

Series: Spiritual formation: Habits of a healthy heart.

Sermon Text: 1 Timothy 4:1, 7-10; Romans 8:3

Key Word: Gospel

Proverbs 4:23 (NLT) warns us to, “*Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.*” It’s talking about [the part of us where our desires dwell](#), and our need to be nurtured by healthy relational habits with God and others. For this reason, we’re kicking off the new year with a series called, “*Spiritual formation: Habits of a healthy heart.*” Plus, each Sunday this year we plan to share a different spiritual practice to help you discover fresh ways to connect with God at any stage of your journey. Above all, we want to emphasize that no spiritual discipline is ever an end or a goal. Spiritual practices are a means of grace--a way God gives Himself to us, so that we can be renovated as we abide in and enjoy Him because of Christ’s finished work. This brings us to our first...

BIG IDEA: The gospel matters to our spiritual health.

How often do you think about who or what is forming (shaping) you and the kind of person you’re becoming? We’re all disciples (students) of someone or something, which is easy to take for granted. Here’s a [provocative thought I came across](#): “*If you read your Bible 5 minutes a day and listen to one 30 minute sermon a week, but spend 4 hours a day on social media and cable news, who do you think is discipling you...or transforming your mind?*” We rarely notice unhelpful influences or bad habits until something occurs that we never dreamed could happen to us (cf. 1Corinthians 15:33; Ephesians 6:12). One such time for me was when I first discovered that **church people are like cats**--most love a good back scratch, but some will bite when you least expect it! While I had received formal training, and the Bible warns of such things (cf. Acts 20:28-30), I responded poorly to being bit because I had not been guarding my heart. I mean, I’d prefer to blame them, but I’m responsible for how I respond, right? Several years later I suffered another big bite, only my heart was more prepared because I had been reducing my overloaded schedule to prioritize time with God and others. Philippians 3:8 (NLT) says: “*Everything is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Jesus*”, but we often approach life like a kid in a candy store--we say “yes” too much, we disregard God-given limits, we do stuff that was best left in a previous season of life, and we live from a place of exhaustion instead of from rest and renewal. Jesus offers us a better way to live in Matthew 11:28: “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*” We’re invited to remember that we are creatures

and that nothing is more necessary than abiding, relating, and connecting with God through His Son and people who are filled with His Holy Spirit. And let's be honest, that's not always easy or fun.

Also, our motives can mess this up! Believe it or not, good spiritual practices like study, praying, giving, and serving can do harm if they become the end game rather than being in relationship with God and others. Author David Mathis urges us to view such practices as "[*Habits of Grace*](#)--avenues God has placed in our world whereby Christians can cultivate their joy in Christ because of His finished work. They are not about lists to keep or boxes to check but about a Person to be enjoyed." We must be careful with passages like *1 Timothy 4:7-10*: "***Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for bodily training is of some value, but godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and for the life to come.***" Take note how *godliness* is not merely about going to heaven. Also, while it involves *training, toil*, and *striving* (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 2:2, 5:7; Philippians 2:16; 2 Timothy 2:5), it becomes fruitless and dangerous if we overlook the all-important "why" in *verse 10*: "***We toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.***"

The problem is well illustrated in a book called, "[*With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God*](#)", which uses 4 prepositions to describe our messed up motivations: A "*Life FROM God*" view may use Him to supply material desires and say stuff like, "*Every morning I ask God to expand my territory.*" A "*Life OVER God*" view may use Him as a source of principles or laws and say stuff like, "*I really don't think much about God.*" A "*Life UNDER God*" view may try to manipulate God with obedience to secure blessings and avoid calamity and say stuff like, "*If we can stop the liberal judges, God will bless our country again*" (reminds me of the Pharisees). A "*Life FOR God*" view may use Him or His mission only to find direction or purpose and say stuff like, "*The church needs more motivational preaching to get us share the faith with our neighbors.*" Wrong motives (agendas) turn our pursuit of God into a quest to conform Him to our will.

Another problem is to forget that spiritual practices have no power to save us, wipe away sin, or turn us into better people. The Apostle Paul was astonished when the church forgot this in Galatians 3:2-3, so he asked: "*Did you receive the Spirit by works of law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*" Spiritual maturity is not measured by what you do or don't do. The amount you read, pray, give, or serve never makes you better than anyone else. The gospel isn't a tool to get people to do more, sin less, and conform to our

image or agenda. We're not to become weaponized Christians who flaunt our progress, attack others, and slap labels (e.g., evil, toxic) on people, places, or things to justify our lack of love and service. In fact, this is where our "Christian accountability" can go way wrong--instead of pointing people to the finished work of Christ, we give "good advice" or steps to perform because "it worked for us" and we think we know what's best for them. James 5:16 suggests a better way to do Christian accountability: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

Salvation and Christian maturity are supernatural activities that occur and are supported by grace through faith in Christ's finished work. **Romans 8:3** (NLT) says: "*The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sin nature. So, God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.*" See why **the gospel matters to our spiritual health**? It is the power of God that must undergird all spiritual practices (cf. Romans 1:16-17). It cultivates the soil of our hearts to ensure our spiritual habits are beneficial. It reminds us that **salvation is about** coming to God, not self-improvement strategies. I like how Pastor John Piper put it when he said, "*The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven (or do stuff); it is a way to get people to God.*" I like that because it's what Jesus affirmed in John 14:6 when he said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"

