

RHYTHMS OF GRACE

1 TIMOTHY 3:16; 4:5-11

I want to begin this morning by asking you a question. What does it mean to be a Christian? What is a Christian? What is the Christian life about? How we answer that question is incredibly important, isn't it?

Some of you might have answered, in your head, that the Christian life is fundamentally a matter of belief. It is an assent to a certain set of doctrines as truth. It is thinking rightly, thinking biblically about God and humanity and how God relates to humanity through Jesus. The Christian life is about what you think.

Others of you might have said that being a Christian is about what you do. Christians go to church, they read their Bibles, they pray, they love and serve their neighbors, they have a certain type of lifestyle. The Christian life is fundamentally about actions, about a set of practices that are visibly Christian.

Well, what I want to submit to you this morning, is that the Christian life isn't just about getting the right doctrine or doing the right things, now it's not about less than that - those things are important - but it is about more. Fundamentally the Christian life is not just about what you think or what you do, but about what you love.

Now if that is true, then that means that, discipleship, the process of growing and maturing as followers of Jesus, OUR SANCTIFICATION... is not just a matter of learning more information, or re-energizing your commitment to the practices of the Christian faith, If the Christian life is about what you love, then discipleship is about reforming, reorienting, reordering what it is that you love.

We're starting a new series this morning that we've titled *Rhythms of Grace* and we're going to be spending the next four weeks talking about how God forms and transforms us as followers of Jesus. We're going to be talking about how God uses certain rhythms and routines, what some call "spiritual disciplines" or "means of grace", to shape us as disciples. (Why we're doing this as a church)

Some of you have been following along this summer in our "Summit Summer Reads" initiative, as we've read through David Mathis' book *Habits of Grace*, if you haven't, you aren't going to be missing any key things (prerequisites) that we're going to talk about here, but if you've read the book you'll recognize sort of an echo of some of what Mathis has to say. Really,

the way we've shaped this series is a synthesis of Mathis' book, and another book called "You Are What You Love" by a theologian/philosopher name James Smith. If you get a chance both those books are highly recommended by us and would add to your thinking on this subject.

But the question that drives all that we talk about over the next several weeks is this: "How does God transform us to look more like Jesus? If we know that God is about the business of changing and transforming us into the image of Christ (that's really what being a Christian is all about), then how does he do that? How does God grow us, and sanctify us, and mature us, so that we glorify the Triune God in all of life?" That question is at the heart of what we're going to unpack over this next month.

Have you ever felt a disconnect between what you know and what you do? Right, I think all of us can own that. There is a gap between our cognitive understanding of God, ourselves, and the world around us, and how we actually live in light of that knowledge. A lot of the time we just don't live with a consistency between the boxes we'd check on a Sunday School answer sheet, and the actual day to day practice of our lives. And the problem isn't that we just need more knowledge. We live in an era, especially in the west, where knowledge and information and resources for learning are unlimited. But yet the reality is that we can't just think our way into Christ-likeness. This disconnect between what we know and what we do is evidence that there's a deeper place than our heads that needs to change in order for us to look more like Jesus.

Think about creation for a moment. When God created us, he didn't create us as James Smith would say, just as brains on a stick. God didn't create us like he created T-Rexes with teeny little arms and legs and gigantic heads. Because God created us to be more than just thinkers, he created us fundamentally to be worshippers.

This is part of what it means that God created us in his own image. It means that God created us to be his image-bearers in creation, to reflect him in the world, to bring him glory, to worship him. Biblically, this category of worship overlaps with the biblical language of love, and so to worship God is to love him. To say God created us as worshippers is to say that we are naturally lovers.

The problem for us is that we love the wrong things. Augustine, the great 4th-5th century church father said essentially this, and he was just retelling the story that the Apostle Paul already told in Rom. 1 when he says that humanity in its sin suppressed the knowledge of

God and worship or loved the creature rather than the Creator. Augustine said that the heart of our sin issue is that our loves are disordered.

The reason that there is a disconnect between what we know and what we do is that what we do isn't drive by what we know. What we do begins with what we love. This is exactly what Jesus meant in the Gospel of Luke when he said that, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." Jesus is saying that the rightly or wrongly ordered loves that are in our heart spill out in our character and behavior. It isn't just our cognitive processes, the joining of our synapses that produces our actions, it's something much deeper, much more primal and visceral, on the level of what we love.

