

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: PERSEVERANCE

It's good to have spiritual heroes of the faith. It is good to know of faithful and godly men, consider their life, and imitate their faith. In no way would this be idolizing people because this is exactly what the Bible tells us we *should* do. Just consider the letter to the Hebrews where the writer says:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith (Heb 13:7).

This year with PointMen, we have been considering the spiritual disciplines. In this session, we are going to be considering what it looks like to persevere in the spiritual disciplines through the faithful lives of some ordinary men who God used mightily. We will look at three of the spiritual disciplines: evangelism, prayer, and Bible intake.

WITH EVANGELISM

When it comes to evangelism, perseverance can be particularly difficult. This could be for any number of reasons: fear of man's response, lack of immediate results, feeling inadequate to speak to people and answer their questions, or other reasons we might give. The person who I admire and respect for his evangelistic efforts is Ray Comfort. He is part of the evangelism series called "The Way of the Master," which taught many how to understand and persevere in evangelism. He was gracious, yet firm in his encouragements to stay fervent in one's evangelism efforts. I remember an interaction he had with a Christian college student. He asked what her motivation for

evangelism was. She replied, “love of God.” Ray asked her if she shared the gospel with unbelievers on a regular basis, and her reply was “no.” Ray then asked her if she was incentivized by earning a \$1,000 for every person she shared the gospel with, would she share the gospel more? She said yes. Ray agreed with her and said that if Christians were incentivized with money to evangelize, then many believers would engage in “4 am- flashlight evangelism.” He asked her a pointed question, and said, “It seems like you can find more time and motivation to share the gospel for your love of money when you can’t seem to find it for the love of God.” Then, he gently reminded this student that Jesus said you cannot serve both God and money (Matt 6:24; Lk 16:13). How much we love God will show – to some degree – in our efforts and perseverance in evangelism. One example of zeal in evangelism is John Harper.

John Harper (1872-1912)¹

John Harper was born in Scotland in 1872. When he was a teenager, he repented of his sins and became a Christian. From that time on – *at fourteen years old* – he began to share the gospel incessantly. When he was seventeen years old, he started going down the streets of his hometown and engaged in open-air preaching, making a heartfelt plea for people to repent of their sins and be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. After about five years of preaching on the streets of his town, he was noticed by another pastor, and taken into the Baptist Pioneer Mission. This allowed Harper to do his heart’s desire full-time: *evangelism*. Not too long after that, in 1896, John Harper started a small church with 25 members.

Harper’s eventful life seems to foreshadow the events when his life would end. He almost drowned several times. When he was 2 years old, he fell into a well but was resuscitated by his very own mother. When he was 26 years old, he was swept out

¹ Moody Adams, *The Titanic’s Last Hero: A Startling True Story That Can Change Your Life Forever* (Ambassador International, 2011).

to sea by a rip current and barely survived. When he was 32, he faced death when he was on a leaking ship in the Mediterranean Sea. He faced additional tragedies in his life when in 1906, his wife died, soon after giving birth to their only child, a daughter named Annie Jessie Harper, who was nicknamed "Nan." Even with these difficulties, Harper was steadfast in sharing the gospel to the lost.

Across the Atlantic, Moody Church in Chicago took notice of Harper's zeal for evangelism, and the church asked him to come and speak on a series of meetings. He accepted the invitation, made the journey, and the meetings went well. They went so well, Moody Church asked him to come back, and Harper accepted again. In 1912 he boarded a ship departing from Southampton, England, for the trip to America.

We only know what happened to John Harper on that voyage to America because of two sources. One of them was little Nan, who was on the ship with her father. She lives until 1986 when she died at 80 years old. She remembered being woken up a few nights into the voyage. It was about midnight, and their ship had struck something. John Harper told Nan that another ship was coming to rescue them, but until that ship came, Harper was going to put Nan into a lifeboat with her older cousin who had accompanied them. Harper would wait until the rescue ship arrived.

The rest of this story of the sinking ship is well documented because when they departed from Southampton, England, they were on the *Titanic* the night it hit an iceberg on April 14th, 1912. Two hours and forty-five minutes after the *Titanic* struck the iceberg, she sank beneath the frigid waters of the northern Atlantic. For fifty minutes, cries of help could be heard in the black night. Eva Hart, a passenger on the *Titanic*, was seven years old at the time. She said:

The sound of people drowning is something that I cannot describe to you. And neither can anyone else. It is a most dreadful sound, and there is a dreadful silence that follows it.

