

We are in the middle of spring. By a show of hands, how many of you have planted something so far this year—flowers, a tree, vegetables? There is something enjoyable and even spiritual about working the soil and helping things grow. I want you to imagine two different neighbors, each of whom had the same dream to grow a lush, vibrant garden. The first woman went out back, rolled up her sleeves, and got to work. She tilled the soil. She put in hours of work. She was sweating and tired and sore. Once the ground was ready, she put the seeds in the soil and thought, “We’re off to a great start. I can’t wait to enjoy the fruit of this garden!” She had every intention of tending to the garden all spring and early summer, but you know how busy life gets. Kids. Work. Cleaning the house. Family vacation. After getting off to a great start, she basically didn’t give any more time to the garden the rest of the season. The second woman began the same way the first did. She worked for hours preparing the soil. But once the soil was ready, she didn’t simply fling the seeds on the ground. She meticulously placed the seeds about ½ under the soil in rows, giving ideal spacing between each seed. And she didn’t sit back and hope for the best, but rather she diligently tended to her garden, usually daily, sometimes providing water, other times fertilizer, sometimes pulling weeds, sometimes pruning. Two women, each intending to grow a garden, but three months later, neighbor number one is going to go to her garden looking for fresh vegetables, and even though she put in some initial effort, all she’s going to have is an overgrown path of weeds. Neighbor number two is going to go to her garden and find enough food to feed not only herself, but all her family and friends as well. A fruitful, beautiful, vibrant garden doesn’t happen on its own; it doesn’t happen from getting off to a great start and having great intentions. It takes time, attention, and constant care. The same is true for spiritual life. So many people “hope” that they can have a fruitful, vibrant, deep spiritual life by simply getting off to a good start and having good intentions. The reality is that a deep, vibrant, fruitful spiritual walk only comes about through constant attention, diligence, and hard work.

Think about where the Pacers are right now – in the Eastern Conference Finals, led by Tyrese Haliburton who has hit some absolutely clutch shots with only seconds remaining. Haliburton has had a phenomenal year. This season, he has had the ball in the final seconds ten times with an opportunity to tie or take the lead. He made the shot nine times out of ten. That is every basketball player’s dream—with the game on the line, with the season on the line, to have the ball, take the shot, watch it go in, and be swarmed by your team. But how was Tyrese able to perform with such excellence in the clutch moments? It was by devoting, over the course of his life, tens of thousands of hours to training. Time in the gym, time in the weight room, time with coaches working on his form, repetition, over and over and over again, equipping and training his body to be able to perform in the right way when it matters most. He’s been able to play at the highest level in clutch moments because of an encompassing lifestyle of practice and training. The same is true in spiritual life.

Jesus said it was possible, and fully expected his followers, to live like he lived. In John 14:12 Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing.” And in Luke 6:40 he said, “Every student who is fully trained will be like their teacher.” Jesus said that a life of unbroken intimacy with our heavenly father, a life of selfless love for others, a life of humility, compassion, joy, peace, and hope, is 100% possible for every one of us! But like a flourishing garden, like an incredible athletic performance, that life won’t happen by accident. It won’t happen simply with good intentions; it will take constant diligence, effort, and work. We’ve already talked about a vision for discipleship, a culture of discipleship, and a mindset for discipleship. Today as we wrap up this series we’ll talk about a **lifestyle of discipleship**. Here’s the key takeaway for today: *Becoming more like Jesus always entails the dual focus of renouncing the flesh and pursuing the Spirit.*

Let’s talk about each of these because these are biblical, theological words that aren’t always used in modern vernacular. “The flesh” represents life apart from God. Living in the flesh is an orientation of life

in which we rely on our own resources—our wisdom, our strength, our ingenuity—rather than on God, and we follow our own desires—we do what we want, how we want, when we want—rather than looking to God for wisdom and guidance. This is the default way every person operates. On the other hand, “the Spirit” represents life with God. Living in the Spirit is an orientation of life in which we rely on God’s resources—we seek his guidance, his strength, his wisdom—rather than our own, and we follow God’s will—we seek to do what he wants, when he wants it, how he wants it. This is the way of life in the kingdom of heaven. Look at how the Scriptures describe these two realities:

- “The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing” (John 6:63).
- “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:24-25).

