t mean all hope is lost because the Holy Spirit is at work within you! He who began a good work in you will carry it to completion.

I’m so thankful for the faithful presence and work of the Holy Spirit in my life – as I look back over the years I can see that he has relentlessly kept drawing me to God, realigning priorities, creating yearning, etc.

The second thing we need to remember is that not only has God given us the Holy Spirit to help us draw near to him, he's also given us the fellowship of believers. When we are born again, we are born into a support network – the family of God. We are now brothers and sisters in Christ and belong to the fellowship of believers. So as you look around the room this morning you see fellow strugglers and God has given us to each other to help one another along the way.

The New Testament has several examples of believers joining together to support and encourage one another in growing in the faith. The book of Acts shows us what that was like for the first disciples as well as the early church in Jerusalem. In Acts 1:12-14, after Jesus ascended before them into heaven, it says: *"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying... ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."* United by the Holy Spirit, they came together for support, encouragement, and prayer.

Not long after that, the Holy Spirit moved in a powerful way at Pentecost and many more were born again and added to the fellowship. What they experienced is written about in Acts 2:42-47: *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*

After persecution started to break out in Jerusalem and the new believers were facing opposition for the faith in Jesus, Acts 4:32-37 shows us how they came together for support: *"Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,*

and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

Brothers and sisters, you are not alone in this quest of growing deeper in your relationship with God. You are not the only one struggling with busyness and distraction and other barriers to experiencing intimacy with Christ. Look around you here this morning and remember that God has given you a spiritual family to support and encourage you along the way. Remember what it says in Hebrews 10:24-25: *"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."*

You and I will find tremendous support by meeting together with other believers who share the same struggles, can pray together, join together in making changes and holding each other accountable to making those changes. Do you have someone who asks you: "How is your relationship with God? How's your quiet time? What has God been speaking to you lately?" If you do, you are experiencing an invaluable gift of grace, and if you don't, you need to! So plug into this amazing gift and remember you are not alone!

And now, the final thing that Whitney writes about that we need to remember to give us hope is that when it comes to seeking more of God, struggle is normal. It's not going to come easy, and there are many reasons. First of all, we're in the midst of a spiritual battle with an enemy who does not want you to grow closer to God. 1 Peter 5:8 reminds us that the devil is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. He is the great deceiver and will use many things to keep us from abiding in Christ. When we value the things of this world and get caught up in pursuing the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life, we fall into his deceitful schemes. We don't even have to be doing evil things to be ineffective in pursuing God; I think most often it's actually good things, but they're keeping us from the best – seeking God's kingdom and righteousness – and the result is the same.

Second, there's also a battle going on right inside of us. In Romans 7 Paul describes this battle – it's the battle between the flesh and the spirit. And

even though our sinful flesh has ultimately been crucified with Christ and no longer has power to condemn us, it's still present in our lives until we die, and that means there's going to be a struggle. We're going to be drawn to things that keep us away from seeking God and create barriers in our relationship with him. We need to be aware of this struggle.

Third, we live in a fallen world and our culture leaves no room for seeking God. He is not a priority in any way; he's pushed aside completely to make room for everything else that people think is so valuable. Work, hobby, school, sports, entertainment – in a world where most people make these the highest priority and establish schedules that effect everyone that reflect their priorities, it's really hard to find time to seek the Lord without paying some kind of consequence.

There are many other reasons, but these are enough to make the point that for Christians who are seeking to grow deeper in their relationship with God, it's going to be a struggle. Don't let the fact that it's difficult be something that Satan uses to discourage or condemn you or keep you from pursuing God. God is not surprised by any of these things, in fact by his infinite power and wisdom he is actually able to use these struggles that the enemy has meant for evil and turn them into something good. Romans 8:28-30 tells us: *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*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.”*

Going back to the first encouragement I mentioned, the Holy Spirit is always working in our lives, working all things for our good, and able to carry that good work to completion.

And so, the message that ends the book and the message I want to leave us with this morning is to not lose heart and not give up in pursuing a deeper relationship with God. There will be struggle, but the Holy Spirit is working in us, we're in this together and can help each other, and the struggle is part of the journey that God can actually use to draw us closer to him. Let us press on in seeking more of God and be like Paul who said these words in

Philippians 3:12-14 (and I'll close with this): *"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*