

The Graceful Effort of Discipleship

a sermon in the series
The Apprentice: An Analysis of What it Means to be a Disciple

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I John 2:5-6

But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

I believe today's message is one of the most important sermons I've have recently preached. I didn't say it would be the most moving or entertaining sermon, but I cannot think of any sermon in a long time that carries the impact that this message has if you will believe and apply what you hear. A significant problem has paralyzed many good and sincere Christians. This problem is the subtle inclination to believe faith is passive, that the Christian life requires a waiting on God to give power before we can serve the Lord. The belief is that there is an order and it cannot be violated. First comes God's empowerment to serve and then secondly you can serve. Never get that out of order, they say, or you will be unsuccessful. You must not think you can serve before you are filled with the Spirit because you can't. You must first wait on God until He gives you the grace to do what He has called you to do.

That teaching has gripped many hearts and as a result incapacitated, immobilized, Christians making them inactive and passive. Such are some of you. You want to be like Jesus but you are waiting for God to change you, believing that if you try to do any of the changing, then you will be in the flesh and will grieve the Spirit of grace.

Last week we preached about the very real possibility that every Christian can be like Jesus. This is not a theory it is very much the potential. You can be like Jesus in your character, lifestyle, and actions. But many if not most of you do not believe this. You believe something other than being regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit is necessary, you need God to give a special grace that will transform you into a powerful disciple and *then* you can be like Jesus. This is paralyzing many.

I. An Analysis of the Problem of Passivity.

A. Spiritual Transformation by Education

Some of you believe that your spiritual transformation is dependent on God giving you more education, information, and instruction in the Bible. Every Sunday you come hoping that you will

hear something that will be the missing key that will unlock spiritual maturity. So you are waiting for God to impart more learning into your mind and thereby change your heart.

B. Spiritual Transformation By an Experience With God.

Others of you believe you would be transformed if God suddenly rent the heavens and poured out on you an experience of the Holy Spirit. You would then be able to live like Jesus lived. If you had an Isaiah moment when he saw God in the temple, or a Day of Pentecost experience when the power of God fell upon the 120, or if you had an encounter with God like D. L. Moody when he was so filled with the Holy Spirit that he cried out to God to stop because he feared he would die from the glory of that experience. Until that happens you believe your somewhat uneventful Christian experience will continue as it has.

There is an opposite problem where people believe that it is all up to them and by their efforts alone they will change. It is best characterized by the Kevin DeYoung book, *Just Do Something*. But that is not the problem within our church family and I don't believe it is the problem of many truly regenerated souls. For most of us the problem is that we are so overweight on a view of grace that we can no longer move. Our spiritual obesity has immobilized us. We are waiting for the proverbial lightning strike of the power of God to hit us, and until then we refuse to put forth any effort for fear it will be our own intellect, ingenuity, and influence.

Much of the *revival movement* and teaching that is occurring in the reformed camp of evangelicalism is this mentality. This brand of revivalism says there is going to be this mighty explosion of God's power and with it will come the great renewal we have longed for. You will be different in every way. Immediately it will be accomplished. Sinners will be saved, families restored, believers bold in witness, and the Gospel will go forth in great fruitfulness. So what do we do? We wait. Idly, passively, we wait for this move of God.

But this is not the teaching of our Lord or His apostles. That does not mean that such things cannot happen in a day when God in extraordinary power revives His church and sends a great awakening among sinners. History bears the fact that it has happened. But the teaching of our Lord and His apostles was a consistent, constant, and steady growth in grace; not waiting for some explosion of super power.

"But what about the Day of Pentecost," you ask, "were they not told to wait for the power of God?" Yes, they were; they were not passive but actively obeying. Do you think if they had disobeyed the instructions of Jesus they would have been filled with the Spirit as they were that day? Of course not. You cannot use the Day of Pentecost as an example because they were doing what they were told to do. Are you? This command to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit is never repeated in the New Testament. Even when churches were experiencing great problems such as spiritual decline and internal division, none of the apostles or authors directed the churches to gather in a prayer meeting and wait for God to come and pour out the Spirit in power. We hear them command the churches to take responsibility for their sin and repent, to return to first

love, to draw near to God and He would draw near to them. Listen to how the Apostle James speaks to a church that is rife with sin and corruption. They were unfaithful to Jesus. It is not a pleasant congregation to pastor or to be a member of. James does not instruct them to duplicate the Day of Pentecost, he doesn't tell them they need to start having cottage prayer meetings, meetings in the homes, and praying for a move of God to revive the church. No, listen to what he says. He says there is something we must do.

