

Grow: 3. Spiritual Disciplines

Matthew 6:1-6

February 17, 2019

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Given the right conditions and the right environment, everything grows. That's the way life works. A seed in the ground becomes a tree. A puppy becomes a dog. A child becomes an adult. And faith is also meant to grow, and to keep growing. God uses certain things to grow our faith. And what is faith? It's knowing that there is more to life than what we see. The book Hebrews tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. But this morning, before we look at how to grow faith, I want to step back and ask why. Why faith? Because not everyone has it or wants it or even understands what it could mean for living. Why faith? We talk a lot about what faith is and what faith can do, but it is also important to know why. Faith is actually a huge part of knowing your why.

There's a video clip from the comedian, Michael Jr., that I'd like you to see this morning, since faith is a choice, before we dig deeper into how to grow faith, let's ponder why faith. Hasn't there been a moment for every one of us that before we would do something or step into something we asked why? Take a look. [video] "When you know why, your what has more impact, because you are walking in or toward your purpose." A few years ago, we introduced a brand promise – a promise of what someone could find here – why church, why faith – why. **At Messiah, we make life better. By loving God, loving each other and loving the world around us, we enrich the lives of all who connect through worship, care, service and community.** Why? Life is better. Life is richer. Why faith? I believe it is that sweet spot where your life and your life purpose connect.

In September of my third grade year, I walked down the street to Mrs. Pritchard's house. I had been waiting for this moment ever since my parents found an old upright piano and moved it into our dining room. Until I would graduate from high school, Mrs. Pritchard would be my piano teacher. There were girls in my class who started piano lessons in the second grade but she would not start boys until the third grade – and for an entire year I had been waiting for my moment. I still remember my first lesson, learning to find middle C on the piano. And the first song, it was "Hot Cross Buns." Do you know it? And I came home from that first lesson and I worked at learning that song and a couple of others. Every day. I practiced. And I was able to learn a more songs and put two hands together. But there came a point. It wasn't the first year or the second year of lessons but it wasn't too far into taking lessons that I lost interest in practicing. It was taking a whole lot longer to be proficient and a few years into the lessons I still wasn't able to play what I was hearing on the radio and most of my friends had quit taking lessons and basketball had become a new interest of mine and that's what my friends were doing. I wanted to quit. I didn't know my why. So, my parents made a deal with me. I could quit the lessons when I was able to play every hymn in the hymnal. They gave me a goal, but they did more than that. They taught me a discipline.

Do you know about disciplines? It's the things you are supposed to do but don't want to do. Eat healthy or get physical exercise. Get up earlier, go to bed earlier, save more, spend less, work less, spend more one on one time with your kids, less time on devices, make a budget and stick to it, You know, those things you are supposed to do but don't want to do. And here's what my parents did to teach me the discipline required to grow in my piano proficiency. Either my mom or my dad would sit next to me on the piano bench every single day so that I would practice. And by the time, I was able to play the hymns, I didn't want to quit, because the discipline had become a lifestyle and I found the joy. I went on to college and continued the lessons and got a

music degree. And though I don't play the piano so much anymore, what I learned enriched my life. Through the discipline, I discovered why. Last week, I asked my mother why taking piano lessons was so important – important enough that it became a requirement for every child in our home. And she said, “because we knew it was an enrichment for your life.”

Disciplines. What many people discover is that when we do the things we are supposed to do, they become habits and then obsessions and finally a lifestyle. Any runners among us this morning? The first time you went running, it hurt. The first few times it was painful – or the day after was painful. But you kept at it until the discipline became a habit and an obsession and now a lifestyle. I've driven past people who were out running on some of the snowiest and coldest days of winter. And they know why. And in our scripture for today, we will hear from Jesus that there are certain disciplines or practices – and in Matthew 6, he mentions three – giving, praying, and fasting – I want to talk about the first two and the third is in this week's GPS.

Jesus wants you to do these things because of what they do for you and your faith. There are other benefits, but what Jesus is teaching is what these disciplines will do for you. And if these are not things you have developed, you are missing out on a lifestyle that will enrich your life. There is tremendous joy but it begins as a discipline. And if you resist these things, I hope you will step back and ask yourself what that's about. Faith is like a muscle, and the more you exercise the muscle – establish the discipline – push and rest, push and rest – that's how the muscle grows. And the same is true with faith. God stretches your faith and sometimes to the limit to build it. But these disciplines are a choice. God can use them to grow faith but only if we do them.

