

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
"Practicing the Kingdom Life"
Sermon on the Mount, pt. 2
Matthew 6:7-34
Feb 17, 2019

Sometimes as a parent you get to do things you never imagined you'd be doing. I don't just mean the gross stuff or difficult stuff... but also the stuff that just wasn't "your thing" that ends up becoming your thing.... because it's your kids' thing.

That's what's happened to me this year. If I told any of my high school or college friends that one day I'd be coaching basketball, they would have laughed in my face. Not only have I never played on an organized team myself... I've never really watched basketball.

The truth is, I don't actually know that much about basketball... and yet, through a series of parenting dynamics, here I am, an assistant coach to about 11 4th grade boys.

Now, I'll be honest. I'm no Luke Crump. But by some grace of God, our boys have made great progress this season. It's been really fun. And along the way, I've even discovered I actually really like basketball and being a coach.

Especially in those moments in the game... when you see them do something you've been ***practicing***... you can't help but be proud of them.

One of the things the head coach, Coach Lynda, keeps telling the boys is, "How you practice is how you will play in the game." That's probably familiar to those of you who have played sports.

"How you practice is how you will play... especially when it matters the most."

Which means, then, that practicing and learning new drills... is the key, not just to learning a few techniques, ***but to becoming a different kind of player.***

When you drill something again and again, it begins to change your automatic responses. What is "natural" we might say, actually changes for you.

But when you're in the heat of a moment in a game, you don't have time to think about things. You sort of respond automatically. And when you practice in a focused way... that automatic response starts to change... because some deep physiological pattern has been cultivated. You fake and shoot without hardly thinking... and the ball goes in.

And it's not just true of basketball, is it? That's true of all sports you practice. And it's also true of making music and learning an instrument. "What you practice and how you practice is how you will play... when it matters."

That same truth underlies our spiritual lives, our lives with God. "What you practice and how you practice is how you will play... when it matters most."

And so, Jesus devotes a huge portion of the Sermon on the Mount, to what and how we practice. That's what we heard in Matthew 6 this morning. One after another, Jesus lays out the drills, the practices necessary, to play at the Kingdom of God level.

He starts with the practice of prayer. It's one of those key practices that forms us in important ways. When we practice praying on a regular basis, an openness and an intimacy between our soul and God is formed.

And if we keep practicing it... we start to see our lives differently... and eventually in those critical moments when the pressure is on... we'll respond differently... because we've been practicing this openness with God in our prayers. Praying shapes you.

But it's not just what you practice. It's also how you practice that matters. And so, Jesus tries to work on our technique:

"Don't heap up empty phrases in your prayers..." Jesus says. "Just pray simply..."

And he gives us what we've come to call "The Lord's Prayer" as a pattern. You might think of it as a dribbling drill for prayer.

And it's a good one.

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." -- just praying that one line develops an openness and reverence between you and God... a posture essential in our lives.

"Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This forms our imagination and desire... the bringing together of heaven and earth.

"Give us this day our daily bread." -- We pray as we learn to trust in God for just what we need today. We learn contentment.

"Forgive us, as we forgive others."

"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the Evil." -- These are the essential prayers for us.

Of course, it's not the only way to pray, but the more we pray it over our lives... the more it shapes us.

Praying like this...

it's one of the key drills... for the Kingdom Life.

But it's not the only one...

Out of this prayer... Jesus focuses on the practice of forgiveness.

And yes, forgiveness is something **we have to practice**.

We have to choose to practice forgiveness if we want to be able to do it. Sometimes it takes running the drill of forgiveness again and again in order for us to make that play when the pressure is on.

Because, let's be honest. **Forgiveness is a tricky play.** It's hard in both small moments of resentment of those every day dynamics in your family and with your co-workers. And it's really hard... in those critical moments of crisis, when you've been betrayed in some profound way. Forgiveness is a technical play, it takes practice.

One of the testimonies we heard a few weeks ago in our child protection training was from someone who had been abused as a child. She talked about her own journey toward forgiveness.

She heard a pastor once say that if you don't forgive someone, it's like drinking poison and hoping that it will hurt the other person. She said, that's what she had done for years. She was drinking poison... hoping it would hurt her perpetrator, and in the process, it was killing her.

Forgiveness can be incredibly hard...

but it is the very foundation of the Kingdom of God.

If we want to know the forgiveness of God... the life and healing of God... we have to learn to forgive too... We have to practice it... in little ways... all the time...

And as we do, the foundation of the Kingdom opens up to us so that we can trust and experience God's forgiveness as well. We don't trust if we haven't learned to offer it.