This is what the lifestyle of discipleship is all about: crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires and keeping in step with the Spirit. The journey to discipleship, to really living like Jesus, always requires both elements; they are like parallel rails on the train tracks. If all you do is focus on renouncing the flesh without passionately pursuing the Spirit and not following your own desires, you’ll end up legalistic and stoic, with no “offensive” or “egregious” sins, but also with no joy, no grace, no warmth, no love. You’ll have cold, stale religion. But if all you do is try to pursue the Spirit without doing the difficult work of putting your flesh to death, you’ll end up with a compartmentalized and hypocritical life in which you come to church and passionately raise your hands in worship and feel so much devotion to God, but you go home and look at pornography, you cheat on your taxes, you are addicted to food and technology and entertainment and shopping, you are mean to your co-workers, and your spouse doesn’t like being around you. We can’t do only one or the other, renouncing the flesh or pursuing the Spirit. We must do both!

Outside of the Bible, the two best books I know are *The Spirit of the Disciplines* and *Celebration of Discipline*. I highly encourage you to read them; they will be an invaluable resource for you. What I want to do today is bring the best of Scripture, and the best wisdom from spiritual sages like Dallas Willard and Richard Foster (the authors of these books), and talk about the very practical steps we can take in our daily lives to become more like Jesus. So how do we do that? Let’s talk about both aspects. We’ll begin by focusing on **crucifying the flesh**. I’ll share seven spiritual disciplines that help put the flesh to death. Imagine you had cancer, and the team of doctors gave you an encompassing and holistic approach: chemotherapy, radiation, immunotherapy, hormone therapy, and surgery. Each one is a specific way of attacking your cancer so that it will die and you can live. That’s what these disciplines are like in attacking the flesh.

Sabbath—One of the first commands God gave his people was “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8). The word “sabbath” means to cease, to stop, to rest. God knew that our normal orientation in life is to live at a frenetic pace, to always be working, always be going, always be moving. Our flesh thrives on constant activity. Sabbath is the discipline of slowing down.

We rarely create the time and space to be in touch with the deeper movements inside of and around us. We are distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion. It is not that we have anything against God, depth, and spirit, we would like these, it is just that we are habitually too preoccupied to have any of these show up on our radar screens. We are more busy than bad, more distracted than nonspiritual, and more interested in the movie theater, the sports stadium, and the shopping mall and the fantasy life they produce in us than we are in church. Pathological busyness, distraction, and restlessness are major blocks today within our spiritual lives. (Ronald Rolheiser)

Sabbath means you take a day, ideally every week, and you say no to work and output and activity. The flesh longs for activity; sabbath kills the flesh.

Silence—If sabbath is telling your flesh, “I don’t always have to be working and moving and running around,” silence is telling your flesh, “I don’t always have to be talking.” Ecclesiastes 5:2 tells us, “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.” In your prayer life, the discipline of silence often looks like sitting in silence and saying nothing, simply enjoying God’s presence, instead of spending time thanking God for all he’s given you, and praising him for his character, and asking for his provision. One thing I’ve found is that when you aren’t talking constantly, it’s a lot easier to hear God’s voice. The flesh longs for noise; silence kills the flesh.

Fasting—Fasting is going without food, for a meal, for a day, or for a stretch of days. Jesus fasted, and he said, “(When I am no longer with my disciples), they will fast” (Matthew 9:15). Fasting is very difficult, but it’s also very powerful. When you are fasting, your body is constantly telling you, “I’m hungry! Give me food, give me food, give me food, give me food now!” But when you decide not to respond to this very powerful physical demand, you are telling your flesh, “You are not in control; you don’t get whatever you want, whenever you want it.” You are learning to control your appetites and put your flesh in check. The flesh longs for food; fasting kills the flesh.

Simplicity—If fasting is the spiritual discipline of cutting out food, simplicity is the spiritual discipline of cutting out other forms of indulgence—shopping, eating out, vacations, new toys, nice things. We tend to operate under the adage, “If I want to do it and the money is there, I’m going to do it.” Practicing simplicity prevents us from getting caught up in a worldly, superficial, indulgent lifestyle. 1 Thessalonians 4:11 says, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life.” The flesh longs for self-indulgence; simplicity kills the flesh.

Secrecy—Often in life we find ourselves doing something good, something noble, something God-honoring, and after we do it, there is something in the flesh that longs for recognition, to be seen and celebrated by others for what we’ve done. That good thing we did ends up having a counter-productive impact on our soul. That’s why Jesus said, “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 6:3-4). The flesh longs for recognition; secrecy kills the flesh.

