

Five Things God Uses
Behind the Scenes
September 9, 2018

Overture – Day By Day

Drama – Quiet Time
Feature – Day By Day

Good morning everyone.

I really appreciate our band doing that song today because not only is it one of my all-time favorites – a classic from way back (we're talking *the 1970s* and the Broadway musical *Godspell*) ...

... I just love the picture it paints of what it looks like when a person's faith in Christ is growing and developing.

- *We see God more clearly* – we know more of who He is and what He's doing which impacts our view of the world and our

place in it.

- *We love Him more dearly* – the knowledge of God isn't increasing only in our heads; it's also growing in our hearts as well. We actually have a connection, a friendship, a relationship with Him.
- *We follow Jesus more nearly* – because we see God and love God, we know that He can be trusted. So we do what He says. We follow in His steps.

And over time those three things – seeing, loving and following – continue and increase ... day by day by day by day by day by day.

And Heavenly Father, as we enter into this time of learning, I pray that what I say and what we do from this point on would help to produce that kind of fruit in all of us who belong to Jesus.

I know that's what He wants for us – it's His will, so I ask in His name.

Amen.

If you've been here for the past several weeks, you know that we've been talking about ...

- Growing in our faith in Jesus – becoming more like Him, becoming more of the person God intends for us to be ...
- And, more specifically, we've been talking about *how* that happens ...
- And, *even more* specifically, we're looking at five things – five catalysts – that God seems to use again and again to bring about that result in our lives.

Last week we learned about the first of those catalysts: *practical teaching*.

If you talk to anyone who has been following Jesus and who has grown in their faith, more than likely they'll talk about a time or a place when they heard someone take the Bible and teach it in a way that changed their life. The Bible suddenly became more than just a bunch of stories or theological concepts. It came alive for them and they began to see how knowing Jesus relates to everyday life.

- How we think
- How we act
- And how we impact the world around us

And if this is your church, I encourage you, if you were not here or able to watch the livestream, to go our website, app or podcast to check it out because I spent a bit of time explaining how we try to do practical teaching here at NHCC and how you can benefit from that.

About Discipline

But today we're going to talk about the second of those five things that God uses to grow us which is *private disciplines*.

Now, when you hear that word "discipline" how does it make you feel? What comes to mind?

If you're like most people, when you hear the word "discipline" you probably think "ugghhh." You probably don't have a positive response because for most people ...

Discipline is the thing you're *supposed* to do that you really don't *want* to do.

For instance, I know I'm supposed to eat more fruits and veggies and stay away from sweets, i.e., I should be more *disciplined* in my diet, but I really don't want to. As I told you last week, I'd much rather hang out with Sarah Lee and her younger sister, Little Debbie.

And there are lots of things in life like that, right?

For example, everyone knows we're supposed to ...

- Spend less and save more.
- Sit less and walk more.
- Play less and work more.
- Watch TV less and sleep more.

None of those sound like a lot of fun when you first think about them.

However, discipline is *also* doing things that you don't like *now* so that life is better *later*.

If I turn off the TV, if I work out, if I eat right, if I manage my money well ... if I do all the things that don't sound like too much fun at the time, it actually works to my benefit in the future. I'm the one, primarily, who reaps the rewards.

Of course, just *knowing that* doesn't mean it's any more pleasant while you do whatever discipline requires, which makes this final characteristic of

discipline even more significant:

Discipline is beneficial even if you have a bad attitude about it.

Discipline *works* even if you're spitting and cussing while you're doing it.

Several years ago, I decided that I needed to get serious about my physical condition. So, among other things, I joined a gym and hired a personal trainer because I know myself: *I won't work out consistently and hard unless someone is making me do it.* I'm lazy and I'm a wimp!

Now, at some point during a typical workout, there are two things that almost always happen.

1. First, my trainer Jonathan tells me to do something I don't think I can do and *would not do* unless he was standing there telling me to do it – which is what I pay him to do.
2. Second, while he is doing that, I literally

have the thought: “why am I paying this guy to make me miserable? I should stop right now and walk out the door!”

