

INTRODUCTION

- 1) I would like to introduce this curriculum.
 - i) All Christians agree that Christlikeness is the central aim of our lives and is the highest state that a human being can attain. And yet genuine spiritual progress is often evasive and confusing. Why is that? What can we do about it? This curriculum answers these questions. It is a practical guide for spiritual transformation.
 - b) And where do the ideas in this curriculum come from? In a nutshell, the talks in this curriculum are my personal attempt to both simplify and to systematically organize the ideas of Dallas Willard and N.T. Wright. Specifically, their ideas about the Christian life. These two men have spent their lives working as “reformers” of the Christian church.
 - i) Just as the reformer Martin Luther did in his day, Dallas Willard and N.T. Wright, in our day, through long and careful scholarship of the Bible, arrived at the conclusion that the we have in key ways critically misunderstood Jesus’s life and message. And noted the terrible result of this is that we are consequently cut off from the life that Jesus holds out in offer to us.
 - ii) Now, occupationally speaking, Dallas Willard was and N.T. Wright is a professor. Despite being professional scholars, they are also Bible teachers, who put forth great efforts to express their ideas at a level accessible for lay Christians. However, despite their efforts at making their content accessible at a popular level, I have found over the years of teaching their materials in various groups, that many people still find their ideas and their teaching approach challenging and at times inaccessible. This curriculum is an attempt to break down that barrier.
 - c) These two teachers are not the only thinkers this curriculum draws on. We will also be drawing on the work of other “physicians of the church.”
 - i) I call them physicians because the goal of a physician is to make someone well. And that is what these thinkers tried to do.
 - ii) To that point, this curriculum is rooted in the reality that we are, each of us, broken people. And part of the healing we need is to get rid of the wrong ideas, and come into the right ideas. Therefore, the ideas in this curriculum are not intellectual curiosities or interesting speculations. Instead, these are ideas that we must put into action and live by. The theology is medical, so to speak. We will be examining the core teachings of the Bible as it confronts each of us in our life here and now, in our need and sin and confusion. As Jesus put it, *The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. John 6:63.*
 - iii) Who are these other “physicians of the church?” We will be drawing on many thinkers, but in addition to Dallas Willard and NT Wright, especially William Lane Craig, Blaise Pascal, and Augustine have their ideas represented here.
 - d) Where I am directly quoting one of these thinkers, I will point that out. But even when I am not, almost nothing I say in this curriculum will be original. Instead, I want to draw on the vast riches of the Christian tradition.

- i) These physicians of the church were seekers and scholars. They exerted long efforts over many years mining away, so to speak, and came away with gems here and there.
 - ii) The challenge for contemporary Christians is that many of these gems are spread out in various books that can be difficult to read, quite long, and confusing at times.
 - iii) My goal is to gather up the various gems spread far and wide and represent them in an orderly and structured way, in the ordinary language of today, and neatly tucked within the framework for comprehensively understanding the broad message of the Bible put forth by Dallas Willard and NT Wright.
- e) And in giving credit where credit is due, I would like to mention my father.
 - i) He was a professor himself. He is a particularly balanced, subtle, brave, and humble thinker. And most of all, he is always interested in the big picture, the forest more than the trees. My way of thinking has been heavily influenced by him. We have talked through many of the ideas in these lectures over our lives together. It would be hard to overstate his influence on this curriculum.
- f) All of the ideas in this curriculum are what CS Lewis called “Mere Christianity.”
 - i) People from any of the branches of the Christian church will be able to accept the vast majority of the material presented. We will not be delving into theological controversies or denominational differences.
 - (1) *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Corinthians 1:10).* Notice that this is a command, actually, to us. A command based on the fact that we all have the same Spirit living in us. A command which we have largely ignored, to the great detriment of ourselves and the world.
 - (a) Now some differences in thought and practice among groups of Christians are good and necessary, actually, as the Christian Church is not a top-down dictatorship but instead a dynamic community of people who love each other. And people will often feel more comfortable in one Church context verses another. But the problem comes in that often, our ideas on the particularities of the faith become a source of division.
 - (b) As was rebuked time and time again from the very beginning of the Christian movement, we have a lousy tendency to prefer to debate amongst our various camps on side issues, rather than joining hands under our King and wrestling with the beating heart of the message of Jesus to corporately advance His Kingdom of goodness and healing on this sorry and needy planet. Unity implies diversity. It also implies cooperation.
 - (2) As Dallas Willard noted, the only thing that can hold Christians of so many different viewpoints and traditions together is what we are after in these talks: Discipleship to Christ. After all, that is what each of us, regardless of our denomination or affiliation, is to be perusing.
- g) Finally, I will tell you a few things that will greatly increase your ability to benefit from this material.

