

Discipline, Discipleship and Stickers
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Scripture Text: Matthew 19:16-22

Note: Please excuse the incorrect sentence structure you will encounter in any of my sermon manuscripts. I write sermons with accessibility and emphasis in mind. At times, I feel that a looser use of the English language lends to a more conversational style and helps minimize a *read-to* feeling when preaching from a manuscript or notes.

Mt 19:6-22 Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Have you ever experienced the wondrous power of stickers? I’m sure the children among us know what I am talking about. Stickers are fun. They’re colorful and silly. Some of them have goofy sayings; others you can “scratch and sniff.” You can stick them to anything – paper, walls, car windows, your hands, your forehead. Teachers know the wondrous power of stickers. When I student taught second grade, the teacher I worked under used sticker charts in the first month of school to get students used to class rules. It worked too. The students were eager to fill their charts and claim a cool reward from the class toy jar. So they behaved. They learned the class rules and they sought to live into the *kingdom* of the classroom -- to be “good”...because they wanted those stickers and that prize. After a few weeks, discipline in the classroom was under control and the teacher and I could move beyond the stickers, focusing instead on identifying the things that would internally motivate and help each of the children to continue journeying a path of learning.

In the Gospel of Matthew, not long before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time, a young man approaches Jesus with stickers and prizes on the brain. “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” he asks. Jesus responds by redirecting the man’s focus, “Why do you ask about what is good? There is only one who is good.” “Your focus and motivation are all messed up,” he seems to say; “You are stuck in the sticker system. You are motivated by what you see as an end prize – eternal life -- something enjoyed by those in the presence of God. You can’t get *there* from *here*, stuck in your mindset of seeking to know what good deed you must do.” And yet, Jesus doesn’t leave things at that. Like my supervising teacher did, Jesus knew the necessity for behavioral and spiritual discipline in getting people to-a-place where they could truly live into the Kingdom. He knew that this man needed discipline in order to get on the right path, in order to SEEK...the *one* who is good. And so he tells the man, “If you wish to enter into

life, keep the commandments.” Again, however, the man doesn’t get it. As if Jesus had never rebuked him for incorrect focus, the man goes right back to trying to fill out his sticker chart – his recipe card for eternal life. And since he appears, in the Gospel of Matthew, to want to take the *easiest* route to eternity, he again focuses on good deed specifics and asks, “Which ones?” This time Jesus plays along at the young man’s level, referencing interpersonal commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “Check, check, check, check, check, check; the young man says, ‘I have kept all these; what sticker do I still lack?’” And seeing that despite disciplinary practices, this man still did not know how to be a true *disciple*, a follower with focus on-the-world rather than the reward jar, Jesus lays it on the line: If you wish to be complete – if you wish to be completely grown – “If you wish to be perfect,” the NRSV says, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” But “when the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

You see – the young man was living a divided, *incomplete* life. As he focused on eternal life, he sought to discipline himself towards that end goal by filling his good deed sticker chart and earning his place at the eternal life reward jar. He saw spiritual discipline as the means to a personal end – his personal end – rather than the necessary preparatory work towards and throughout the ongoing journey of discipleship. By following rules, he sought to cast grappling hooks into the kingdom that would link his life to the eternal life to come. But there were things the man didn’t understand. He didn’t understand that actions of discipline are meant not to *bridge* one’s life to life eternal, but to bring one into a place of *wholeness* – where our heart and our actions and our focus dwell together and where true discipleship can happen. Discipline itself is not discipleship. “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus asks. Prepare your heart so that you can focus on the *one* who is good. God – the one who is good – wants *all* of you (not just your token good deeds). Your practices of discipline should, therefore, operate in no less a manner than to take you to that place of wholeness.

The young man’s disciplining practices weren’t getting him to that place of wholeness. And so Jesus seeks to help him reorient his vision. Stop focusing on your stickers and trying to cast hooks into heaven, Jesus seems to say. Instead of focusing on deeds and life beyond -- that you *think* will bring wholeness -- embrace wholeness here and now. Focus not on stickers and rewards, but on the world around you. And when you do – when you set your eyes on your neighbors, placing your treasure and your heart in the world – then will you find that you have treasure in heaven and the Kingdom of God. *Because you have lived* into the *communal* Kingdom of God rather than tried to escape it in search of reward on the other side of death.

When it comes down to it, it’s a question of whole-ing stewardship. As God has made us stewards of our lives, our communities and the world, the proper question is definitely not, “what good deed must I do to have eternal life,” as the young man in the story asks, but rather, “what must I do to seek wholeness – to be complete?” Jesus’ answer deserves another listen: If you wish to be complete, you must give away that which you have –

that which you value -- to those in need around you. In this way, your treasure will be established in heaven – in God’s will and vision – in the Kingdom of God -- rather than in earthly things. “Then come, follow me.” Jesus’ answer contains nothing less than whole-ing discipline and discipleship.