"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." (James 4:7-10)

If we were writing to the church James was writing to we would say something like this: Get together and ask God to draw nigh to you so that you can draw night to Him. Ask God to give you grace so that you might repent and cleanse your hands. Oh, ask God to come and lift you up so that you can be humble. James doesn't because he understands that the disciple must put forth an effort to obey because faith is never passive.

And now listen to the words of our very own Lord written that most difficult church in Laodicea:

"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷ Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. ¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. ²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. (Revelation 3:15-21)

Jesus does not say what they should do is get together and wait in His presence and ask for a spirit of renewal to turn their hearts back to them. No, He gives them counsel to act.

Our obese view of grace would change Jesus' counsel to say this: Pray that I will heal your eyes so that you may see. Pray that I will not just knock on the door but come in and then you can have fellowship with Me.

Jesus does not advise in this manner. He says you and I have a responsibility and it is that we would anoint our own eyes, that we would be zealous, that we would repent, that we would turn back to God and that when He knocks on the door of our heart we would have enough sense and determination to get up off our spiritual couches and go to the door and let Him in.

You're not altogether to blame. I believe my emphasis on the promise that God has made this church has produced some of this spirit of passivity. Some have concluded that when the promise is fulfilled, then, and only then, can they really live like Jesus. Any attempt or effort to live like Jesus before the fulfillment of the promise would be carnal and displeasing to God. Beloved, this is absolutely wrong and is a misrepresentation of the promise and my preaching.

Last night I went back to those messages and read through them. They're all on manuscript form on the web and I read a few of them. There is a particular message where I warned you that waiting on God is not passive but active. It requires a trusting of God. While we wait for the promise we must not be idle but obedient to do what we already know to do.

We like to quote John 15:5, "Without Me you can do nothing." But we do not stop to think that the opposite is also true, "If you do nothing it is without Me." If you choose to do nothing God will let you. And you will do it without Him. God does not bless passivity. Passivity is not waiting on God and it does not demonstrate faith; rather it demonstrates the opposite—unbelief. We can be so spiritual in our unbelief. We can be passive because we think we are "waiting on God."

This teaching is so dangerous. Brothers and sisters will encourage you to not think ahead or plan whatsoever because that would be worldly. I've had people encourage me not to plan sermons when I go to different places to preach, like Romania for example. They have told me to trust the Lord He will give you what you need when the time arises. Sometimes He does that very thing. But sometimes He gives me instruction before I go. What is my point? Being lazy and not praying and not listening before I go will not produce what I need when I need it. Passivity is not faith and faith is not passive.

Another reason this way of thinking is very damaging is because as most doctrinal falsehoods, there is some element of the truth that conceals the hook. We are to pray, we are to seek His favor, but that doesn't mean I do nothing until then. In fact, it means if I want to find the favor of God I must be busy about what I know His will is. It is true to say that without God's power we are doomed to futility and we will not succeed. We must have God's power to do what God calls us to do. But has it occurred to you that if God calls you He will empower you. The call is power itself. Look at the effectual call that produces salvation. The call to be saved is the very saving of the sinner. If you are determined to obey the very command itself will empower you, if the will is inclined to obey.

II. Grace and Effort Are Not Opposites, They're Friends

The Bible says grace and effort are friends. You can have effort without grace but you will never have grace without effort.

In our text we see both grace and effort; we see both God's work and activity and the Christian's work and activity.

“He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.” (1 John 2:6)

The Christian can walk as Jesus walked. This is your responsibility as a child of God. And you can do so because of God’s responsibility to work in you.