- (1) I have gone through this material with several groups. In doing so, I have consistently gotten the feedback that this material is exciting and deeply encouraging, but is also challenging for people. This is because what you will find here is quite a different way of thinking about the Christian life than what you may have been exposed to. Frankly, this curriculum is just as much about helping you to unlearn, as it is about helping you to learn. Now, the fact of the matter is that rethinking the way that we have long understood the world is never easy. It is uncomfortable at times. Just as we can see that it was for the disciples throughout the gospels. As a result of this discomfort, we have every tendency to revert to old ways of thinking.
- (2) To help you along, there are several aids available.
 - (a) First of all, the word-for-word transcripts of each talk are posted online.
 - (i) All of the Scriptures are italicized with accompanying chapter and verse references in the transcripts. Take time to dive in and poke around those Scriptures would be my hearty recommendation! Especially when ideas or concepts are introduced that you find to be difficult, confusing, or contrary to your current notions.
 1. To help you with this, Enduring Word is a free app that you can download to your phone or access online. It is an easy to understand and very easy to navigate commentary on the entire Bible. There are many ideas in it that I disagree with. Just like there are many ideas the various thinkers that I mentioned earlier have said, that I disagree with. But it will get you started in wrestling with these Scriptures, and it is always at your fingertips, which is no small thing.
 - (b) Other than the transcripts, there are two additional resources available on the website. First, there are a few brief discussion questions posted for each talk on the website. We will use them as a springboard for discussion in our meetings. As you are able, spend some time pondering them and trying to find the answers in the talk before our meetings.
 - (c) Second, on the website, you will find a discussion handout for each talk. Don't worry too much about this. It is what we will use in our in-person weekly group discussions as we go through the ideas in each talk section by section.
 - (ii) To summarize, learning this material is an active process, just like learning automobile repair or algebra. Learning this material will take significant effort on your part.
 - (1) What this means is that while these are technically *talks*, you will find passively listening to them to be inadequate.
 - (2) To effectively process these ideas, it will take dedicated time wandering around in this material. Like wandering around and exploring a forest. Curiosity, exploration, and discovery are all part of the adventure. I would recommend Googling things. Referencing the Bible. Sitting and quietly thinking through some of the more confusing material. Chatting with thoughtful friends about it.

You might consider making your own outline of each talk, or at taking notes. Repetition is definitely required.

- (3) Many people think infrequently and superficially about the deep issues of life.

And the result of that is a life lived based on instinct and circumstance.

Inconsistent. But, the Bible commands us in many different ways to spend significant time thinking and pondering our lives as well as spiritual issues. It is just full of phrases like these: ...*Meditate on these things (Philippians 4:8)* ... *Set your mind on things above (Colossians 3:2)*...*Remember (Deut. 16:12)*.

- (a) It took me many years of studying this material, in various formats, to grasp these ideas, despite having had formal theological education myself. Don't be discouraged that it's a long road. The journey itself is terribly important and is uniquely transformative. As J.R.R Tolkien said "Not all who wander are lost." As long as you are wandering in the right places, that is. And wandering in the forest of these ideas is a good kind of wandering.

- (b) I am still wandering around the Bible myself, and always will be. After all, as Anselm of Canterbury put it, the Christian life is a journey of "faith seeking understanding."

THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES PART 1 – WHAT ARE THEY? WHY DO THEM? HOW SHOULD WE DO THEM?