During those fifty dreadful minutes, a young man was clinging to a piece of

wood, and he told the story of John Harper's last hours of life because at a prayer meeting in Hamilton, Ontario, several months later. He explained that he was on the Titanic the night it struck the iceberg, and the last conversation John Harper had.

"Suddenly," he said, "a wave brought a man near, John Harper. He, too, was holding a piece of wreckage."

He called out, "Man, are you saved?"

"No, I am not," I replied.

"He shouted back, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.'

"The waves bore [Harper] away, but a little later, he was washed back beside me again. "Are you saved now?" he called out.

"No," I answered. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

The young Scotsman then said, "Then bereft of strength, his hold on the wood gave, and he sank. And there, alone in the night with two miles of water under me, I trusted Christ as my savior. I am John Harper's last convert."

The man to whose soul Harper had, with his last breath, thrown a verbal lifeline indeed ended up being a saved man. With his dying breaths, John Harper was evangelizing even as his failing grip led him to a watery grave, miles at the bottom of the frigid Atlantic Ocean. John Harper's faith in the promises of God produced an energy, an enthusiasm in God, even when he was fearful that his own life was in jeopardy. Above all, he was zealous and enthusiastic for the salvation of the lost. And he never needed \$1,000 for motivation.

Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843)

He was a Scottish Presbyterian minister, who died at the young age of 29 years old. Despite this, he was an enormous influence on the church, and you are likely familiar with his daily bible reading plan that bears his name. He recalled a striking story of evangelism and of love of souls that he told to his congregation.

Moravian Missionaries (Present Day Czech Republic)

The most striking example of self-devotedness in the cause of Christ of which I ever heard in these days of deadness, was told here last week by an English minister. It has never been printed, and therefore I will relate it to you, just as I heard it, to stir up our cold hearts, that we may give ourselves to the Lord.

The awful disease of leprosy still exists in Africa. Whether it be the same leprosy as that mentioned in the Bible, I do not know, but it is regarded as incurable, and so infectious that no one dares to come near the leper. In the south of Africa there is a large [quarantines facility] for lepers. It is an immense space, enclosed by a very high wall, and containing fields, which the lepers cultivate. There is only one entrance, which is strictly guarded. Whenever anyone is found with the marks of leprosy upon him, he is brought to this gate and obliged to enter in, never to return. No one who enters in by that awful gate is ever allowed to come out again.

Within this abode of misery there are multitudes of lepers in all stages of the disease. Dr. Halbeck, a missionary of the Church of England, from the top of a neighboring hill, saw them at work.

He noticed two particularly sowing peas in the field: The one had no hands, the other had no feet—these members being wasted away by disease. The one who [lacked] the hands was carrying the other who [lacked] the feet upon his back, and he again carried in his hands the bag of seed, and dropped a pea every now and then, which the other pressed into the ground with his foot; and so they managed the work of one man between the two. Ah! how little we know of the misery that is in the world! Such is this prison house of disease.

But you will ask, who cares for the souls of the hapless inmates? Who will venture to enter in at this dreadful gate, never to return again? Who will forsake father and mother, houses and land, to carry the message of a Savior to these poor lepers? Two Moravian missionaries, impelled by a divine love for souls, have chosen the

[quarantine facility] as their field of labor. They entered it never to come out again; and I am told that as soon as these die, other Moravians are quite ready to fill their place.

Ah! my dear friends, may we not blush, and be ashamed before God, that we, redeemed with the same blood, and taught by the same Spirit, should yet be so unlike these men in vehement, heart-consuming love to Jesus and the souls of men?

WITH PRAYER

Have you ever asked yourself what exactly prayer is? To best answer this question, we can ask when people started to pray and why. It is interesting to think of a time when there was *no prayer*. When Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, God spoke to them directly (Gen 1:28). When they sinned, they could no longer commune with God face to face, and they fled driven from the face of the Lord and were driven out the garden (Gen 3:8, 23-24). But God gave them a promise before they were driven from his presence in Gen 3:15 – which was a promise of a savior (Gen 3:15).

Later, in Genesis 4:26, we read “at that time, people began to call upon the name of the Lord.” This is the day that prayer began. In summary, it is most likely that prayer began when people were seeking God to keep his promises to them.² So, to “call on the name of the Lord” is to believe in the promises that God has made and to ask him to fulfill them.³ So, prayer is not primarily based on what we want to happen in the world, but what God wants to happen in our world. So, prayer is foremost us seeking God’s will in our lives, not the other way around.

² In context, there is a genealogy and a previous promise given (Gen 3:15) that is fulfilled through that genealogy – Eve’s. It had been 325 years since that promise was made to Adam and Eve, and people were likely wondering when this promise was going to be fulfilled. So, they began “calling on the name of the Lord” to ask him to remember his promise to send them a savior.

