

Sixth Sunday in Lent, Palm Sunday, 2012
Series: "Growing to Spiritual Maturity"
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"Walking the Way of Perfection"

I read a letter posted by a young person on a Christian blog site this week that was a desperate cry for help in the area of his or her spiritual life (I don't know whether it was from a young man or a young woman). But I want you to tell me if this person's struggle sounds at all familiar to anything you've experienced in your Christian life, or may still be experiencing even now.

"I live in a Christian household, and I've always gone to church, but I've always struggled with my faith.. I've asked God to save me a million times it seems. I've tried to commit to him and obey and trust and follow him, but I always fall back into my old habits no matter how hard I try! Just last year I recognized really for the first time what a sinner I really am and totally gave myself to God, and for a few months I experienced the greatest feeling of my life. I felt so emotionally close to God. It was my first spiritual high, and I loved it so much. I was moved by His Word so easily that even a simple worship song would bring me to happy tears, and I actually found myself just raising my hands and praising Him more genuinely than I ever had in my life. I actually committed to him. I read His Word almost all day, every day, listening to nothing but my Christian music. I stopped doing a lot of my bad habits, and, unlike so many times before when I tried to change my heart, it didn't feel like a chore. I was freely obeying and loving Him with more of my heart than ever. I really thought, "Finally!" And then... it all slowly drained out of me until I was what I am right now as I'm writing this: spiritually dead, lost, stripped and hollow. I feel like such a failure! I just don't know what to do anymore. No matter how many times I try, even when I finally believe I've made it, I fail God once again and my motivation to try again keeps getting weaker and weaker with each failure. And right now it's at its weakest. And sometimes—as much as it scares me—I think, "What's the point? You're obviously going to fail again, so why even try?" And I don't want to think that, because it scares me so much that I can't seem to get my life right. I don't want Jesus to deny me when I die, like in the bible he says he'll separate his sheep from the goats. I want to be someone he'll be proud of, but I just feel so dead and abandoned without that feeling I had during my spiritual high, and I don't know what to do anymore. Please help me, because right now I just feel like giving up."

So, does that sound at all familiar? If you're anything like me it does.

As we come to the conclusion of our study on growing to spiritual maturity, and as we've been saying throughout this study that true spiritual growth involves conforming our lives more and more to the image of Christ's righteous life—it's to have His life more and more formed in us by the power of His Spirit—I think we have to conclude this study by wrestling with the question of "what is the path forward? How do we move forward toward spiritual maturity without constantly stumbling and falling and feeling like, when we take two steps forward, we then almost immediately take two steps backward, like this young man or woman?"

You see, I think that this person's struggle reflects what so many Christians are going through today. And I think it reflects the weakness of what is so common among evangelical Christians today, the weakness of the "method" for growing spiritually—if I could put it that way—a method that is inherently volatile, that is inherently "up and down," that's inherently about taking two steps forward and falling back a step-and-a-half or two or three, because, if I could give you a metaphor, what so much of modern evangelical spirituality is about is trying to charge up the mountain to get to, and to remain at, a place in one's relationship with God, described by this young person as a "spiritual high"—trying to attain spiritual maturity through a great, heroic charge up the mountain. And then when you're not able to sustain that spiritual high, you fall back down the mountain. Does anyone know what I'm talking about?

So the question for us today is: is there a different way? Is there a *better* way? And I'm excited to tell you this morning that there is a different way; there is a better path. It's not as heroic. It's not as sexy. It's not attended by as many emotional highs, but it's also not fraught with as many perils of stumbling and falling back down the mountain. You're going to love what I call it. I call it the Way of Perfection.

Now you say, "The Way of Perfection? I thought charging up the mountain was hard enough. I thought my attempts to grow spiritually are difficult enough. Now you want me to be perfect about it?" Relax! Let me explain to you what I mean by the Way of Perfection, and then you can judge whether it *is* a better way than the way of constantly charging forward and falling back.

You see, there's one thing I've discovered from my own mountain climbing experiences, which have been a few. I've hiked pretty extensively through Yosemite National Park, and have actually made it to the top of Half Dome twice, although if I attempted it today I'm sure I'd die right there on the trail. It's eight miles up and eight miles back, which my friends and I did in a single day. And it's an increase of five-thousand feet in elevation in that eight miles. So it's a *serious* charge up the mountain, and could do it when I was 21. But what I've discovered with the wisdom of a few years is that the best way up a mountain is the slow, long, spiraling way around. I can do that. I can actually keep moving forward on a trail like that, and not have to worry so much about falling headlong off the steep side of the mountain. What I'm saying is that the Way of Perfection is like that. It's about taking small, gentle steps forward that you're able to essentially become perfect in—I say "essentially become perfect in" because we'll never be able to reach true perfection—but you'll essentially be able to master the step that you're at, before you take another small step forward and higher. The next step builds on the previous step. Do you see?