1. We will begin our curriculum with a discussion of the spiritual practices.
 - a. They really belong at the end of the curriculum, where they could be properly understood in the overall context of our life with Christ. But because we are committed to the practices as a community, and are doing them from day one, we want to be doing the practices right from the start in a way that is helpful. Which, we will see, takes some careful thought and the right approach.
 - b. What are the Christian spiritual practices? Not to shock you too much out of the gate here, but, in my opinion, the most direct way of putting it would be to say that they are portals to another Reality. Along those same lines, Dallas Willard says that a spiritual practice is “an activity that is in our power and enables us to achieve by grace what we cannot achieve by direct effort.”
 - c. Now, there is no standardized list of Christian spiritual practices. Instead, the practices are religious exercises of different sorts that we see modeled and also often commanded in the Bible. And that is why we make a regular practice of these things. Sometimes, the practices are also referred to as the spiritual disciplines. Some of the practices involve taking a break from things, some involve doing things. Some of them are individual activities, some are done in a group setting. In their various forms, they are each special, unique, and vital to the Christian life.
 - i. To get a better feel for what these practices are, if you look at our website, you will find our charter for this community. This charter lists the practices that we as a community are committed to. This list is a basic framework for a well-rounded, balanced and Biblical integration of the practices into your own life.
 - ii. In this talk we will first discuss both the why and the how of the practices generally. Then, we will discuss several of the specific practices in detail. There are practices that we will not be discussing in detail. That is not because they are unimportant. It is because these tend to be fairly well emphasized and understood in most Christian circles. Worship, celebration, and fellowship are examples of this.
 - d. Having laid that basic groundwork, we will now spend the rest of the talk discussing what the spiritual practices are, and how they fit into the Christian life.
2. Let’s start by considering: what is the Christian life?
 - a. The Christian life begins when we open ourselves to the reality of God.
 - i. When we ask Him to come to us, He does. And two different things immediately happen:
 - b. First, we are accepted and forgiven. Let’s talk about that now.
 - i. As Blaise Pascal pointed out, humans are an extremely complex mix of both greatness and wretchedness. Capable of remarkable acts of sacrifice and love, but simultaneously prone to significant selfishness and aggression. But these are not equal and opposite tendencies. If we were

to remove the element of mercy, in the final analysis, when we are weighed in the balance, we will always be found morally deficient. Given the extent of our depravity, our own efforts will never tip the scales the other direction.

- ii. But when we ask God for His help, we open ourselves to God's provision. And then, something very deep, profound and mysterious happens. From there on, we are bonded with Christ. As a result, we actually participate in Christ's life, including His death and resurrection. And this means that, just as Christ was in the right, so we too are now "in the right," and are forgiven our sins. Here is a summary of the situation.

- 1. *"Having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions". Colossians 2:12-13*

- iii. As a result of this wonderful turn of events, we can live entirely free from concerns of punishment from the hand of God, and free of fear or guilt.

- 1. This is all on the basis of a gracious provision God on our behalf. It is not something we achieve or contribute toward. Instead, it is something we simply receive, with humble gratitude. The practices, for instance, have nothing to do with this.

- a. Here is how Jesus explained this.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Luke 18: 9-14

- b. We are that corrupt, condemned tax collector. God is the gracious forgiver. And we must be mindful always to maintain that attitude of humility, rooted in the actual reality of our standing before God, is what Jesus was teaching.

- i. Jesus was pointing out that we have a constant tendency to drift away from this humble appraisal of ourselves. To overlook our faults and exaggerate our virtues. To look down on others. And if we are operating from that arrogant state, the spiritual practices will feed into our arrogance.
 - ii. The spiritual practices need to be done from a position of humility. We do them because we are frail and sinful, and so we need them.
 - c. Now, we will discuss the second thing that occurs at the start of the Christian life.
 - i. Despite being accepted and forgiven, we are, as we just mentioned, still a complicated mess of sin, insecurity, hangups and hurts. God doesn't just leave us in that state. What does He do about it? As a result of Christ's loving decision to identify with us, Christ's Person merges with our person. We receive His Spirit, the Holy Spirit. "*And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.*" (Romans 8:9) says Romans. We can see from this passage that the Bible teaches that receiving the Spirit of Christ is not a separate event that occurs later on the Christian experience. Instead, it occurs at our initial turning from our old life, and toward God.
 - ii. The Bible at times describes receiving the Holy Spirit as an additional birth, a new birth. It teaches that prior to the new birth, we are dead. Physically, we are alive. But the kind of life that humans were meant to have, the most important kind of life, is not there. In that dead state, deep down under all the nice clothes we wear and the nice language we use, beneath all the coping mechanisms, the core of who we are is deeply fractured. In this state, efforts to change the essence of who we are, are futile. We can manage our behaviors, but we will still be the same kind of person. But the new birth changes everything. It is the touch point of God's life coming into our life.
 - iii. What is the result of the Spirit of Christ indwelling and acting in a cooperative person? To see this, let's go back to the initial giving of the Spirit, at Pentecost. You will notice two things occurred at that time. Fire and wind.
 - 1. In the Bible, fire has to do with purification and refinement.
 - a. Fire is dangerous, isn't it? It's hot. It burns things.
 - b. That is how God is. "*Our God is a consuming fire.*" *Hebrews 12:29*
 - c. Well, what exactly *does* God consume? Everything? No. Instead, He consumes everything that is evil and unhealthy, leaving the good stuff intact. And that includes any corruption in ourselves.
 - i. Now, God doesn't take any pleasure in this, but the fact is that sometimes it hurts, it burns, getting the