³ J. Gary Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 38, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL; England: InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2016), 23.

What is the purpose of prayer?

If we understand prayer this way, then the purpose of prayer becomes clear: to make us more like Jesus. More than anything, prayer is asking God for things to go as he desires, as he has determined, and according to his will. If his will is that we are to be more like him, then prayer is a means by which that is accomplished. This is why Jesus' model prayer says to pray that his will be done, on earth as it is done in heaven (Matt 6:10).

George Müller (1805-1898)

George Mueller was born on September 27, 1805 in, Prussia. His father, a tax collector, was what has been described as a "worldly man" who oddly gave his sons a great deal of money when they were very young, money they used foolishly. In fact, Mueller spent many of his early years going deeper and deeper into a sinful lifestyle that included lying, stealing (often from his father), gambling, licentiousness, extravagance, and what he has admitted was "gross immorality." Even his mother's death did not deter him. At sixteen he spent time in prison for defrauding a landlord. Later, he did enter the University of Halle with good testimonials, even earning the right to preach in the Lutheran Church, but he wasted all his money in profligate living accompanied by others like himself. No one could have imagined that he would ever be a man of God.

George was invited by a friend to attend a Bible study and prayer meeting at the University of Halle (Germany) in 1825, when he was twenty years old. George was convicted of his sins and turned to the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. As a new convert, he took very seriously the words of the Lord Jesus. He later married, and in 1832, and felt called to care for children who were orphans, and in 1836 they took in 32 orphan girls into their own home. Over the course of time, extending long after George Müller's death, over 18,000 children were spared from misery, poverty, and death by the life-giving power of the Gospel.

Broken Boiler

“It was towards the end of November of 1857, when I was most unexpectedly informed that the boiler of our heating apparatus at No. 1 leaked very considerably, so that it was impossible to go through the winter with such a leak. Our heating apparatus consists of a large cylinder boiler, inside of which the fire is kept, and within the boiler, the water pipes which warm the rooms are connected. Hot air is also connected with this apparatus. To suspect that it was worn out, and not to do anything towards replacing it by a new one, and to have said, I will trust in God regarding it, would be careless presumption, but not faith in God. It would be the counterfeit of faith.

The boiler is entirely surrounded by brickwork; [the damage], therefore, could not be known without taking down the brickwork. This, if needless, would be rather [damaging] to the boiler. But suddenly, and most unexpectedly, at the commencement of the winter, this difficulty occurred. What then was to be done? For the children, especially the younger infants, I felt deeply concerned, that they might not suffer, through [lack] of warmth. But how were we to obtain warmth? The introduction of a new boiler would, in all probability, take many weeks.

The repairing of the boiler was a questionable matter, on account of the greatness of the leak; but, if not, nothing could be said of it, till the brick-chamber in which it is enclosed, was, at least in part, removed; but that could, take days, and what was to be done in the meantime, to find warm rooms for 300 children? What was to be done? Gladly would I have paid £100, if thereby the difficulty could have been overcome, and the children not be exposed to suffer for many days from being in cold rooms. At last, I determined on falling entirely into the hands of God, who is very merciful and of tender compassion, and I decided on having the brick-chamber opened, to see the extent of the damage, and whether the boiler might be repaired, so as to carry us through the winter.

The day was fixed, when the workmen were to come, and all the necessary

arrangements were made. The fire, of course, had to be [put] out while the repairs were going on. But now see. After the day was fixed for the repairs, a bleak north wind set in. It began to blow either on Thursday or Friday before the Wednesday afternoon, when the fire was to be let out. Now came the first really cold weather, which we had in the beginning of that winter, during the first days of December. What was to be done? The repairs could not be put off. I now asked the Lord for two things: (1) that He would be pleased to change the north wind into a south wind (which brings warm air), and that He would give to the workmen 'a mind to work'; for I remembered how much Nehemiah accomplished in 52 days [while] building the walls of Jerusalem, because 'the people had a mind to work.' Well, the memorable day came.

The evening before, the bleak north wind blew still; but, on the Wednesday, the south wind blew: exactly as I had prayed. The weather was so mild that no fire was needed. The brickwork is removed, the leak is found out very soon, the boiler makers begin to repair in good earnest. About half-past eight in the evening, when I was going home, I was informed at the lodge that the [owner of the repair company], had arrived to see how the work was going on, and whether he could in any way speed the matter. I went immediately, therefore, into the cellar to see him with the men to seek to expedite the business. In speaking to the [boss], he said [to me in front of the workers], "the men will work late this evening, and come very early again tomorrow."