“But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.” (1 John 2:5)

Because the love of God is perfected in the heart of the believer, the believer is able to keep the word of God. The love of God produces obedience. It is God’s grace that works first in us and therefore we work. Grace is God’s love given to you, who don’t deserve it, which gives you the desire and power to obey Him. The love of God perfected is another way of saying the grace of God, the unmerited favor, His love is working in you obedience. That’s how you know you are in Him—you walk as He walks. You walk as He walks because of grace. His grace produces the effort. Because we want to feel or sense God’s grace working in us we mistakenly believe that it’s not because we do not feel or sense it. Let me talk about that. Did you know that most of the time you’re not going to feel the grace of God? Why is that? Several reason, but the first is because it’s always working. Just because you think God is silent doesn’t mean He’s idle. He’s active in your soul, He’s always pouring grace on your heart so it’s always there.

Secondly, grace is often undetected because He wants you to walk not by your feelings but by your faith. A Christian that is always excited emotionally is a Christian very susceptible to failure, fall, and temptation because they live by their feelings and not by faith. God doesn’t want to promote that He wants to deal with that.

God’s grace is always at work within our hearts, but we often do not recognize it. And because we do not recognize it, we doubt God making faith in God inoperative in your soul and that makes your faith inoperative. It’s there but faith is not engaged. What do we do then? So we think we must pray and wait for God to give grace and when He gives it, we will dramatically feel it, as one would feel an explosion. But this is wrong and it leads to a false view of grace, a view that cripples our ability to live as Christ lived.

This pseudo-spiritual form of passivity stems from a very imbalanced view of grace. As I said a few moments ago, when your spiritual diet consists of a wrong view of grace that says effort, work, striving, and laboring are opposites of grace, you will become spiritually obese—fat, lazy, and immobile. You will become a spiritual couch potato because you will never take initiative. This view of grace that is opposed to any human effort makes one sluggish, terribly slothful, and absolute stationary. It will not allow to move. You take no initiative. You make no progress and in the end you do not live by grace through faith. You are defenseless to the arguments and will of the devil.

The Bible’s teaching on grace does not oppose effort but embraces it. I like how author Dallas Willard has stated in several of his books, “Grace is not opposed to effort; it’s opposed to earning.” We never earn grace nor any other blessing from God. The law demands you put forth effort

to earn; the Gospel says you put forth effort because you have already received. The law screams at your flesh to earn by sincere effort; the Gospel quietly assures you that it will impart by grace what you otherwise could not earn. Grace empowers effort. Because God works in you, you work also.

Just because you cannot earn God's favor does not mean that you must not seek God for His favor. The Bible repeatedly teaches the same lesson; those who seek the Lord and His favor receive it. Those who do not seek it the Lord will not find His favor.

"Thus Rehoboam strengthened himself in Jerusalem and reigned. Now Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he became king; and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city which the LORD had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, to put His name there. His mother's name was Naamah, an Ammonitess. ¹⁴ And he did evil, because he did not prepare his heart to seek the LORD." (2 Chronicles 12:13-14)

Speaking of King Uzziah the Bible says,

"And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. ⁵ He sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper." (2 Chronicles 26:4-5)

You may argue with me and say that these Scriptures support the idea that there is nothing we can do but wait on God and not until God acts to give us His favor can we perform His will. But I argue that the whole of Scripture teaches that I seek the Lord because of God's grace, He will always supply it. My seeking for it is God's grace in action. I argue that these verses only prove my point all the more. There is a responsibility I have to exercise my will to pursue God. Because we are His children, God gives us the grace to do it; but that grace will not do it for us, it will give the energy to do it, but it will not choose to do it. God's grace will not do for you what you are supposed to do. It will not obey for you. It will not repent for you. It will not turn to the Lord for you. God's grace will not do for you what you are to do but it will be there as an energy as a desire within your heart to turn to the Lord. You must exert your own will and choose to pursue God and His promises. If you don't want God, He will not overwhelm you, in most cases. He has placed within your power the ability to seek or not to seek. The choice is yours.

This is what separates the proverbial men from the boys, the women from the girls and the spiritually mature from the immature. The mature disciples are those who are able to disciple others—the commitment of will and action. The mature do what it takes desperately dependent upon God for His help. The spiritually mature are not always the most knowledgeable about the Bible. The spiritually mature are not always the most gifted. But the spiritually mature are always the ones who are most committed in their will to act upon the Word of God. The mature do what it takes—desperately depending upon God for His help.