- rotten stuff out. Because a part of us is dying...it can, at times, be painful.
- ii. Now, do not be afraid of God. That fire is not going to come on you by force. If you want to stay away, you can stay away. Far away in the dark in the cold with the disease and unhappiness festering away inside you. Or you can move toward the healing light, braving its burn, moving past it into wholeness and freedom.
2. But the other thing we notice at Pentecost is wind. Wind being associated in the Scriptures with God's creative and life-giving activity.
 - a. For example, when God creates the world, we see the Spirit hovering over the waters, facilitating creation, in *Genesis 1*.
 - b. As another example, when Jesus is teaching Nicodemus in *John 3*, He notes that the wind is always at work in the background blowing around in ways we cannot predict or understand. It is causing trees to sway and what not. Jesus then teaches that in the same way God's Spirit is always invisibly acting in the background. In ways that we cannot understand, the Spirit works bringing life and goodness to people.
 3. The Spirit is fire and wind. Purification and creative activity.
 - a. "Grace perfects nature" as Aquinas observed. He said, "grace does not destroy nature, but fulfills its potential."
 - b. That is what God is in the business of, in so far as we will cooperate and allow Him to. Beautifying and enhancing your life to its full potential. That is what the Spirit, was doing hovering over that dark murky soup in *Genesis 1*. Forming it, organizing it, infusing it with beauty, goodness and energy.
 4. As the prophet Ezekiel predicted, this process of cooperating with the indwelling Spirit of God will have a profound effect in the very deepest parts of who we are. *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ezekiel 36:26-27*
 5. But what is the end point of all this growth? What, actually, are we becoming? You may find this shocking, but C.S. Lewis pointed out that if you were to now meet someone who is what we are to become, you would be strongly tempted to worship that person. Here is how 1 John puts it *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made*

known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

- iv. This is all so exciting. But actually, we have gotten far ahead of ourselves. We need to back up again to the start of the Christian life, the new birth. Now, a birth is not much by itself, is it? Because being born is only a starting point. What if a little tiny embryo in the mother's belly just stayed that way? It's got to grow, and become something else. And this process of we were discussing of maturing and healing, and becoming what we should be, is called **sanctification**. Through the process of becoming sanctified, we are bit by bit being freed from the controlling power of sin, growing into the moral character of God. Sanctification also involves our progressive learning how to cooperate with and then manifest God's power into the world around us.
- d. The Bible teaches that this ongoing process of growth and healing is not automatic. Instead, it requires effort on our part. It is a dance that has two partners, both God and yourself.
 - i. Recall that forgiveness and acceptance only involve effort on God's part. They do not involve effort on our part.
 - ii. But sanctification involves both action on God's part, and effort on our part.
 - 1. "Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action." said Dallas Willard
 - iii. Some Christians are suspicious of any talk regarding the role of works or effort in the Christian life. And when you start talking about a definite life plan of spiritual practices and other spiritual efforts, they get uneasy. They wonder, "isn't Christianity about simply accepting grace and a free gift of pardon?"
 - 1. Accepting a pardon is one part of what of what Christianity is about, but Christianity is much more than that. For one thing, when you think about it, simply accepting a pardon and stopping there destroys any purpose to Christian living. We would be simply waiting around to die and go to Heaven.
 - 2. We want to be saved by faith, not paralyzed by faith.
 - iv. The New Testament says many times, in many ways, that Christian growth requires effort on our part.
 - 1. ***Make every effort...to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. Heb 12:14***
 - 2. ***I want to know Christ, to know the power of his resurrection and sharing his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to***