Let's pray: Father, non-gospel views have led many of us into lonely, isolated spiritual practices. We wrongly believe we must get our sin under control to be of any value or to be helpful to others. Your gospel, on the other hand says sin can't be dealt with apart from union with Jesus by grace through faith. So, if our spiritual practices aren't helping us abide in (relate with) Jesus and His body, then we're missing the point. As we come to your table in a few minutes, may it convince us that what we need most is not to be scolded, self-improved, or told what to do but rather to become branches that draw our life from you, the vine. Amen.

So, what's your NEXT STEP?

- Remember, our next step always begins with faith in Christ. Either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Either way, His Spirit will help you.

Quotes related to this passage:

- **My story:** I was letting life stretch me too thin and spending too little time with the Lord. That all changed when I sensed God nudging me to do something crazy--quit a good paying side job I loved to invest in my overall health (e.g., spiritual, mental, physical). While I didn't want to

give up money that helped my family or a job that was going great, I realize in hindsight how surrendering to God's nudge prepared me for trials I had not seen coming. I needed to slow my roll to create space to abide in (relate with) God, so when the doubts came, I knew enough of His character and promises to keep my head on straight.

- **Intimacy with God doesn't magically occur:** A big reason people struggle to relate with God and others is due to lack of making time for it. Sadly, when I hear people say, "*I don't feel close to God*" or "*I don't have any friends*", it's usually because they've prioritized busyness over presence--who even has time for deep, meaningful time with God or anyone else, right? When trouble comes, it's no wonder we feel abandoned and alone when we've not developed a good support network where people would even notice we're in a pickle. So, what efforts are you putting into your pursuit of Him? Is it anything like the effort you put into eating healthy, or working out, or advancing our careers, or making sure your kids get into the right schools and sports programs?" It may be painful but ask God to show you what you need to see here.
- **A gentle warning:** While the internet can be a helpful tool, it also makes it easier to isolate and be cut off from life-giving relationships. I mean, who needs a doctor when you have Web MD? Why go out when everything can be delivered? Who needs a church or a pastor when you can just livestream or download content from some of the best communicators in the world? And this one's the saddest... Why pray to God when Google will give you quicker answers? Pardon the sarcasm, but do you see how tools can offer us solutions apart from relationships? It may seem convenient and even appealing, but passages like Genesis 1 and Jesus' prayer in John 17 reveal that we have been created by triune God who was in perfect relationship and designed us to need relationship with the Father, the Son, and anyone in whom their Holy Spirit resides. There are only 2 ways to live: Connected or disconnected. Which one describes you, how is that going for you, and what would you like to change?
- **We need God to intercede and participate:** While we may desire to commune with God and others, sin makes that super difficult, doesn't it? The Bible begins and ends with expressions of God's deep desire to have intimacy with us, and everything in between explains how Jesus came to fix the problem and restore us to right relationship with God and everything He made. Scripture is a love story about God using His unlimited resources to passionately pursue us. John 17 reveals how Jesus became our way back and intensely prays for us. Numerous other passages describe the endless intercession always taking place on our behalf by The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. No one is more committed to us than God, which is why it is essential for us to be in relationship with Him and those who love Him.

Quotes related to the larger context:

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

- R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015).
- Dave Mathis, John Piper, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2016)
- Skye Jethani, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011)

- Plass, Coffield, *The Relational Soul: Moving from False Self to Relational Connection* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014)
- R. C. Sproul, *Does Prayer Change Things?*, vol. 3, *The Crucial Questions Series* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009)

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us about many other resources.

Direction for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the discussion around 30mins. Go for a single, not a home run.
3. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Let’s prepare for our sermon from 1 Timothy 4:1, 7-10; Romans 8:3.

- What do these passages seem to be implying?

Let’s apply our sermon from 1 Timothy 4:1, 7-10; Romans 8:3.

- If we’re all disciples of someone or something, then who or what are your greatest influences? What do you spend the most time doing, and how is that discipling (shaping, forming) you?
- In what ways has your pursuit of God been more of a quest to get what you want out of life or others? Can you think of 1 or 2 ways to increase the time you spend abiding in (relating with) Jesus in the upcoming months, and how might that help you?
- Are your spiritual practices drawing you into communion with God and others, or are they a substitute for life-sustaining relationships? Another way to ask this is, “Are they your excuse to become more isolated, reclusive, and judgmental OR are they what’s driving you into deeper relationships?” Please explain.

Here are some great resources for digging deeper into community group life...

How life together looks <http://austinstone.org/stories/film/item/140-missional-community-lukes-story>

Rethinking what we do https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvWnXYSELF4&feature=player_embedded

Numerous articles to provoke thought <http://tod dengstrom.com/archives/>

What groups of 2-3 might look like <http://tod dengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LTG-Overview.pdf>