“But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” (Hebrews 5:14)

The writer of Hebrews says that those who are “of full age,” meaning mature, are “those who by reason of use” have exercised their senses to discern between good and evil. We know what the word *exercise* means. We don’t like the word *exercise* much because it means strenuous. It is the Greek word *gymnazō* from which we get our English words *gymnastics* and *gymnasium*. It means to train in gymnastic discipline. But it’s the word *use* that we gloss over and we must not do so. It comes from a word that means “a condition of body or mind resulting from practice or habit.” It simply means by doing something over and over, developing a habit, they know how to distinguish good and evil, God’s will and their will. They know by constant, habitual performance. The Bible says that those who condition their minds and bodies by an intense work out performed over and over are the ones who succeed. Both these words *exercise* and *use* sound very different than passivity and inactivity.

In 1 Timothy 4:6-10, the Apostle Paul commands Timothy to exercise himself toward godliness. Godliness is not something Paul expected to come to the Christian without the Christian exerting effort to pursue.

*“If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.⁷ But reject profane and old wives’ fables, and **exercise yourself toward godliness**.⁸ For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.⁹ This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance.¹⁰ For to this end we both **labor** and suffer reproach, **because we trust** in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.” (1 Timothy 4:6-10)*

Did you notice verse 10 and the reason why Paul and his companions said they both labored and suffered? He said it was because they trusted God. Faith is not passive but active. Faith gets you off your spiritual couch and causes you to labor for Him.

We are commanded to conduct ourselves in this world in the same way that Christ did. This is every bit a must as it is to pray or study Scripture. It is expected of you as much as loving your enemy or your neighbor as yourself. “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.” *How can I do that? By the grace of God!*

Grace works through our effort; it never opposes the effort to obey, rather it supports it. The only effort grace will deny is the effort of earning.

III. The Disciple Becomes Like Jesus by Grace that Empowers Effort

The only way you can be like Jesus is by this grace that empowers effort. Growing up into Christ-likeness will not occur by education or experience alone. These are wonderful pursuits. The pur-

suit of knowledge is a good thing and by that knowledge we can experience the reality of Christ. I am thankful for every encounter of Christ and every endowment of power. But my character, lifestyle, and actions are impacted more by my employment of God's grace to put into active obedience what I read in this book. To rely on education or experience without effort leads to failure. Your faith must be engaged with those commands.

Most failure in Christians is due to an imbalanced emphasis either on education or experience and a neglect of effort. I am to be employed in pursuing what God commands and if so, **then** I will receive all the grace I need to obey. For example, note the order found in John 14:15-16, "If you love Me, keep My commandments. ¹⁶ And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever." First, obey God and then secondly the power of the Spirit will be given not the reversal, first the power of the Spirit and then obedience. But He first says, "Love Me." You'll never obey unless you love Him. May God help you to see what He's saying.

Therefore, to be like Jesus requires from us a steadfast will that chooses obedience and produces actions that are consistent to Christ's commands. You may pray all you want for God's power but prayer without a determined will to obey will never produce the obedience required. An engaged will is our part and it is up to us to offer it to God who will bless with His power. Without this no amount of waiting, prayer, and fasting will produce one ounce of holiness. But let a Christian obey God and pursue holiness and he will have all the grace he or she can use. The power of God will be active. The question is whether or not you will obey. Are you willing to obey everything God has commanded?

Let me illustrate with the Apostle Peter. Jesus came walking on the water toward the apostles who were cramped into their boat trying to row against a stiff wind. They thought they were seeing a ghost but Jesus announced Himself. Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

Jesus bid Peter to come and Peter walked on the water. But notice, did Peter's faith levitate Peter out of the boat and onto the water? No, faith is not active in that way. Faith activates you. Therefore, Peter climbed over the side of the boat and began to walk.