And the problem for us, even as rescued and redeemed Christians, church, is that underneath all of our thinking, in a way that we aren't even aware of most of the time, our worship, our affections, our loves are aimed at the wrong things.

Not that long ago I had the vacuum out at our house and I was using the hose and the brush tool to clean up the dust bunnies around the baseboards. As often happens when either me or Eli are doing something that we just want to get done with no interruption, one of my daughters came by and wanted to help. Well, I don't know what had happened that day, but I had a rare moment of patience and gave the vacuum to my daughter to use. Well, of course, she is tiny and the telescoping portion thingy is huge and she's trying to talk to me and suck things up, and she doesn't know how to turn the vacuum off, and before you know it I'm scrambling trying to make sure the vacuum doesn't suck up my clothes, or her other sister's hair, or any of the other random things that are in the path of the vacuum's suction.

Well, brothers and sisters, that unwieldy moment with my daughter perfectly illustrates our problem. We are wired for worship and we can't turn it off. We can't stop being worshippers. And no matter what is in front of us - whether it's turning on the TV, or going to the mall, or going on Facebook - our affections, our loves, are aimed at something. We are sucking promises and ideas and hopes and dreams and stories of the good life that all have nothing to do with the rescuing and redeeming God, we're taking these into the deepest places of our heart wherever we turn. So it's no wonder that as we go through life in a disordered world, still with disordered hearts ourselves, that our loves continue to become so disordered. And because all of this lies under the surface, most of the time what we think we love isn't what we actually love.

I've been haunted by something James Smith shares in his book "You Are What You Love" for several weeks now. He tells about a old film from a Russian director. The film is one of those post-apocalyptic, barren wasteland type of movies. There's been some disaster, human kind is almost destroyed, picture Mad Max, the Book of Eli, any of those movies... and all that's left of humanity is trying to get to the zone, this place where life still exists. And within the zone there is a place called the Room, a place that has a special power to give you whatever you want. Now in the story of the film, two men - called Professor and Writer - and told about the zone and the room and have to be led there by a man named Stalker. All of this is background to understand what is sort of the climactic point of the movie which is when Stalker finally arrives with Professor and Writer at the threshold of this room and Professor asks Stalker, "What if I don't know what I want?" "That's for the room to decide, says Stalker. What you get is not what you think you wish for, but what you most deeply wish for." Suddenly, Professor and Writer - though they've been waiting with anticipation for this moment, are filled with trepidation. Because something dawns on them. What if they don't actually want what they think. What if their deepest desire is not what they think it is?

What do you really want? To ask that question is to ask what you really love? What you actually love is probably different than what you think you love.

God's goal in discipleship then is recalibrating our loves. It's reordering our loves so that we love the right things. If we are more than just thinkers and doers, if we are lovers, and if even Christians don't love what they think they love, then what we need more than anything is to have the deepest places of our hearts re-formed and re-oriented to love the right things. So God's transformation of us is centered around training us to love and worship the Triune God rightly. And it's right here at that place that we can start to talk about Rhythms of Grace.

What I'm doing for you is trying to frame for you what spiritual disciplines are aiming at. It's so easy for us to when we see ourselves as thinkers and doers, to think about spiritual disciplines as just the practices of a disciple. Bible reading, prayer, church attendance... these are just things that Christians do. If you're going to be a good Christian you need to do these things.

And when we approach these Christian "practices" in that way, the sum total of the Christian life can seem like just a successive chain of quiet times. Being a Christian can feel like simply an ongoing repetition of the practice of personal devotions and corporate worship. Do you ever feel like that? We've got our eyes focused on the wrong thing. When we think like this

we turn what are called the “means of grace” into the “ends of grace”, as if the entire purpose of God’s grace and power in our lives is aimed at making us into good Christians who consistently read their Bibles and pray. I mean, it’s no wonder we don’t experience transformation - God is after something so much deeper in you than just a superficial change of your habits.

What we have to get is that these rhythms and routines of spiritual life, what we are going to center the next few weeks around - God’s Word, Prayer, and the community of the church - these are not just things that disciples DO, the rhythms themselves actually do something to us.

