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SESSION ONE

Training to Live Like Jesus

Reading adapted from a message by John Ortberg

I vividly recall my first time on the Camp Paradise ropes course. (If you've never been on a ropes course, it's basically a high-wire experience for dummies, designed to stretch your abilities and help you overcome fear.) Allegedly, the ropes were thirty feet high, but I'm sure someone made a mistake. Clearly, I was thousands of feet in the air. Butterflies in attack formation assaulted my stomach. My sweat glands kicked into high gear. I was filled with anxiety. "This is not Camp Paradise," I thought. "This is Camp Purgatory. This is where they make you go to pay for your sins!"

The instructors moved across the ropes effortlessly and without fear. They had taught me that, because of the equipment and rope thickness, I was perfectly safe. Did I believe them? Part of me did. But not my stomach and sweat glands. I tried hard to stop my anxiety. I made every effort to feel and act as relaxed as my instructors did. But neither their teaching nor my willpower was enough to transform my inner being. There was only one way: I had to go through training. I had to *experience* the ropes course.

As I did, a change took place. Slowly, I came to trust that I really was safe. After a while, my whole being—even my stomach and sweat glands—began to believe it. I was being progressively transformed from a state of anxiety to a state of relaxed enjoyment. Training—practicing the ropes course day after day like the instructors did—allowed me to act with their same relaxed effortlessness.

Neither their teaching nor my willpower was enough to transform my inner being. There was only one way: I had to go through training.

Training vs. Trying

What does it mean to enter training? *It means to arrange your life around certain exercises and experiences that will enable you to do eventually what you are not yet able to do even by trying hard.* Training is essential for almost any significant endeavor in life—running a marathon, becoming a surgeon, learning how to play the piano. The need for preparation or training does not stop when it comes to learning the art of forgiveness, joy, or courage. It applies to a vibrant spiritual life just as it does to other activities. Learning to think, feel, and act like Jesus is at least as demanding as learning to run a marathon or play the piano.

To follow Jesus means learning to arrange my life around those practices that will enable me to stay connected to him and live more and more like him. In short, this is just another way of defining a spiritual discipline. *A spiritual discipline is any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it.*

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What the Spiritual Disciplines Are Not

Unfortunately, for many people, the very concept of spiritual disciplines has become grossly distorted. So let's be clear about a few things.

Spiritual disciplines are not a barometer of spirituality. The ultimate indicator of your spiritual health is your capacity to fully love God and love people. If you can increase your capacity without the practice of any particular disciplines, then by all means skip them. Disciplines are never ends in themselves—only means to a greater end.

Spiritual disciplines are not a way to earn “brownie points” with God. They are not about meriting his forgiveness and goodwill. They are not “extra credit.” They have value only insofar as they keep us vitally connected with Christ and empowered to live as he lived.

Similarly, a disciplined person is not necessarily someone who does a lot of disciplines. It is not a highly sys-

tematic, rigidly scheduled, chart-making, gold-star-loving early riser. *A disciplined person is one who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit.* A disciplined person is one who discerns when laughter, or gentleness, or silence, or healing words, or truth-telling is called for and offers it promptly, effectively, and in love.

Every Moment Counts

A group of us were discussing how to pursue spiritual life when one person, a mother with two young children, commented that it was easier for her to work on her spiritual life before she became a mom.

She had never been taught to consider the possibility that caring for two young children—carried out daily with expressions of gratitude, with prayers for help, and with patient acceptance of trials—might be a kind of “school of transformation” the likes of which she had never known before. To her, having a quiet time counted toward spiritual devotion, but caring for two children did not.

It all counts. Life counts. Every moment of life—at least potentially—is an opportunity to be guided by God into his way of living. Certainly, there are some foundational practices, like prayer, solitude, and Scripture meditation that are critically important. But all of life’s activities can become spiritual training exercises if you allow them to.

Sitting in traffic congestion can become a training exercise in patience. Mundane activities like cleaning the house or taking a shower can train our hearts in gratitude, if we use those opportunities to thank God for his daily provisions. Delighting in nature or in wholesome pleasures can train our hearts in joy. Even sleep can be a spiritual discipline. Yes, you read that right! Disciplining ourselves to get a good night’s sleep can train us away from anxiety and toward trust if we remind ourselves that the world is in God’s hands and it will get along very well even though we’re not awake to control everything.

A disciplined person is one who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit.

There is no need to divide life into times to “be spiritual” and times to “just do life.” Every moment is a chance to learn from Jesus how to live in the kingdom of God.