Matthew 6:1 **Be careful that you don't practice your religion... He's talking about disciplines. In front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.** These are private things, and if you do them, God will see this and reward you. The reward may not be the reason you do these things, but Jesus is saying God will reward you. **Whenever you give to the poor...** Here's the first private practice. He's talking about money, referring to a practice known as almsgiving. When people would come to the Temple or the synagogue, the poor, the sick, and the disabled would be lined up outside begging, and as people would enter, they would give to certain needs – maybe a person's need touched their heart or their story was compelling – so they would give. This was not their tithe – the amount devoted Jews would give to the Temple to support the Temple and its work. Almsgiving was above and beyond – like our monthly second mile offering. **Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people.** What's their reward? Honored by other people who are watching. They gave but with fanfare. “Ta-da, here comes Steve. Look how generous he is!” When you give like that, you already have your reward. People are saying, “Wow, look how generous he is!” **But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.** God will recognize what you do secretly, and reward you. Jesus doesn't tell us what the reward is, but do this, and you will know. Do this, not because of the reward, but do this and then you will know. Privately, give to those things that are close to the heart of God.

What if you really believed what Jesus said? What if you really believed God would reward you? Would you do it, if you really believed? I wonder if resistance to doing this is not about the money but we don't believe it. Giving is about growing faith. God doesn't need your money. You will end up leaving it here anyway – can't take it with you. What if you believe that if you take your hard earned money and give to things that honor God and God's work in this world – feed

the hungry, house the homeless, help the children – what if you really believed God saw that and would reward that – and you privately, behind the scenes, gave. Wouldn't you be looking for opportunities? We live in a culture where money is everything. We worry more about money than anything. That's reality. And Jesus comes along to say, I know you will trust me in the hereafter – what choice do you have? – but I'm teaching you to trust God now. And I'll do that by messing with what you trust the most – your money. I want you to trust me by giving up some of your money. Not because the church needs it or other people need it, it's because you need to do this for your heart. Trust me – not your wealth – trust me. Your money is actually a faith thing. God wants to grow your faith, and God will reward you. The choice is yours.

And then in verse 5, Jesus says **When you pray...** Jesus is going to talk about your time. **When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will them. I assure you, that's they only reward they'll get.** Jesus is going to connect praying with a reward from God. **But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place.** Jesus is not talking about your interstate 494 or 394 prayers or your prayers for your kids or grandchildren. Everybody prays these "on the go" prayers. Jesus is talking about taking a few minutes of your precious time – and in our 21st century world is there anything more precious than our time? We only get so much of it – and it's never enough! Jesus is saying – take part of your busy life and devote it to God. Go to your room and shut the door and talk to me. **Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.** God sees you pray. That doesn't mean God ignores your prayers in the car, but somehow, some way when you devote time along just you and God, God sees that and will reward you. You're not praying for a reward, but that's what God does – faith grows.

Being busy is all about me, and God can hardly break through my being busy. So when I take a few minutes – and isn't that what's necessary to grow any relationships – time – alone – communicating. For me, it's the first thing I do in the morning, even if it means waking up earlier than I want, and when I don't, something is missing in my day. The reward is that I know my "why" – my faith grows – and that's the one thing I will carry with me through eternity. The reward is not that I get all my prayers answered, but I have this uncanny assurance that God is with me every moment of my day.

Here's what I want to end up this morning: you and I can do something to GROW. These are disciplines, and a discipline is not easy at first but a discipline can become a habit and then a lifestyle – and there's the joy. Saying, God I trust you with my money. I trust you with my time. I trust you with my life. Here's my challenge: try this for the next month. Give God a few minutes and a few dollars, not because God needs it but God wants to reward you. Will you trust God in this? Maybe you're thinking - what should I pray about? I don't know. Just tell God what's going on in your life and what's on your heart. What you would share with your best friend or your therapist or your momma. And if it feels strange to talk out loud, write it down – and if you're afraid someone will see what you've written, throw it away. God is not going to forget. What if you gave God your first few minutes and your first few dollars, because you want God to know. I trust God first – and any tension or resistance that you are feeling right now is a faith issues. It's like trying to exercise a muscle. It may hurt at first, but that muscle will grow.

I want you to know your why.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 17, 2019

Weekly Prayer: O Lord, you are the Way, the Truth and the Life. Open our hearts to hear and understand, for we are easily influenced by the loudness of a world that does not see the value in your Way, Truth and Life. We come here to turn our thoughts to you so that we may grow in faith and honor you with our lives. Guide us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, February 18

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-4

“Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. “Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

Observation: In chapter 6, Jesus teaches about three specific practices that God uses to grow our faith – giving, praying, and fasting. It is easier to do these things when we gain recognition and praise, but that's not the way faith grows. One's motive matters. Are your actions self-centered or God-centered? Only God-centered will produce a reward.