Because worshipping and loving is our default setting, it’s something we can’t turn off, every second of our life we are being formed by our rhythms and routines, by our habits. Let me give you an example.

Think about your typical morning when you wake up. Your alarm goes off on your phone and either you’re the kind of person who jumps right out of bed or you hit snooze a couple of times. You get out of bed and what’s the first thing you do. Well, a recent survey found that 80% of people with a smartphone get on it within 15 minutes of getting up. What ritual is next? Brewing your morning coffee? Making a cup of tea? Taking your daily vitamins? Scrambling out the door because you’re late getting on the road?

The point is that because so much of how we’re shaped as humans happens under the radar on this level of what we love, these simple routines that we rarely even think about have significant power to shape us. Think about what your smartphone is teaching you. I am as guilty as anyone when it comes to being bound to this device. But what is my heart learning to love as the world literally responds to a swipe or a pinch of my fingers? What things are shaping me as I brainlessly surf the latest headlines on ESPN, or flip through my twitter page?

What objects of worship are doing something to you as you scroll through your Facebook timeline, as you look at the comments on your latest post? What is the story of the good life that you’re taking in through the news you’re reading, or what you’re pinning to your pinterest account, or what apps your using most of the time on your phone?

My point isn’t for you to get rid of your smartphone or your Facebook account (how many of you in a rash moment of spiritual fervor have done something like that?) ... what I’m pressing on you is to step back and take a look at the rhythms and routines of your life and realize that your day to day practices are not just something you do, they are doing something to you. For better or worse they are forming you.

If we're honest with ourselves, the majority of our lives in these rhythms and routines are lived on autopilot. We go through life without much intentionality about what we're actually doing.

This is where we really need Paul to help us. In the passage we read this morning, Paul is writing his first letter to Timothy, his young protege in the faith, to equip him to lead within the church. But so much of what Paul says is applicable, not just to leaders, but to anyone who is a growing disciple. And here's Paul's exhortation to Timothy:

v. 6 - "If you put these things (meaning the doctrine that he's laid out in just the last couple of verses) before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed."

OK, so Paul is after some sense in Timothy that he is being transformed, that he is being trained.

v. 7 - "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness, for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."

Paul is saying to Timothy what we've already said this morning. He's saying that we need a retraining in our hearts. And this excavation of the deepest parts of us and re-formation of what we love doesn't happen by accident. I said just last week that we don't just jump in the river of the Christian life and float toward godliness. Unless we are intentional about saturating our life with re-formative, re-orienting practices, our hearts will float away from God. Our affections, our loves, will continue being mal-formed, de-formed by the default rhythms and routines and stories of the good life that the world around us offers, and we'll look less and less like Jesus.

"Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths, rather train yourselves for godliness."

How many of you have watched some of the Olympics this week? OK, most of you have watched at least some. You've probably seen Michael Phelps in the pool, but anybody see Penny Oleksiak? The Canadian 16-yr-old who won four medals? It was a proud week to be Canadian. But here's Michael Phelps right, in his fifth Olympics, winning his 23rd gold medal - Phelps has given twenty years of his life to a training regimen that's unparalleled. He swims six hours a day and up to 50 miles a week, and lifts weights three days a week. And what's even crazier is his diet. He consumes 12,000 calories a day. Most of you are probably around 2-3,000 calories.

Here's what he eats for an average breakfast - three fried-egg sandwiches with cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, fried onions, and mayonnaise. Then he drinks two cups of coffee and then consumes a five-egg omelet, a bowl of grits, three slices of French toast with powdered sugar and three chocolate-chip pancakes.

This is what it takes to be the greatest swimmer of all time. Phelps has committed to shaping his life around routines and practices that form him into an elite swimmer. Notice that the reason he does these things isn't because that's just what swimmer's do. His practices are doing something to him. He has an end goal in mind of winning a ridiculous number of gold medals that his training routine and diet simply serve a means toward that end.

Now we get the concept of training when it comes to Olympic athletes, but not so much when it comes to the Christian life right? I mean, isn't transformation a supernatural work of God? What's all this talk about training? Shouldn't God just change us instantaneously? Isn't this about rhythms of grace and not works anyway?