God’s Role and Mine

You may be wondering, “What about *God’s* role in spiritual growth?” To speak of spiritual growth only as the product of training could make it sound like something that can be engineered.

Think of the difference between piloting a motorboat and a sailboat. I can run a motorboat all by myself. All I have to do is start the engine. I am in control. But a sailboat is a different story. I can hoist the sails. I can steer with the rudder. But I am utterly dependent on the wind. My job is simply to do those things that will enable me to catch the wind when it comes.

Spiritual transformation is like piloting a sailboat. I can open myself to it through certain practices, but I cannot engineer the wind. When it comes, it is a kind of gift. Seeing this saves me from pride and from the wrong kind of effort. Wise sailors know their main task is to be able to read the wind, to learn to raise and lower particular sails to catch the wind most effectively. They know when to stay on the existing course and when to set a new one.

So it is with the spiritual disciplines. Our job is to creatively and wisely engage in those activities that will give God a chance to work in our life. This can look different in different seasons of our lives. We can put up the sails and adjust them as needed. But what happens is up to God.

“Follow Me”

Jesus came with the gracious announcement that it is possible to be changed. It is possible to live in such a way that people see you and say, “Wow! I didn’t know that a life could look like that.”

Do you believe this is really true, or might be true, or at least that you want it to be true? Then hear Jesus’ invitation to you: “Follow me.”

My job is to creatively and wisely engage in those activities that will give God a chance to work in my life.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Your challenge this week is to see that all of life counts. If you let them, the ordinary moments of your day can become powerful training exercises in spiritual transformation.

For one week, punctuate your days with the simple question, “How can *this moment* train me?” For example:

- You’re in the “under ten items” checkout line behind someone who is either rude or mathematically challenged, and you’re getting really frustrated. Stop and ask, “How can I use *this moment* to train me in patience and graciousness?”
- Someone offends you with a hurtful comment. You are just on the edge of hurting them back with a cutting remark. Stop and ask, “How can *this moment* train me in self-control and loving honesty?”
- You’re on the verge of procrastinating (again) with a project you dislike. Stop and ask, “How can I respond in *this moment* in a way that will help train me in perseverance and faithfulness?”
- You’re grumbling through daily chores—laundry, shopping, housecleaning, tasks at work. Stop in the midst and ask yourself, “How can I use *this moment* to train myself in gratitude for all that God’s given me?”
- In the middle of a pressured day you encounter someone in need. Stop and ask yourself, “Might God want to use *this moment* to train me in kindness . . . and to trust that I can be helpful and still accomplish what I need to?”

Again, these are just examples. The key is to bring this question to mind throughout the unique events of *your* day. On some days, you may know that you will be facing a difficult, tempting, or stretching situation. Consider praying a “how can *this moment* train me” prayer in advance.

Throughout the week, keep track of how this experience goes. How easy was it for you to stop yourself midstream? When did you feel like you got it right? How about times when your attempts failed? Do you notice any patterns to those experiences?

BIBLE STUDY

Imagine that you knew you only had hours left to live. You would more than likely try to have one final conversation with the people closest to you. What would you say? What would your final words be? You would probably move quickly beyond small talk to those things of greatest importance to you; things you wanted your loved ones to hear and really *get*; things you wanted them to hold in their hearts forever. This is the context of Jesus' words in John chapters 14 and 15 as he prepares his disciples for his departure.

1. Jesus set high expectations for his followers. In John 14:12, he challenges them to live like him, doing the works that he did. What startling thing does Jesus go on to say in the last half of verse 12?

2. You would think that living this kind of life would require many things. But Jesus distills it to one thing required above all else. What is that one thing? (John 15:1–10)

3. Considering Jesus' illustration of a vine and a branch, put in your own words what it means to *abide* or *remain* in him.

4. How easily does abiding come for you? To what extent does your life naturally lend itself to abiding (remaining) in Christ?

Reflecting specifically on this past week, at what moment *did* you feel strongly connected to God—when abiding was a reality?

What factors contributed to that?

If you did not feel very connected to Christ, what were the obstacles?

5. Think back to this statement from the reading: “Training . . . means to arrange your life around those exercises and experiences that will enable you to do eventually what you are not yet able to do even by trying hard.” What is the connection between training and abiding (or remaining) in Christ?

How do the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 underscore the reality that learning to abide is not something into which we passively fall?

6. Return to Jesus’ words in John 15:1–10. If we *are* living connected to Christ, something will be inevitable; if we are *not*, that same thing will be impossible. What is that thing? (See also verse 16.)

What sobering words does Jesus speak concerning those who consistently fail to bear good fruit?