Prayer and forgiveness... these practices are essential... And they are probably practices you've tried along the way. But Jesus doesn't stop there. **Next, he starts talking about fasting.** And what's really fascinating about this is Jesus talks about it, ***assuming we are all fasting.***

He doesn't tell us to fast. Or try to convince us it's essential. Did you notice that? He just says, "When you fast..."

Think about that for a moment. Jesus is assuming we're practicing some kind of fasting. It was obvious to him and to his first-century audience. For them, fasting was a basic drill for the spiritual life. It's as basic as practicing lay-ups is for the basketball court.

In fact, fasting is one of the 5 classic practices that are shared by the three great monotheistic faiths. The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions have all taught that fasting is an essential practice in our spiritual life.

But I would venture to guess it's the one practice Jesus talks about today... that we have done the least. I know it is for me. Sure, I've done it here and there, maybe something small for Lent...but it's never been a regular practice.

And yet, Jesus takes it for granted that you and I are fasting. He assumes you know how important it is. He just doesn't want us to make a show out of it. He's reminding us what it's for... because remember, ***how you practice*** matters.

So, he reminds us, fasting brings a gift from God into your life. It's hard, but it comes with some divine rewards, Jesus says.

It frees us from some of our natural compulsions...

and it awakens our bodies and our 5 senses in new ways.

It gives them back a vibrancy that can help us connect to God and the world.

Even if you and I aren't that familiar with it, lots of Christian spiritual leaders have practiced it, and said that it has made a pretty profound difference.

Listen to how Thomas Merton describes it:

“Our five senses are dulled by inordinate pleasure. Penance [or fasting] makes them keen, gives them back their vitality, and more. [It] clears the eye of conscience and reason. It helps us to think clearly, judge sanely. It strengthens the action of our will.”¹

In fasting, Merton found a potent practice that can awaken our body to God, to the sacred divine presence in connecting things all around us... and so can we. It's another practice that changes what actually happens and how we respond when it's game time.

It's a practice of self-denial that, when practiced in a healthy way,
in balance with the right spirit,
can begin to create a kind of vibrancy in our lives.

The next drill Jesus has for us today is a different kind of self-denial. It's not fun, but it makes such a difference.

“Don't store up treasures on earth...” Jesus says, “For where your treasure is there your heart will be also. You can't serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money.”

Jesus is challenging us to pay attention to our practices around money. And this one always makes us squirm a bit, doesn't it? It's like running sprints late in practice when you're already tired... and your legs burn a bit. The boys hate it when we make them do that!

No one wants the pastor to talk about their money... and we'd rather Jesus stay out of our bank statements too, wouldn't we?

It doesn't really matter how much we make or don't make. All of us can get this mixture between feeling guilty and feeling defensive when it comes to what we do with our money.

I heard someone once say, people don't like it when you talk about money, because people always get defensive when you talk about their gods, and let me tell you, that stung me for a bit!

But here in the church, we're called to have the hard conversations... for the sake of our souls. And one of the ways we do that is to challenge one another to give and give generously. That's what we've done in our Generation Campaigns the last few years, isn't it? We've challenged one another and found joy!

Now, on the most basic level, we ask one another to give because the ministry of this church can't exist without ongoing financial support. That's just true. And so, regular, committed giving is an expectation we have of all our members. When someone wants to join, I tell them that. ***When you are a member, there is an expectation that you are a committed giver too.***

But there is a deeper... and even more important reason we talk about money in the church and we practice giving. It's not just about keeping the lights on and paying salaries. It's why the offering plate is passed each Sunday ***as part of our worship...***

¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts In Solitude* (1956), 14. Quoted in Cameron J. Anderson, *The Faithful Artist: A Vision for Evangelicalism and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 116.

Giving regularly, and consistently, what God calls us to give... is another essential practice for life in the Kingdom of God.

Now, just to be clear. It's not that we can buy our way into the kingdom. None of the practices work that way. You don't garner more favor with God by praying more, or forgiving more, or fasting more. And you certainly don't become God's favorite by giving more.

This is one of those foundational things we have to remember when we're talking about spiritual practices. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more.

And there is nothing you can do to make God love you less.

God's love for you is already whole and complete.

God's love is like the gravity that is always consistent on the basketball court. It's just there!

But all these practices enable us to play in sync with that gravity...

They enable us to live in the field of God's love in this fluid and beautiful way.

They are spiritual ***practices that form us into players of God's Kingdom out there on the court of this world... where the gravity of God's love is constant and unchanging.***

And giving is one of those critical practices.

Now, there's no one right amount you have to give, but the tradition has always suggested 10% of your income as a healthy guide. So, that's what Jessi and I try to follow. And that's not to boast, it's just to let you know that I practice this too.

Truth be told, I know some people who ***make less than*** I do that consistently give more than 10% to their church and to other causes they care deeply about. They choose to live simply so they can be more generous.