Well, there are a couple of questions in there, but let me deal specifically with two. The first is this, God is in opposition to us trying to earn something before him, but he is not against our effort. Effort expended to grow as Christians is not the same as trying to earn God's favor. Now, unless we're careful we can conflate these two things and they can get muddled, but we need to know that effort and earning aren't the same thing.

Secondly, Scripture actually exhorts us toward effort. You see this all over the New Testament, but in Philippians 2 in particular Paul instructs us to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. So we are supposed to work, but what is the ground, the foundation of our work? What is the power and motivation behind it? It is that as we work, God is working. Our work is rooted in and enabled by the prior work of God in our hearts, doing what we can't do.

So let's get back to Paul's words to Timothy. "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths." We could easily just pass this over and move on to Paul's words about training, but there is something here that I want you to see.

Paul is saying that there are going to be stories out there that we are at risk of being captivated by. These are the stories about the world and about ourselves and about what makes for happiness that are sold to us as soon as we pick up the phone or walk out our door in the morning. And we've already said that because we are wired to worship, we are naturally lovers, without intentionality the promises and allure of these stories are going to attract us.

But the alternative is this - train yourself for godliness. Now what does Paul mean by this? Does he mean that we just discipline our bodies like Michael Phelps but instead of aiming at Olympic gold we're aiming at holiness? Well, in some ways yes, but that's not exactly what he's getting at.

Look back at the end of Chapter 3 for a moment. 1 Tim. 3:16:

"Great indeed," Paul says, "is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in to glory."

Now this is likely an early church hymn or confessional statement that Paul is quoting, but do you see what he's saying here? He is saying that mystery of godliness is the gospel. The mystery of godliness is tied to the person and work of Jesus who became flesh, died for our sins, rose again, and was taken up into heaven from where he'll come again.

So in 1 Tim. Paul means for us to equate the term godliness with the gospel story. So when we get to chapter 4 verse 7, here's what Paul is saying - train yourselves for or we could even say with the gospel. Train yourselves with the gospel. The heart and power and vitality of spiritual training is the true story of the gospel.

Here's why that matters. It is only the gospel that actually has the power to change the deepest levels of our loves and longings. This is why Paul in Romans 1 calls the gospel the power of salvation for those who believe. It's not just the message we believe to get saved, it's the story that continues to save and shape us. Paul is saying train yourself, intentionally allow yourself to be shaped by the story of the gospel and not the myths around you, because it is the gospel story that has promise not just for this life, but for the life to come.

All of this helps us give definition to what spiritual disciplines are all about. The disciplines, are not just what Christians do. Whether it's saturating our life with the Word of God, or prayer, or what we do here on Sunday morning and in our community groups - these things are all aiming at turning ourselves and our loves so that we face Jesus and his work in the gospel. The disciplines are a grace-driven effort toward consistent practice of the gospel-saturated rhythms that re-form and re-shape us by reordering what we love. All to the end that we would love and worship and glorify the Triune God in all of life.

But transformation takes time. Spiritual growth is more like a slow cooker than a microwave. And so in all of this we need patience with ourselves and with each other. Discipleship, as Eugene Peterson says, is a long obedience in the same direction. And so the equation for transformation in our lives is not just learning new information, it's not some new

experience with God that we need, neither is it just “doing more for God,” we’re transformed by this simple math:

The grace and power of God given through the Holy Spirit + gospel-saturated rhythms of grace personally and corporately + time = growth/re-formation of our loves/who we are.

We spent a week camping earlier this summer on the coast out on the Olympic Peninsula at Kalaloch. And while we were there we spent a lot of time on the surrounding beaches - Ruby Beach is right near there, and what is just spectacularly beautiful about these beaches is the incredible rock formations there. Every beach has these unique sandstone cliffs and monoliths, and tidal pools formed just simply through the consistent rhythm of the waves and tides washing over them day after day for thousands of years.

Church, this is the way that God is forming us. The waves and tides of his grace in the gospel, as we set ourselves in the way of them through rhythms of grace, over time reform and reshape us. Every one of us has all kinds of rough edges that need to be softened. We have protrusions that need wearing down. We’re disordered in more ways than we’d like to admit. But as we intentionally turn our affections toward the grace of Jesus demonstrated to us through his life death and resurrection, God changes us... and in transforming us he brings out a beauty in us individually and as a church that brings glory to him.