

FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL LIVING
Week 4: Session 3 - Growing in Grace
The Practice of Intentional Faith Development

Lent 3 Year C

Is 55:1-9; Ps 63:1-8; 1 Cor 10:1-13; Lk 13:1-9

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Heb. 10:24-25

¹⁹ Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴ **And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

The story is told of a man who once borrowed a book from an acquaintance. As he read through it, he was intrigued to find parts of the book underlined with the letters YBH written in the margin. When he returned the book to the owner, he asked what the YBH meant. The owner replied that the underlined paragraphs were sections of the book that he basically agreed with. They gave him hints on how to improve himself and pointed out truths that he wished to incorporate into his life. However, the letters YBH stood for “Yes, but how?”

There are a lot of areas in our Christian life where we could all write YBH in the page margins.

“I ought to know how to take better care of myself, but how?”

“I know I ought to spend more time in scripture reading and prayer, but how?”

“I know I ought to be more sensitive to others, more loving of my spouse, more understanding of the weaknesses of others, but how?”

These are all good qualities—we know that—but how can we acquire them? As Christians we know the kind of life we ought to live. We know the kinds of spiritual fruits we should be bearing—fruits of love, joy, peace, etc. Most of us have the best of intentions to advance and grow our spiritual lives, but how? We are afraid because we all know where the road paved with only good intentions leads!

The parable of the unfruitful fig tree in verses 6-10 of today's reading from Luke's account of the gospel reminds us that God expects us to be fruitful for him. We know what the Christian life requires of us and yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we also know how far short we fall. He expects us to produce that which is pleasing to him—to learn and grow so that we can be whom God has called us to be. So the question that confronts us this morning is: "Yes, but how?"

At some point we will all be called to account for our spiritual lives. Not that a good life saves us—we are not saved by good works—we all know that. Nevertheless, God *does* expect us to do something with our lives, as a response to his grace towards us. God expects us to learn and grow in our knowledge and love of him—to be useful witnesses for him and the gospel. This parable tells us that God actively labours over us to make us fruitful before making his final judgement. We are not only given time to get things straight, we are also given the care and attention that a good gardener gives to his plants—the raking and the fertiliser and the nourishment that all things require if they are to be fruitful—something we learnt about during the previous week in our reading and study about worship as our response to God's grace to us.

Do our lives count for anything? Are we fruitful for God? Do we make a difference? Or are our branches bare, and our limbs naked?

There is an old story told about a little boy called John. Young John was going home from school one day past his granddad's house with a couple of his mates. As they passed the house they saw the old man out on his veranda in his rocking chair with a big black book on his lap reading rather intently. "What's your granddad doing?", asked one of Johnny's friends. "Oh—granddad—he's cramming for the finals", John replied.

Our Christian lives should be lives of continual growing in grace—what Robert Schnase, in his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, calls being actively involved in "Intentional Faith development."

So, what does he mean by "Intentional faith development"? Intentional Faith Development is about how you continue to grow as Christians. It's about being purposeful about learning in community, outside of the regular worship services that most of us experience every or most Sunday mornings. It's about deepening our faith and growing in grace and the knowledge and love of God. And there are a whole lot of ways we can do that. The most notable probably, is that of a regular Bible study or home group, where people—often of like mind or interests—gather together to study the Scriptures, engage in fellowship and actively support one another.

Often, food and drink is involved. This is no accident. There is something fundamental about the combination of food and fellowship. That's one of the reasons we have morning tea after worship on Sundays. How else are we going to get to know one another? Some of Jesus' most meaningful encounters happened at mealtimes.

I can't speak for other groups, but the one I'm a part of usually begins with a light supper (coffee and cake), where we spend some time informally sharing together and catching up on the week's events. This then merges into our Bible study, which concludes with prayer. This is one model—and I'm sure there are other models that work just as well.

There are other types of groups that may also serve a similar function of fellowship and support, such as support groups that may have a particular context in mind—like young mums or retirees, for example. There are prayer groups that meet primarily to pray for the church and its members, or for mission. Valid groups may also be found in service or music ministries, retreats (which we usually hold at least once a year), seminars (which we have held from time to time and run for a limited time) or maybe day-long workshops designed for a specific goal.

We learn and grow in our faith in community, primarily because Jesus and the New Testament have taught us to learn this way, and because spirituality cannot easily be learned alone. I have heard people say that they don't need the church. All they need is the Bible and that teaches them everything they need to know. These people are very naïve, and really do lack a proper understanding of the nature of the church, which, by its very nature, is corporate. As Christians we are not independent, we are *interdependent*.

Learning in community also provides a level of accountability in our walk with Christ. When you meet together in groups, for whatever specific reason they are formed, you become accountable to one another—if not, it's not going to work. In these groups we are able share some of those deep personal struggles that we would never share with a large group or with individuals you hardly know. Accountability also stretches to confidentiality and a deeper level of prayer and support that you would not find elsewhere.

When we practice Intentional Faith Development, we...

are changed from the inside out.

become more attentive to the presence and working of the Holy Spirit.

connect to other Christians and become part of a supportive community.

find strength to change direction and make good decisions.

give and receive encouragement. And...

practice caring for one another.

In every congregation, however, there are those who resist Intentional Faith Development. They do so for a number of reasons. Sometimes they're unfamiliar with the Scriptures or religious terms and they are concerned about being embarrassed. I remember, many years ago, the church I was attending decided to have a short Bible study before the morning worship. When one elderly gentleman present was asked to look up a particular Bible verse, it became very clear that he had absolutely no knowledge of where to find it. The situation was quite awkward and embarrassing for him.

Sometimes people, perhaps those who are very shy, are afraid of not knowing others in the group and maybe even not being accepted. Sometimes it's cultural. Sometimes, it's simply because of the time factor. Finding a time that suits everyone in the group can sometimes be daunting in the midst of everyone's schedules and obligations. Sometimes people's beliefs are different and they're afraid of potential conflict. I've been in situations like that and I admit it's not always a comfortable situation. But as Christians, we are supposed to get beyond that.

There are others who just want a quick-fix and are not prepared for the long-haul that commitment to a Bible study or home group, that is necessary for spiritual growth. One of Eugene Peterson's best books on pastoral work, describes discipleship as, "a long obedience in the same direction." Unless it's a seminar situation or a workshop, you have to be prepared for the long-haul. True discipleship comes from a gradual but constant growth.

In order to grow in grace through the practice Intentional Faith Development, you have to overcome excuses. You have to make the time. Find a learning community that fits your schedule and commit to it. Fundamentally, it's about priorities. What are the things that are (or should be) most important in your Christian or spiritual life? Only in this way can you cultivate your spiritual life rather than just being a religious consumer. We ought to be constantly stretched and challenged in order to grow in our spiritual lives.

Through the practice of Radical Hospitality (week 1), we open ourselves to receiving God's love. We say Yes to God. Through Passionate Worship (week 2), we love God in return, offering our hearts to God in worship to create us anew. Through the practice of Intentional Faith Development, we grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.