But I don't. I do what he's telling me anyway – at least, as much as I can. I press on because I've learned that in spite of my whiny attitude in the moment, the process still works!

And what's interesting about that is that right after that moment, right after I push through that impulse, I kind of like how it feels after that. And I decide that I will keep up this discipline even though it's hard at times.

“Spiritual” Disciplines

Now, if you were to talk to people who are mature in their faith; people have grown over time to be more like Jesus, the great majority of them would say that somewhere along the line they heard about something called “private *spiritual* disciplines” – things that you do *with God* behind

the scenes *now* so that your faith is stronger *later*.

In fact, let's just put that definition up on the screen so you can have it if you're taking notes.

“Private spiritual disciplines” are things you do alone with God *now* so that your faith is stronger *later*.

And when they first heard that, most of those mature believers-in-Jesus thought “So, this is something I'm *supposed* to do that, quite honestly, doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun” because discipline is hardly ever fun.

But in spite of that initial reaction, they did it anyway and discovered that it was beneficial – their faith grew and their relationship with God grew!

So, what kinds of activities fall under the heading of “private spiritual disciplines?”

Well, there are quite a few – things like ...

- Reading the Bible on your own – getting a printed or electronic version and reading portions of it and inviting God to speak to you through what you read.
- Keeping a journal where you write down what you think God is saying to you about what you’ve read in scripture.
- Committing scriptures to memory so that God’s thoughts literally begin to shape how you think, which then shapes how you act, which then shapes how you impact the world.
- Listening to worship music by yourself and engaging with God through that.
- Fasting – abstaining from food or some other activity for a period of time so that the longing to eat or do whatever reminds you to turn to God in that moment.

There are many things you can do on your own with God that will build your faith and your relationship with Him, but we're going to focus on just two for the rest of our time together because *Jesus specifically mentions them* in His Sermon on the Mount.

He's in the middle of his teaching (and this is found in the 6th chapter of Matthew's record of Jesus' ministry)...

And Jesus says:

“Be careful not to practice your acts of righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” *Matthew 6:1 (NIV)*

Now, this is the overarching thought that Jesus wants us to have in mind before He talks about these two spiritual disciplines.

And just to be clear, when He calls them “acts of righteousness” He’s not saying these activities will *make* you righteous and holy. Instead, these are the kinds of things that righteous people do. In other words, these disciplines are part of the normal Christian life.

However, Jesus also says they need to be kept private – just between you and God – because if you do them to impress others with how spiritually mature you are (and it’s very easy to do that), that’s the only benefit you’ll get from them. You’ll lose out on what God wants you to get out of doing them.

So here we go ...

Jesus says ...

“When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have

received their reward in full.

“But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Matthew 6:2-4 (NIV)

And that’s private discipline number one – *giving*.

Now, don’t freak out because we’re not going to spend a lot of time on this one today other than to say this: of all the spiritual disciplines you could incorporate into your life, *very few have the leverage that giving does when it comes to growing your faith.*

That’s because ...

- The thing we tend to count on the most, the thing we tend to trust most in everyday life isn’t God. It’s money.

- And the question we tend to live by isn't "will God take care of me and provide for me?" but "will I have enough money?"

But Jesus knew that the only way to flip that around – the only way we'll begin to trust God more than money – is for us to let go of some of our financial assets; to just give them away to the people and causes God loves.

That's why giving is such a huge deal to Jesus. That's why He taught *more about money than any other subject* other than the Kingdom of God.

The reason generosity matters – the reason Jesus talked about it so much – isn't primarily because of what it does for whatever person or cause is on the receiving end. It's because of what it does for the one who gives. That's why *three times* in this teaching Jesus talks about the reward that comes to the giver not the receiver.

