

August 21, 2016

Luke 17:11-19

Training

"Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you, who belong to Christ Jesus, to live." 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Continuing from last week's thought about being "in the zone", this week consider the training it takes to get there. Whether it is athletics or music or any endeavor at which we seek to excel, time spent at the activity makes all the difference in the world.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, claims that it takes roughly ten thousand hours of practice to reach mastery in a field. Well, if the goal is to live a full Christian life, then it seems we need to put the time and training in.

I did a little math. If you, as Paul wrote, prayed "all the time" - that is 24/7 - you would be able to "master prayer" in just 417 days. If, however, you were engaged with God just 8 hours a day for every day, then mastery would take 3.4 years. On the other hand, should you be in the "God zone", 40 hours a week - like a full time job - you'd achieve the goal in 4.8 years. But, if you connect with God just one hour a week on Sunday, then it would take 192 years to put in the 10,000 hours. You get the picture.

What Paul is saying is that we need to adjust our lives so that God plays a central role. He lists joy, attention and thanks. Take the example of the 10 lepers described by Luke. These men had little to be cheerful about - they were diseased, despised and discarded by society. In desperation, they called out to Jesus for "pity". He responded that they should show the priests who had the authority to declare them clean. So they went.

Up to this point, Luke shared a simple healing story. But, then we learn that 1 of the 10 realized what had happened and out of his joy returned to speak to Jesus, sharing his thanks. The Samaritan lived out Paul's formula of joy, attention and thanks. The other 9, who we presume were practicing Jews, totally missed the point. They may have gone to Temple, kept the Sabbath holy and met in the synagogue, but they were far from being in "spiritual shape" to be in the game with God.

It is a challenge - but spend a few moments watching the phenomenal feats of the Olympic athletes and you will see that dedication and hard work is possible. To get into "spiritual shape" takes time and a commitment based on routine. Finding joy in the everyday events of life can be a challenge. We like to feel sorry for ourselves and find a catastrophe in almost every event. This attitude does not serve anyone well. Knowing - truly believing - that God is present with us provides the antidote to bitterness, fear and despair.

Beyond a "happy face", however, Paul speaks of praying all the time, which sounds impossible. However, prayer is not just reciting the Lord's Prayer or the 23rd Psalm. Prayer is being in communication with God. It is talking and listening to God. There are many people who easily, even eagerly, post what is on their minds on Facebook all the

time. What if we "posted" to God what was happening to us with the same enthusiasm and commitment? That would be an example of praying "all the time".

Finally, our "training" needs to include gratitude. Meister Eckhardt, the German mystic, said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." Saying "thank you" implies the recognition that we are not in charge and we are dependent on the generosity of someone else for what we have, which is the precise relationship we have with God.

I concede that putting in 10,000 training hours of joy, attention and thanks is a very ambitious goal. But, what is to stop anyone from starting today, right now, from keeping an eye on their attitude, the fact that God wants to be in conversation with us and that there is so much to be thankful for? Try identifying with the 10% - the single leper who was less concerned about the "business" of religion - and, instead, truly alert to truth of life in Christ.

Grace & peace,

Pastor Ron