*what lies ahead, **I press** on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3: 10-14*

3. *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. **No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave** so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27*
4. Why does Christian growth require vigorous effort on our part?
 - a. Because God cannot snap His fingers and instantly transform us. Not without turning us into robots or into puppets. We are responsible for who we are. That is core of what a human being is.
- v. And so effort is required on our part. But sanctification is not simply the result of our own efforts. The Holy Spirit that we are given at the new birth is active and helping every step of the process, making all the difference. God, as a good God, loves us and is always looking for spots and trying to help us. He will therefore always act in our lives in so far as we allow Him to. And that is the Biblical idea of grace. Grace is, people like to say, “unmerited favor.” Unmerited favor is a good definition of grace because grace is help that God gives to us, which we do not deserve. But we must understand that God’s help to us, His grace, takes many forms, beyond simply the forgiveness of sins. If you page through the New Testament and find the many places where the word *grace* is used, and you scribble *grace* out, and instead substitute the words “forgiveness of sins” you will see that many passages when read this way make no sense at all. That is because, in these passages, the word *grace* is instead being used to describe an acting of God in us to increase our capabilities beyond our natural abilities. Dallas Willard said this “**Grace** is God acting in our lives.” Because of this, Dallas Willard noted the following: “It is not sinners who use up grace, it is saints. Saints burn it up at astonishing rates, like a 747-airliner going through jet fuel.” He also points out that “even if we had never sinned, we would still need grace.”
- vi. We can see a balanced perspective on Christian growth in the following passage from 2 Peter:
 1. ***His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to***

add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 2 Peter 1:3-7

- a. Notice that you are given a very good reason to *make every effort*, a reason that your efforts will not be in vain. We are told to *make every effort* to become Christlike because *His Divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life*.
 - b. And what is this everything that we need for a godly life? *Participation in the divine nature*. Pretty weighty stuff. Are you comfortable with that idea? Participating in the nature of God?
 - c. Want to *add* a few things to your faith? *Goodness? Knowledge? Self-control? Perseverance? Godliness? Mutual affection? Love?*
 - i. It takes both. *Participation in the divine nature. And making every effort.*
3. And how do we *make every effort*? What kinds of specific efforts should we make to grow in godliness? How do you start burning up some of that jet fuel? That is where the practices come in. The spiritual practices are not simply self-help or self-discipline exercises. Instead, they are unique from all other human actions, because they are special ways that we can open the door to God's grace, His activity, in our lives. Here are two examples of this from Scripture:
 - a. Consider when Jesus's disciples tried to cast a demon and could not, what did he tell them? *"This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting."* Mark 9:29
 - i. He did not just tell them try harder. He did not tell them really just go for it, really just believe, or have faith, or depend on the Spirit. He told them something different. We can see that there are necessary preparatory efforts on our part. In this case, prayer and fasting.
 - b. What did Jesus tell his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane? *"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."* Matthew 26:14
 - i. Watching and praying were necessary. He tried to tell his disciples that without these practices, that they would not be able to succeed in the critical moment of testing. But the disciples did not watch and pray. They were asleep. And the result was as Jesus predicted.
4. You see, temptation and evil are always present and active, and coming at us in new and unexpected ways. That is why the practices must be a regular, ongoing part of our Christian life.
 - a. They are like breathing. We need that oxygen on an ongoing basis. The practices are necessary to human life and flourishing.
 - b. Jesus Himself lived by these practices. And so, in keeping these practices, we are adopting the overall style of life that Jesus lived, as Dallas Willard observed.
5. Another thing we can note from those two examples is that the practices involve our whole person.