Essentially, the Way of Perfection is the way of growing to spiritual maturity by keeping a Rule of Life.

Now some of you are familiar with the concept of a Rule of Life, and some of you are less familiar. So what is a Rule of Life? In my reading I've come across several definitions or descriptions of what a Rule is, that I like. Here's one from a woman named Ruth Barton in a book called *Sacred Rhythms*: "A Rule of Life is a simple pattern of attitudes, behaviors, and practices that are a regular routine and are intended to produce a certain quality of life and

character.” That’s the first part of what a Rule of Life is. It comes from the Latin word for Rule—*Regula*—and it’s about having a guide for being *regular* in our spiritual practices.

Here’s another definition I found on the website of the C.S. Lewis Institute: “A rule of life is an intentional pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness.” It’s an intentional, regular pattern of prayer, and study, and of the various other disciplines that you build into a routine for growth in holiness.

So, first, a Rule of Life is a way of being regular in your spiritual life. But a Rule of Life is also like a ruler: it’s a way of measuring your progress towards spiritual maturity by comparing your actual practice to what your Rule expects of you. And that’s why I think it’s essential to actually write out your rule. It needs to be there staring you in the face to help you keep accountable to it.

But what do you put into your Rule? Now this is the essential question, because for a Rule to have any power to help us get up the mountain, to help us grow in holiness, without it causing us to be frustrated so we slide right back down to where we were before, it has to be accomplishable; it has to be attainable. So the article from the C. S. Lewis institute goes on to say, “In order to be life-giving, a Rule must be realistic! It is not an ideal toward which you are striving to soar. Instead, your initial Rule should be *a minimum standard for your life that you do not want to drop below*” (italics added).

So many times when I’ve talked to people about keeping a Rule, or to people who tell me they want to establish a Rule for themselves, they say things like, “These are all the things that I want to do. These are all things I *intend* to do. I want to pray three times a day for an hour each time. I want to read ten chapters of the Bible every night. I want to do three Bible studies a week. I want to do all these things.” But, you see, that’s not a Rule. A Rule is not a list of your best intentions. It’s not about setting lofty goals for yourself. That’s right back at trying to charge up the mountain. A Rule is list, or a schedule of spiritual practices, *that you will do without fail*. That’s what a Rule is. And, you see, that’s how a Rule becomes the Way of Perfection. It’s about mastering your minimum standard of spiritual discipline before you try to charge ahead to the next level. It’s about becoming perfect at the step that you are, before you try take that next step forward.

Let me try to illustrate the point. You know, New Year’s resolutions are sort of like establishing a Rule of Life for yourself. But how many people make New Year’s resolutions that are completely unrealistic? Danielle shared a story she read in a magazine right at the end of last year. It was the story of a woman who felt, like I think all women feel at the end of the holidays, that she was overweight and out of shape. So her New Year’s resolution was that she was going to get up at five or six o’clock every morning and run three miles a day, every day. Now what do you think happened? She failed miserably! She almost never actual ran three miles, and some days she didn’t even get up and get out the door. So what did she do? Did she give up? No, she brought her resolution down to an attainable level. She said, “I may not be able to run three miles a day, but what I *can* do is get up every morning and put on my running shoes and head out the door, and however far I get after that will be a bonus.” You see, that’s keeping a Rule. That’s mastering the first steps so you can build onto them a regular workout routine.

I think we understand this when it comes to physical exercise. Why haven't we figured it out with regard to spiritual exercise? St. Paul says, "Bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). So maybe we need to learn from this woman how to grow in godliness.

What are your spiritual running shoes that you're going to put on every day without fail so you can head out the door towards spiritual maturity? If you've never established a Rule of Life for yourself, and you don't really know where to start, try this on for size. The Didache, one of the earliest writings of the Church outside of the New Testament canon, maybe written as early as 70 A.D., calls for Christians to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day. Now that's a Rule of Life, isn't it? And more importantly that's something that's attainable. That's something you can do. That's something you can master and build upon. Why not start there?

I guess the point I'm trying to make this morning is, as you strive to grow to spiritual maturity, as you strive to grow to think more biblically, and to become more obedient to the will of God, and to live a life of humble submission, and to make worship the central principle of your life, to live out your life as that continued sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God, don't try to be a hero. Don't try to charge up the mountain to live at a perpetual "spiritual high." Learn the Way of Perfection. Learn to master small and gentle steps in your long march to holiness. Learn to live by a Rule of Life. Then you'll find that you're actually getting somewhere.

Paul says, "Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection..." (Heb. 6:1). And having the promises of the gospel, "let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). The Way of Perfection; it is the way to spiritual maturity. May God bless us as we walk this way. +