Application: In the first century, people were praised for their generous gifts with monuments and inscriptions. Jesus is saying that's the only reward they will receive. Have you ever given so that you will receive a “thank you” or an acknowledgement? How does that motive differ from giving in a way that you “don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”?

Prayer: Lord, teach me your ways. Examine my heart and help me to release what I feel is “mine,” so that I can be open to what you want to pour into my life. Lead me to give in response to what you have already done for me. Amen.

Tuesday, February 19

Scripture: Matthew 6:5-14

“When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

“When you pray, don't pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they'll be heard. Don't be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask. Pray like this: Our Father who is in heaven, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us. And don't lead us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. “If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Observation: Some have said that in our 21st century world, time is our most precious commodity. Jesus is asking that you give time, that you dedicate time to speak with God – and saying that God will honor and reward that practice. If prayers are limited to “give me” or “I need,” you haven't really given time, because “your Father knows what you need before you ask.”

Application: What outcome does Jesus promise for praying? Have you ever avoided prayer because you did not think you had the right words to pray? It is impossible to grow any relationship if we do not carve out time to communicate. Consider taking time today to write a note to God about what is on your heart.

Prayer: God, thank you for your love and your promise to be part of my life. Help me to honor you with a few minutes of my time each day to listen and to receive what you want for me. I want to grow closer to you. Amen.

Wednesday, February 20

Scripture: Matthew 6:16-18

“And when you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. Then you won't look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Observation: Jesus often went apart from others to fast. Fasting is winning the war over the flesh and, in place of our wants, seeking what God wants. Fasting is sacrificing what we could have and focusing on what God has for us. There were many in Jesus' day who fasted as a way of showing others the sacrifice they were making. They missed the true reward of fasting because their motive was the approval of others.

Application: Today, we might consider fasting from other things – perhaps television, Facebook, your smart phone or whatever prevents us from taking time for prayer and scripture. What might Jesus be able to teach you when you give up (for a time) what you “need”? Fasting makes us available to God's grace. How could this grow your faith? Consider fasting from something today.

Prayer: Lord, you know what I depend on. Help me to see what matters most to me, then lead me into those practices that will draw me closer to you. I want to follow you with my life. Amen.

Thursday, February 21

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-24

“Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. Therefore, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how terrible that darkness will be! No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Observation: Jesus has been teaching about discipleship – how to grow as his followers. Personal practices would set them (and us) apart from the world. In these verses, his focus is on how wealth can be a distraction. Our attitude toward money is a measure of our discipleship. Jesus is not saying that saving money is wrong, but condemns an attitude that makes money more important than eternal values.

Application: Money is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Everyone needs money, but what purpose might God have that would be different than “Wall Street?” God doesn’t want your money but your heart. How could your attitude about money keep God from your heart?

Prayer: God, you have blessed me with life and have promised me an abundance of life. Lead me into those practices that will grow my relationship with you. Help me to remain focused on what you want for me. Amen.

Friday, February 22

Scripture: Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; Matthew 14:22-23

Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer.

But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places for prayer.

Right then, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came and he was alone.

Observation: According to the Gospels, Jesus regularly went off by himself to spend time in prayer. The verses from Matthew appear immediately before the story of Jesus walking on the water to assist his disciples. Could it be that Jesus’ ability to provide healing and help is tied to his ability to dedicate time to prayerfully seek what only God can provide? Surely, Jesus is teaching his followers through his use of time.

Application: What kind of prayer discipline does Jesus model for you? Most of us offer prayers in moments of need. We call out to God to assist those we care about. But what would a regular time to be alone (Go to your room and shut the door. Matthew 6:6) look like for you? To establish a habit or a discipline takes a concerted effort over time (some suggest at least 28 days).

Prayer: Teach me, Lord; teach me how to live so that I may see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly each and every day. Amen.

Saturday, February 23

Scripture: Romans 8:26

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans.

Observation: One of the hardest of the disciplines to actively maintain is prayer. By neglecting it, however, we open ourselves up to the ever present evil that constantly schemes and strategizes against us. Sometimes the result is irritating distractions, other times the result is total redirection which we may not recognize until the damage is done to ourselves and others. Without prayer we are often oblivious to this assault on our lives until we meet it face to face.

Application: When faced with the reality of Evil in my own life, I attempt to control it through:
___ self-remedy: I seek external answers and information
___ self-reliance: I look inward for answers

_____religion: I go through empty motions

_____prayer: I'm convinced that I Can't but God Can

Prayer: Lord, thank you for refusing ever to be far from me. I am encouraged knowing that I am closer to you than I have imagined. I am not alone. You are always with me. Lord, teach me to pray. Amen.