- a. Sometimes we tend to think that the entirety of the spiritual life is what someone believes. We talk as if we are just going to have to pass that theology test at the Pearly Gates. But new and better ideas alone are an inadequate to the problem we face as embodied, multifaceted creatures.
 - i. We need to be renovated through and through. The will, the feelings, the mind, our habits, the social life, the emotions, our bodies (including our neurons and hormones), and so on.
 - ii. And the spiritual practices heal these different parts of us. Fasting, for instance, involves other parts of you besides just your mind. Fasting works on your body, your will, your emotions.
 - b. Right ideas are crucial. But right ideas by themselves are not enough. For instance, having the right ideas of what we need to do is not very helpful, if we do not have the ability to do it.
 - i. When we are evangelizing people or really just for anyone and everyone in our churches, we must be making this clear to them.
 - c. We must have a comprehensive plan to renovate the whole human person.
 - i. If you cannot join or start a community like this one, at a minimum, find a partner. Write down on a piece of paper your specific weekly commitments to the practices that you will both commit to. And then meet with them every one to two weeks and discuss adherence to the practices.
 - 1. Having a partner will dramatically increase your success in living the Christian life, just like having a work out partner will dramatically increase your success at getting in shape.
6. Let's next discuss some common mistakes and pitfalls with the practices.
- a. First, the practices must be done in a balanced, wholesome way, as part of a sensible life. Moderation is very important.
 - i. For example, we are not supposed to spend all day every day sitting in a chair in a dedicated time of prayer. That is not what Jesus did.
 - ii. Take fasting. We are fasting one day every other week. Why is that? Don't we wanna really burn through that jet fuel? Why not four or five days a week?
 - 1. Because it is not balanced or helpful to fast too often.
 - 2. That is the same reason we are not fasting once a quarter. It is not balanced or helpful to do it too rarely either.
 - a. The Christian life is a balanced life. Abstinence and engagement both have a place.
 - b. And so, fasting has to be balanced by feasting and celebration.
 - c. You know what's a great Bible verse?, *Deuteronomy 14:26*
 - d. *And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.*
 - b. With the disciplines, more is not always better.

- i. Be careful of extreme thinking.
 - ii. Augustine pointed out that perfect moderation was harder than complete abstinence.
- c. Another pitfall with the practices is legalism.
 - i. The practices are to help you grow in your ability to love God and to love others. The practices are not things we do for their own sake.
 - 1. There are people who have made the practices and other types of religious types of activities a major priority in their lives, while neglecting to keep love central and first. That is a sure-fire path to becoming a self-righteous prig.
 - 2. For instance, it is good to break a practice, when necessary, in loving God or others. That point was a tension with Jesus and the religious teachers, wasn't it? "How can you break the sabbath?" they asked him. "Because I have my priorities in order", He told them. Because a situation would happen where someone needed to be healed, and you don't turn away from that, do you?
 - 3. As another example, there was a time when I had reached the limit for screen viewing, with that practice. And my four-year-old came up to me. During her screen time. Sweet as pie. All full of the lovey-doveys and wanting to spend time with me and have me snuggle with her while she watched her cartoon. What did I say? "No way!" No, of course I snuggled and watched it. Use your common sense is what I am saying, and keep the goal in mind.
 - 4. In *Galatians (5:6)* Paul says, *the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love*. The rest is just going to wash away when the tide goes out. Make sure your spiritual practices are always to that end.
- d. We are out of time for today. To review, we saw that Christian maturation requires vigorous effort on our part, as well as on the part of the Spirit living within us. In Christian living, preparatory efforts, such as the practices, are necessary on our part in order for us to succeed in critical moments of testing...just like our practicing the piano would be necessary before giving a public performance. The practices are special ways we invite God's grace, His activity, into our lives, and participate with it.

Father, help us to learn to live, always, in participation with you.
Amen.

Reflection

- The teachers of the law in Jesus's day were diligent in keeping the spiritual practices. However, the practices did not benefit them. Why is that?
- Why doesn't God just snap his fingers and instantly turn us into perfect Christians? Why does sanctification require effort on our part?

- Explain the following quotes by Dallas Willard. “It is not sinners who use up grace, it is saints. Saints burn it up at astonishing rates, like a commercial airliner going through jet fuel.” “Even if we had never sinned, we would still need grace.”

Why are preparatory efforts, such as the practices, necessary on our part in order for us to succeed in critical moments of testing?