Now, most people who have developed some

maturity in their faith will tell you that, in the beginning, this was very hard to do. Giving was a chore. They started doing it because they were “supposed to.”

But, they discovered that God was taking care of them anyway and their faith began to grow which is at least part of the reward Jesus was talking about.

So, one private spiritual discipline you can begin to incorporate into your life – and I encourage you to do so if you have not – is setting aside a regular amount or a percentage of your income on a regular basis so you can give it to the people and causes that matter to God.

And you can do that here at NHCC or somewhere else but if you want to do it here, I’ll just mention that when we leave this morning the ushers will have baskets at the door and you can contribute.

But really, for giving truly to become a *discipline*,

the best way (assuming you want to do it here), is to go online at our website or through our app and look for the giving tab and set up an automatic recurring donation.

And just so you'll know, we are so confident that giving will have a positive effect on your faith that we have a 90-day money-back guarantee. The details on how you sign up for that are on the website and in the app but, bottom line, if you've not been giving or giving regularly and you start to do so, if you don't sense your faith growing after 90 days, we will return your money with no questions asked.

Now, let's move on to the second private discipline that Jesus talks about in His message. And if you think the first one was hard, this one is even more challenging to incorporate.

Jesus says ...

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.”

Sounds familiar.

“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Matthew 6:5-6 (NIV)

And that’s private discipline number two – *prayer*, but it’s not the typical “I’m in a crisis and I really need your help God” kind of prayer that we all naturally send up.

That’s good that we do that, but that’s not the kind of prayer Jesus is talking about and that’s not the kind of prayer that has a reward. Instead, the kind of prayer that accomplishes *that* is the kind

that requires us to devote our most valuable asset, which isn't money. It's time.

And, as we saw in the skit, making time to be alone with God isn't easy. There's always something else to do. There's always some kind of interruption, to say nothing of our own natural propensity to avoid discipline!

But Jesus says – and those who have grown in their faith would agree – that it's worth the effort because of the *reward* it brings which isn't a “yes” answer to all of my requests. In fact, (as we'll see) in this kind of prayer, *there may not even be a request.*

The reward that comes from this kind of prayer is the assurance that God is with me, that God is for me and that I matter to God. The reward that comes from this kind of prayer is that I ...

- See God more clearly
- Love Him more dearly

- And follow Him more nearly

Day by day.

Beyond The “Ask”

So how do you do this kind of prayer?

I mean, when it comes to giving, that’s pretty straightforward.

- You decide to make it a priority
- You put it in your budget (even to the point where you have money available to give on the spot to people in need)
- And then you write the check ... or use Venmo, Paypal, Popmoney, Zelle, ACH, etc ... or just hand over the cash.

But this kind of prayer isn’t as straightforward because, for most of us, we think of prayer as giving God a list of things we’d like Him to do for

us or someone else.

For instance, “Dear Lord ...

- Please heal her
- Please protect me
- Please let the Chiefs win
- Please help me to do well on the test”

And, again, just to be clear ... later in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus *does* encourage us – strongly – to ask God for help.

But think about this (especially if you’re a parent): if all your kids did when they talked to you was to present you with a list of requests:

- Will you give me money for the movie?
- Can you buy me a new pair of shoes?
- Will you wash my clothes?
- Can I have a puppy?

If that was the extent of your interaction with them, how would that feel to you?

You'd probably understand that it's just part of the role you play as a parent. I mean, who else are they going to ask? *But you would also want more.* You would want the kind of interactions that build your relationship with them.

God is the same way. He wants us to ask for what we need but He also wants us to interact with Him through prayer in a way that builds our relationship with Him which, if you're a Christian, *is the single most important thing in your life!*

So how do you do *that*? How do you go beyond "the ask?"

I'm going to tell you, but not only am I going to tell you, we're actually going to experience it right now in the service so that you can take home what you learn and do it on your own (and, hopefully, on a regular basis – every day, every

other day or whatever works best for you).

And our musicians are going to help us in this so I'm going to ask them to come on up and get into place while I explain the process and then we're going to do it.