"We would rather, Sir," said the workers, "work all night." Then remembered I the second part of my prayer, that God would give the men "a mind to work." Thus, it was by the morning the repair was accomplished, the leak was stopped, though with great difficulty, and within about 30 hours the brickwork was up again, and the fire in the boiler; and all the time the south wind blew so mildly, that there was not the least need of a fire. "Here, then, is one of our difficulties which was overcome by prayer and faith."

Milk and Bread

Abigail (Townsend Luffe) was the youngest child of God-fearing parents. From [infancy] she was accustomed to hearing the reading of God's Word, and very early was taught the way of salvation. Her father was a close friend of the late George Muller, the man whose child-like faith in God bore fruit in the great orphanages in Bristol, England. So little Abbie early learned that faith in God brought things to pass. Later in life, an article was published in 1920, and she recalled an instance of answered prayer in Müller's orphanage:

Early one morning she was playing in Mr. Muller's garden at the orphanage. Mr. Muller took her hand saying, "Come, see what our Father will do," and he led her into a long dining-room. The plates and cups or bowls were on the table. There was nothing on the table but empty dishes. There was no food in the larder, and no money to supply the need. The children were standing waiting for their morning meal, when Mr. Muller said, "Children, you know we must be on time for school." Then lifting his hand said, "Dear Father, we thank Thee for what Thou are going to give us to eat." A knock at the door was heard. The baker stood there and said, "Mr. Muller, I couldn't sleep last night. Somehow, I felt you didn't have bread for breakfast, and the Lord wanted me to send you some. So, I got up at two o'clock and baked fresh bread and have brought it."

George Muller thanked the man and praised God for His care, then said, "Children, we not only have bread, but the rare treat of fresh bread." No sooner had he said this than there came a second knock at the door. This time it was a milkman. He said his milk cart had broken down right in front of the orphanage and seeing that the milk would spoil in the time it would take to fix the axle of the wagon, he would like to give the children his cans of fresh milk, so he could empty his wagon and repair it.

Perseverance in Prayer

Sometimes Meüller can be simply remembered as “the man who got things from God.”⁴ While it is true that God answered his prayers in extraordinary ways, it fails to know and understand the lifelong hardships that Meüller endured. He persevered through suffering, difficulty, and overwhelming circumstances by persevering in prayer.

WITH READING AND STUDYING

The reason Müeller is known as a man of great prayer is because he first was first greatly committed to the Scriptures. But it was not always so. There was a season in his life when he didn't read “careful and consecutive” reading of the Scriptures.

Mr. Mueller says: “I fell into the snare, into which so many young believers fall, the reading of religious books in preference to the Scriptures. I never had been at any time in my life in the habit of reading the Holy Scriptures. When under fifteen years of age, I occasionally read a little of them at school; afterwards God's precious book was entirely laid aside, so that I never read one single chapter of it, as far as I remember, till it pleased God to begin a work of grace in my heart. For I was aware, though I read it but little, that I knew scarcely anything of it.

But instead of acting thus, and being led by my ignorance of the word of God to study it more, my difficulty in understanding it, and the little enjoyment I had in it, made me careless of reading it (for much prayerful reading of the Word, gives not merely more knowledge, but increases the delight we have in reading it); and thus, like many believers, I practically preferred, for the first four years of my divine life, the works of uninspired men to the oracles of the living God. The consequence was, that I remained a babe, both in knowledge and grace. For when it pleased the Lord in Aug. 1829, to bring me really to the Scriptures, my life and walk became very different.

⁴ George Mueller and Rosalie De Rosset, *Answers to Prayer*, Moody Classics (Moody Publishers, 2007), introduction.

We Must Labor in the Word

The Bible – as a pattern – tells Christians that it is not going to give the riches and treasures of truth that it contains to those people who are not willing to work hard for it (Prov 3:3-6; 2 Tim 2:6; Ps 42:1; Ps 111:2). We must labor, ready, study, mediate on God's word and persevere in it.

GROUP DISCUSSION & QUESTIONS

1. What are some reasons you struggle to share the gospel with others?
2. What are some ways you can help yourself persevere in evangelism?
3. Do you have any opportunities or times that you intentionally set aside to practice the spiritual discipline of evangelism?
4. What is prayer? How does this understanding of prayer help you to persevere and be diligent to pray?
5. Every time you pray, do you think that the primary reason you are praying is to be more like Jesus? If not, how can you remind yourself the goal of prayer?
6. Do you intentionally set aside a time during your day to take time to pray?