A couple of years ago, at a church I was serving while in seminary, the fourth through sixth grade youth group and I spent a month talking about stewardship. Now please don’t think that I wasn’t trying to brainwash them into emptying their piggy banks into the offering plate. Rather, because their church was beginning their annual stewardship campaign, I recognized that they were going to be hearing this word, “stewardship” tossed around a lot in the near future, and I wanted them to be insiders in the congregation’s conversation. The point I stressed over and over with them was that they may often hear the word “stewardship” mentioned in relationship to money (and that is an important part of stewardship), but that stewardship itself is bigger than that. Stewardship is about taking care of that which you have – your money, your resources, your talents, your time, your body, your earth, your family and neighbors, your church – taking care of those things in an intentional way that gives back to God. I particularly like this definition from Robert Hastings: “Stewardship is the management of life and all its resources for God and for the good of all.” To be a faithful *steward* is to be a manager for God of one’s life and resources – which really – are God’s anyway, not ours. Coming off of a couple of weeks where the kids and I had been talking about the spiritual discipline of prayer, the fourth through sixth graders and I began to talk about stewardship as a whole-ing spiritual discipline. I shared with them *my* efforts at being a faithful steward. And I share what I told them with you now (not because I want to make anyone feel uneasy about your own efforts of stewardship, but simply to witness to one aim at being a good steward). In the area of money, from the age of 18, I have given 10% percent of my income to the church and charity. This started when I made as little as \$32 dollars a week. When I got my first full-time job, I gave more -- 10% to the church and about 4% directly to charity above that. When I gave up my full-time job and entered seminary, although I had to suspend my church giving as I scraped by on a very small income, I did manage to make the sacrifices necessary to give about 10% to continue supporting a child I’ve sponsored in Colombia since 2001. Beyond money, I have volunteered at church, in the conference, at Camp Mo-Val, on various mission projects and trips, at MS Society walks and bike rides and occasionally tutored to kids behind in their reading and writing skills. I have become a faithful recycler and energy-conscious citizen. I have worked hard to maintain a healthy lifestyle and care for the body God has given me – exercising as regularly as possible and taking care for what I put in my body. As a result, I am able to maintain good energy that helps me serve God to the best of my ability. Seeking to take care of my family – I have strived to better relationships with my siblings and to build a relationship with my young nephew. Caring for my neighbors, I have participated in social justice activities such as letter-writing, boycotts, support of socially just clothing companies, protests, an awareness-building trip to Palestine and subsequent church presentations on what I encountered. *All* of these activities have been efforts of stewardship.

In all of these ways and others, I have spiritually disciplined myself by seeking to be a good steward of my WHOLE life FOR GOD. I have done my best to discipline myself in these ways *not* because I see them as things that earn me stickers towards some particularly fabulous, individual ending, but because I want to be a disciple with a heart who can follow Jesus in the world -- for the sake of the world and the particularly fabulous vision of God. And I know that my heart is shaped by my efforts of stewardship. I have found that it is an ongoing effort, rather than a journey with an end. I am forever “whole-ing” myself – striving for wholeness. I believe this is as it should be. For it is *in the midst of the effort* to be a good steward that I become a person who can follow God – who is continually dedicated to being the kind of person who can follow God as each day comes. And so each Sunday, I engage worship and church activities seeking whole-ing stewardship. Each morning, when my alarm goes off sooner than I would like, I remind myself that stewardship includes taking care of myself through exercise so I can serve God with stamina (sometimes I listen to myself and sometimes I don’t, but I do at least *hear* that voice of stewardship). Each month, as various events or activities for which I have volunteered approach, I remind myself of what it means to be a good steward of my time and talents. Each time I stand by the recycling bins and trash can, I think about stewardship. Each time I call or visit my nephew, I am seeking to be a good steward of what God has given me. Each day when I watch, hear or read the world news, I think about how I should respond as a steward. And each year...I fill out my church’s pledge card *in the midst of my stewardship efforts*, knowing from experience that the words of Matthew 6:21 are so very true: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Where my treasure is, there my heart will be also. Those things that I value in myself and in my life – what I do with them and where I place them draws my heart to those places and shapes me as a Christian, helping or hindering me from following Jesus. And because none of us live an isolated existence, what we do with our treasure also effects those around us, our world, our God and God’s mission as it is sought through the Church.

Where my treasure is, there my heart will be also. My heart has been drawn to many places in life where I have placed my treasure. For example, coming to St. Peter’s: when I arrived here at St. Peter’s, I didn’t *automatically* love you folks. I felt called to serve among you and from what I learned about the congregation prior to coming, I knew I would like you, but there wasn’t some magical love switch I just turned on. I came, placing my treasures among you – my time, my talents, my faith, my and Jamie’s uprooted lives, and a generous portion of our incomes. We did all this not because we loved you on Day One, but because we trusted...we trusted in my call and we trusted that Jesus would be right: where my treasure is, there my heart will be also.

As we *all* approach Pentecost’s Commitment Sunday next week for our “Let the Light Shine Through” debt reduction campaign *AND* as we think forward to what our commitments of time, talents and tithes to St. Peter’s might be in 2010, I want to invite *you* to think about discipline, discipleship and the whole-ing call of God. I want you to think about whether you are trying to practice discipline (such as prayer, Bible study, giving of money, giving of time, care for yourself, your community and your church, and other practices of stewardship) – I want you to think about whether you are trying to

practice these disciplines without discipleship or conversely, discipleship without discipline. Are we investing in habits that will shape us into a community of disciples who can follow Jesus? Are we here to become disciples or are we only here to *get* something from the church experience, doing the odd thing here and there for a shiny sticker? Do we want to be *complete*? Do we want to be whole-ing followers? Jesus said to the man, go and do this if you want to be perfect. THEN, come follow me. It's time to stop casting lines into the reward jar or attempting to fill in recipe-like, salvation Bingo cards. I want *all* of you, God says. May the reign of divided lives in pursuit of the Kingdom end; and may we realize what it means to live *into* God's Kingdom...as faithful, whole-ing stewards...in and with the world, for God's glory and vision. Amen.