It's really pretty simple. All you have to do is to remember the word PRAY and what each letter represents in what to focus on in your conversation with God (beyond the requests).

And if you pray like this – if you focus on these things in your private time with God, you *will* be rewarded.

- You will grow.
- Your faith in God will grow.
- You will begin to see your connection, your friendship, your relationship with God growing.

So, here's what we're going to do (beyond

asking) when we pray.

- Praise God for who He is
- Remember your need for Jesus
- Appreciate God's blessings in your life
- Yield to God's will

Praise, remember, appreciate, yield.

Say that with me, will you? Praise, remember, appreciate, yield.

Now, if you were going to do this at home, you would go to a quiet place by yourself, turn off all your gadgets and then focus on one or more of these four things along with your requests. You don't have to do them all each time. But we will today just for the experience.

PRAISE

So let's start with praising God for who He is.

And in this part of the prayer, we're going to basically say "wow" to God about God.

That sounds a little odd but, if you put it in terms of how you feel about someone you deeply love or respect – your spouse or your significant other or someone close to you, it makes sense.

For example, you might say something like "You are so good with people. I'm always amazed by that because I'm not."

Or "you always think of just the right thing to say. I'm always blown away by that because I don't."

It works the same way with God. We think about who He is and what makes Him great and unique and we just tell Him.

For example, we might say "Lord, you are _____ and I am amazed by that."

"You are loving, you are gracious, you are patient, you are eternal, you are wise and all knowing, you

lead us, you know us ... and I am amazed.”

Now, to help us get an even greater sense of what this part of prayer is like, we’re going to sing a song that expresses praise to God for who He is. And then when we’re finished, we’ll have a very brief time of silence where you can personally praise God in prayer.

Now, since we’ve been sitting for a while, we’re going stand just to get the blood flowing again. Here we go.

Worship Song – “10,000 Reasons”

Ok, take minute to praise God for who He is. Say to him in your heart “Lord, you are <> and I am amazed by you.”

Ok, you can be seated.

REMEMBER

Now, the second letter in PRAY is R which stands for what? *Remember* our need for Jesus.

This is where instead of looking upward at God and extolling his virtues, we turn inward to ourselves, examine our lives and name our sin.

For example we might say, “Lord, I have failed by _____ which is why I need a savior.”

Now, the thing about this part is that in order to name these things, we sometimes have to ask God to reveal it to us.

To fill in the blank you might have to first ask God things like ...

- Where am I falling short of your intentions for my life?
- Am I being disobedient to any of Your commands?
- Where am I failing to love others as You have loved me?

And then you just wait for things to come to you and then you fill in the blank. “Yes, Lord, this is true of me. I have failed by <>.”

Now, having said that, I want to be very clear about this: *the point of this part of the prayer isn't to beat ourselves up.* It's not to say what worthless scum we are.

It's to remember that we need a savior and that God, because of His great love for us, came to be our savior in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; that even though Jesus never sinned, He willingly on the cross took the punishment our sins deserve.

And because of that, all of our sins – past, present and future – have been completely and totally forgiven.

This part of the prayer is a reminder that our relationship with God is not dependent on how good we are but how good Jesus is – that He, as the

Apostle Paul put it, is our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

So, just for a minute, we're going to be quiet. And this is your opportunity to ask "Lord, show me where I have failed" and then to agree with Him and be grateful He gave himself to atone for your sin.

Ok, here we go.

Worship Song – "Lord I Need You"

APPRECIATE

So, we have "P" for praise ... and "R" for remember.

And we come to "A" for appreciate ... appreciate how God has blessed you.

Now, this is similar to praise in that the focus is back on God again but, this time, instead of

naming characteristics that make God amazing we name the ways in which we have been personally blessed.

For example we might say, “Lord, thank you for _____”

“Thank you for my health, thank you for my home, my job, my church, for Jesus, for your guidance” – the list could go on and on.