And I know many who ***make more than I do***, who don't come close to giving 10%. They are just not there yet. And that's OK too.

But giving 10% is a good guide for us all.

What is important to remember... is that generosity is never something you can check off your list. It's not something you accomplish. It's not like we get to say, ***"Well 10% is God's and the rest is mine."*** Nope, because in the Kingdom of God, the word ***"mine"*** is always called out as a foul. It's not allowed. All of it is God's. And if we keep using the word ***"mine"***, we may just foul out of the game!

So, generosity is something we practice... to help us remember all is God's.

And in our culture, it's so important for us to practice it again and practice it again... and keep practicing that generosity... because the power of the dollar over our hearts and minds is strong. And Jesus is real clear – ***"You can't serve two masters."***

Giving in intentional, committed ways,
not under reluctant compulsion,
but with joy and gratitude, frees us from the money's mastery over our hearts...
Giving openheartedly changes who we are...
and enables us to live free in God's generosity toward us.

Which brings us to the final drill for the Kingdom Life Jesus offers us today. This is one that we don't always think of as a spiritual practice, but it is: **The practice of trust. Choosing again and again, to trust.**

"Do not worry about your life... of what you will eat or wear..." Jesus says. And He spends some real time on this one. Maybe that's because we haven't realized that trusting, or not worrying, is a practice.... something that we can choose.

Sometimes we act as if trust is a passive thing:

"Well, Jesus, I can't help but worry...
there are my bills...
and my kids...
and our future...
and what if this... or what if that..."
And sure, those things are true.

And yes, anxiety and worry are something that a lot of us, including myself can struggle with. Years ago, my doctors prescribed something that I still take today to help me manage that anxiety. But I can't rely on the pill alone. It also takes spiritual work.

You see, sometimes I have wanted to say to Jesus, "Look, worrying has helped me along the way. It's helped me to take care of some important things, and meet my obligations, and not be foolish about certain decisions."

If we could say that to him, I imagine he'd look deep into our eyes with that piercing love of his, and say quite simply, **"If you want to be my disciple, if you want to know the freedom, and life, and joy of playing in the Kingdom, then you have to practice trusting."**

That doesn't mean we have to be foolish, but it does mean we have to let go of our worry... again and again. Because the honest truth is, worrying doesn't do anything for you... ***but maybe harden your arteries, and increase your blood pressure, and make you irritable.***

So, maybe trust is the drill you need to start doing every day... just like you brush your teeth... just like we have the boys do passing drills, just like my piano teacher made me do scales. Again, and again, day after day, set aside a time to choose trust.

Or maybe it's one of these other practices.

Prayer. Forgiveness. Fasting. Giving. --- These are some of the essential practices for us all if we want to become Kingdom of God players out on the court of life, moving about gracefully and powerfully in the gravity of God's love.

And if we will do them, something will happen to us.

These practices won't just change who we are,
in the process we ***will come to know God...***

the presence, and love, and blessing of God... that Jesus described in the Beatitudes. Through these practices, ***we come to know God.***

That's the heart of every spiritual practice. They are the means to build intimacy with God.

And so, there are quite a few of us that are trying to pick up a new practice these days.

A couple weeks ago I met with a new spiritual director. And he asked me to commit to certain spiritual practices three times a week. "Oh, I can do more than that," I told him. He laughed and said with wisdom, "I'm sure you can, but I think it's good to start simple. Will you commit to these three times a week for the next six weeks?"

I told him yes... And so, I'm living into that now.

The youth group is also taking on a new practice this month. They are spending this month reading their Bibles every day. And I'm sure that it doesn't go perfectly. I'm sure they miss days. But I'm so proud of our teenagers for making this effort.

Maybe some of you adults will join them.

Or maybe it's one of these other practices that Jesus named
that you need to work on and could commit to.

Suzanne Stabile, who will be here in April teaching the Enneagram,
I've heard her say many times... that each year she picks a new spiritual practice to try to develop. She doesn't try to do it all at once. Remember, this is not about proving something or achieving something. But she does want to grow in her relationship with God.

And so, each year, she picks just one new spiritual practice to work on all year... to try to weave into her life... trusting that it will gradually change the game she's been playing.

And maybe that's the invitation for you today.

What's one practice that you can develop more deeply in your life this year? What would it look like to commit? How would you remind yourself?

If you want some guidance on how to start, shoot me an email this week.

I'd love to help you get started... and encourage you along the way.

I need a spiritual director to help me. It's OK if you need help too!

Because what I know...

is that if we don't practice the ways of the Kingdom...
nothing in our lives will ever really change.

What and how you practice... is how you will play... especially when it matters most.

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

~ James 1:22