If you observe the many miracles that Jesus performed you will discover that Jesus most often than not required an act of the will on the part of the sick. He told the lame to get up and pick up their bed and walk. I wonder what your response, with all your education and knowledge on the grace of God, would have been that day if you had been the lame man told to take up their bed and walk? I think many of us would say, "Lord, why do You think these four guys broke into this roof and lowered me? I can't walk! Touch me and I'll be able to." But Christ required obedience and the reason He did so is because it is an act of faith. Obedience is always an act of faith and since faith is not passive it will obey. He told a blind man to go to the pool of Siloam and wash his eyes. The man could have very easily replied and said he could not see in order to get to the pool. But he went and obeyed nonetheless and was healed. Jesus told ten lepers to go to Jerusalem and show themselves to the priest and as they went they were healed. His operational

mode has not changed. If you would simply place your faith in what He's said to you, you will find all the power of grace necessary.

Our problem is we want to be passive. We are lazy and want God to do everything for us. If we were the one who was blind and Jesus told us to go wash in a certain pool we would say, "I can't do that Lord until you first heal me. I need your power first and then I will do what you want me to do."

Jesus said He was the vine and we are the branches, which does not mean we as branches passively stand apart from Christ praying, "Make me fruitful. Let your life flow in me." No, not at all! The vine includes the branches. In other words, no vine is separated: roots, stalk, branches, and leaves. We don't see the vine in that way. Not at all. When we see a vine we see the whole, the stalk, branches, and leaves with its fruit. Therefore Jesus, who is the Vine is also the branches. You and Christ are one in a perfect union. Therefore His life is already in you. You and Jesus are inseparable which means you already have the power of God in you. You don't need anymore power.

It is my conviction that you have already received everything you need to live as Christ lived on this earth. The Apostle Peter said,

"as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue." (2 Peter 1:3)

The Apostle Paul says something identical,

"And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:8)

Instead of praying, "Give me power!" we should pray, "Lord help me to yield to your power that is in me." At that point we should act in faith that He has already given us all we need for life and godliness. Start doing what He has already commanded and you will experience His life in you.

Let me give you one more example. It came from our last Wednesday prayer meeting. Let us suppose you know you need discipline to get up and seek the Lord in prayer and the study of His word. We all need that. Rehoboam did evil, because he didn't prepare his heart to seek the Lord. Uzziah, as long as he sought the Lord, prospered. You need to get up every morning and spend time with the Lord. I feel no embarrassment or guilt in saying that every Christian needs to be an early riser to study the Word and spend time alone with God. And if you work nights and sleep days, work it out however it works. Before you begin your day, whether it's in the morning or in the evening, you need to be alone with God, seeking His favor and power. So we do say, "Lord, I need to do this." But instead of praying for discipline, as we normally would, you ought to believe His promise that says you already have been given discipline. That promise is found in 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." The words *sound mind* mean self-discipline. You now must choose to be passive waiting for some

power to zap you and awaken you an hour earlier in the morning or you can choose to be active in faith trusting God's word is true and set your alarm clock an hour earlier and get up expecting grace to help you. Faith is active because it believes God. It believes that God will give the necessary power in the very act of obedience and not before.

Every command in Scripture is possible to you because God has promised to give you everything you need to obey Him. He gives you Himself, living and dwelling within you. You have all that you need. The choice is ours; will you or will you not obey God? That's it. Will you give Him your life in humility, trusting that only He can save you from your sins? It is that simple. Do you trust and believe God or not? Those of you who are not Christians, I plead for your heart right now. I ask you, will you trust God for your destiny or will you continue to trust you? The choice is yours. He will not do it for you. If you wait there in your pew right now for something to hit you some force or power, you will sit there until your bones rot. You are commanded to turn your heart to the Lord and seek His face in repentance trusting Him for the forgiveness not just of your sins but for eternal life from that moment on. Get up and go to the Lord because He has promised that He will not reject you. If you do that, I promise by the authority of the Bible you will be saved. There is no shadow of turning with God. What He has said is true and you can bank your eternity on it. Otherwise all you have to trust is you and you are not capable of saving yourself from eternal doom and damnation. All of your goodness is nothing compared to the goodness of Christ. But Christ is sufficient. Trust Him.

I ask my brothers and sisters, will you wait for some lighting bolt from heaven to transform you or will you get up today and start doing what God has commanded trusting that His grace will see you through? The choice is yours. This is what the graceful effort of discipleship looks like—it takes God at His Word and acts, believing that God will help. May God help you to do that. Amen.