Sacrifice—Sacrifice is going above and beyond what is required or expected to serve God and others in exceptional ways. You might sacrifice sleep to begin your morning in prayer, or sacrifice time to serve someone in need, or sacrifice your money to advance the gospel or support your church. Paul said in Philippians 3:10, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and the participation in his suffering.” Jesus lived a sacrificial life, and it was only on the back end of sacrifice that he experienced resurrection power and glory. If you want to become more like Jesus, there is no other way than to embrace sacrifice. The flesh longs for self-preservation; sacrifice kills the flesh.

Confession—Confession is the discipline of refusing to live in the dark or to hide certain parts of your life, but deciding to live authentically and transparently, and, in the right environments, to audibly express to others your sins and short-comings. James 5:16 says, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” Confessing sin is hard, but God extends his grace and mercy to our lives in an undeniable way when we live with courageous transparency. The flesh longs to be esteemed by others; confession kills the flesh.

All seven of these practices are tangible ways, practical steps we can take to renounce the flesh, ruthlessly attacking it like we would attack cancer, so we can kill it before it kills us! But renouncing the flesh is

only one of the railroad tracks for full vitality in Christ, for living the life he came to make possible. We must also focus on **walking with the Spirit**.

Prayer—Prayer is conversation with God. Jesus' life was ordered around prayer. "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35). If we are going to walk in the Spirit, we must spend time alone with God, telling him what's on our hearts, and listening to what's on his. Prayer creates space for the Spirit to make you more like Jesus.

Scripture—The Bible is God's roadmap for our life. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, and a light on my path." The Scripture allows us to have God's wisdom for the decisions of our everyday lives. Scripture creates space for the Spirit to make you more like Jesus.

Solitude—All throughout his ministry, Jesus prioritized time alone with God. Throughout the gospels, we see that thousands of people were constantly flocking to Jesus, to listen to him and be healed by him. Instead of allowing his schedule to be set by the clamoring masses, we see that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). Solitude creates space for the Spirit to make you more like Jesus.

Worship—Jesus made attending church, where there was corporate worship, and Scripture and prayer a priority! "On the Sabbath day Jesus went into the synagogue, as was his custom" (Luke 4:16). If you want to draw near to God, come to the place where God is moving! Worship creates space for the Spirit to make you more like Jesus.

Fellowship—In week 2 of this series, we focused on how discipleship happens best in the context of community. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another" (Hebrews 10:24-25). The journey to the cross is a journey on which we need companions! Fellowship creates space for the Spirit to make you more like Jesus.

Thanksgiving—Thanksgiving is the practice of taking note of the goodness and grace of God and expressing your gratitude for it. Jesus did this often. In Matthew 11:25 we read, "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.'" Thanksgiving is one of the most overlooked but also most powerful spiritual disciplines. Thanksgiving creates space for the Spirit to make you more like Jesus.

Service—Service is the discipline, the rhythm, of taking your time and attention and using it not to do what you want, but to do what others need. Jesus modeled this on the last night of his life when he took a basin and towel, assumed the position of the lowest ranking slave in the house, and washed his disciples' feet. After he served them in a lowly, humble way, he said, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14-15). Serving others is not always glamorous, but it's a way of life that transforms your character, breaking the bonds of your focus from yourself, and placing it instead onto God and others. Serving creates space for the Spirit to make you more like Jesus.

All seven of these practices are tangible ways you can create space in your life for the Spirit to move. Like weeding, watering, and fertilizing a garden, like working out in a gym, practicing hard, and getting in lots of reps, this is what it takes! I want to show you, one more time, what's at stake. "If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:12-13). If you follow the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put the flesh to death you will live. Jesus said he came that we may have life and have it abundantly. He said that for anyone

who believes in him, it will be as if rivers of living water are flowing from within them. That abundant, joyful, vibrant, flourishing, nourishing life is possible, as we embrace a lifestyle of discipleship.

We have a great opportunity today to hear from one of our ministry partners who is doing this well. Please join me in welcoming Paul to the stage. Paul is working in a closed country in which fewer than 1% of the population are Christians. I have visited him there, and I've personally met and spent time with the people who he and his team have led to a relationship with Christ, and I am blown away by the spiritual maturity and depth of these people. I thought, "Wow! You have really trained these individuals in a lifestyle of discipleship," so I thought it would be great to have him share some of the practical things he and his team do.