And it could even include your trials and tribulations because you know that God promises to use even those for your good. “Lord, thank you for this difficulty <> because I know you will use it.”

So, we’re going to take just a minute to do that part of the prayer right now. This is your chance to say “Lord, thank you for <>.”

Here we go.

Now, when you have this part of the conversation

with God, you almost always experience a sense of joy over God's goodness to you.

And we have a song we sing around here which expresses that kind of joy so we're going to sing it together.

But this time, it I'm going to give you permission to do what it says *that we never do* because it feels pretty "out there" for our church. We're kind of reserved. We don't want to be over expressive.

Of course, later today when Patrick Mahomes throws his first TD pass of the season, you know what we're all going to do? We're going to lift our hands and raise our voices. YES!!!

So when we sing that line in the song: "come and lift your hands and raise your voice" you have permission (in fact I challenge you) to raise your hands at that point and then put them back down.

OK? Let's stand and sing.

Worship – Rejoice

Feature – Your Love is

YIELD

Ok, so we've talked about and experienced ...

- Praising God for who He is
- Remembering our need for Jesus and what He did for us on the cross
- And appreciating God's blessings in our lives

Now, it's time to “yield” ... which is not a word we hear or see very often other than maybe on a traffic sign.

But that actually helps us understand what it means. To yield means to submit your movement, your agenda, and your direction to whoever else has the right of way.

And in our lives, God is the one who has the right

of way which is why, when Jesus taught His followers to pray, He started with God's agenda – “hallowed be your name” – which means “may your name be honored and respected above all others in this world. May you have first place in everything.”

And then He followed it with “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth just like it is where You live” (which is Heaven).

So, this part of the prayer – yielding to God – is when we acknowledge that our life is primarily about Him and His agenda, not us and ours. It's when we express the willingness to align ourselves with His purposes in this world; where we say “Thy Kingdom come, not my kingdom come.”

And honestly, that's kind of scary because it's not always clear what that means.

So, at this point we might pray, “Lord, I will

do _____ as you enable me.”

“As you reveal strength and give me direction, I will do this or go here or stop that or start that.”

And sometimes, you already know what that is and so you just pray it. But if not, this is when you say “Lord, I don’t know exactly what it is in this area, but I’m saying yes to your will.”

So, that’s what I want to invite you to do right in this next moment of silence. Here we go.

Conclusion

“Lord, I praise you for your ability to hear us. Even though you are in the dimension of spirit, and even though there are millions of people in this world, you can somehow hear our prayers. That’s amazing.

And it’s just as amazing that you even want to hear our prayers because we fail you in so many

ways. We fail each other. We're petty, we're unforgiving, we're cold, we're selfish. And if you had left us to ourselves, we would have suffered eternal separation from You.

But you loved us so much that Jesus took our place and by trusting in His goodness and not our own, we are forgiven. We are free from condemnation and we are so grateful for that.

We're also grateful Lord that we live in a time and place where we have such wealth and comfort. Even the poorest among us is rich by comparison to all the people who have lived on this earth. And those of us who have more, we're like the kings and queens of old. They would be speechless if they could see how You have blessed us.

And yet, Lord, we know that you never bless us just for our own sake. You do it so that we can be a blessing to others. So, we ask you to show us how to be a blessing this week. And we say "yes" in advance to what you will reveal, because the life

we get to live is about you and your agenda and not us and ours. And we know that our greatest joy comes when we accept that truth and live that truth.

Amen.

Now, next week, we're going to talk about the third catalyst that God uses to grow our faith and again, I'm going to give you a heads up that you don't want to miss the beginning of the service.

Also, if you're a guy, you should know that you can be part of a group of guys who work on putting into practice the kinds of things we talked about today. If you want to know more about that, stop down front and talk to Ladell Thomason ...

... after we stand and sing one more prayer together.

So, let's do that. Let's stand and sing.

Worship Song – Remind Me Who I Am