

All right, everybody. Welcome to Valley Creek. We're so glad that you're here with us today. And we are in a series called A Different Way. And before we jump in, I just want to start by celebrating you. I want to celebrate you for the way that you've been listening over these last few weeks, the way that you've been open, the way that you've been wrestling, the way that you've been thinking and contemplating and reflecting on what God is saying and what God is doing. We've been getting incredibly consistent feedback from all our Circles and our serve teams of how God is moving in this season and in this series. And so, all I'm trying to do at the beginning of this series is lay a foundation, cast a really big vision, try to lift up your head a little bit, and then speak to the deep things inside of you. Because you were created for more.

You see, the first week we started this whole thing and we just said that Jesus invites us to a different way, that we don't have to live like everybody else. We don't have to live a life of stress and worry and anxiety and hustle. He says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Come and let me teach you how to do your life." And then the second week. Then we talked about how God invites us to come and be His disciple, a learner, a student, a follower, one who becomes like the one that they're following. Jesus invites us to come and arrange our life around Him and He will teach us how to live in the kingdom. He will teach us how to live our lives. And then last week, we talked about change. And we said it's actually possible to change. Not only is it possible, it's actually normative. And yet if we're honest, we have been deeply shaped and formed and molded by sin in our lives. So, we have these deep ruts, these deep patterns, and we find ourselves often doing the things that we don't want to do and not doing the things that we do want to do because of these ruts that have been created in our life.

And I spent all week sharing that with you last week and studying on it. And then this week, I fell into one of my ruts and finding myself not doing what I want to do and doing what I don't want to do and watching as the sin patterns of my life hurt the people that I love that are around me. Sin always steals, kills, and destroys. And it can be incredibly defeating when you find yourself in one of those ruts. And then you have to stop and remind yourself there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He's broken the power of sin off my life and He's training me to go in a different direction. He is inviting me to a different way where I become one who does the things that He does. And we said that if we're going to change, Dallas Willard, the great theologian, gives us this great little acronym, that if people have changed, they have vision and intent and means.

That if you're going to change in life, this is how people change. They have vision, they have intent, they have means. They have vision. They see an alternative future. They see what can be in the midst of what is. They see what must be in the midst of what is. And then when that vision captures their heart, they have intent, eagerness, earnestness, determination, all their heart, they're set on it. And then they will find means, next steps, pathways, education, training, opportunities. But that's how people change. And he gives us this great example and says, why does almost every other country in the world learn English as a second language?

Well, it's because they have a vision for it. They have a vision that if I learn English as a second language, it's going to bring me prosperity and success and blessing and opportunity, so I intend to do it. I'm eager, I'm earnest, I'm determined with all that I've got. So, I will find the means, like Duolingo and English-speaking cafes and English programming, and I will change.

And yet he says, why then is it that Americans, we don't, almost none of us, learn any language as a second language? Like, why haven't you learned Arabic or Japanese in your life? Because you don't have a vision for it. It's of no value to you. You don't see how it's going to make your life any better, so you never intend to actually go and do it. And it doesn't matter that there are more means available to you right now to learn Japanese or Arabic than have ever been in human history. So, could it be the reason a lot of us never spiritually change is because we don't actually have a vision to be a disciple of Jesus, and live in His kingdom. So, then I never actually intend to do it, and it doesn't matter what kind of means are available to me, I don't have a vision nor intent, so I'm not interested in the means. There is all kinds of vision that is cast for you and all kinds of means that are available to you. The question is, is do you have intent?

And no one can do anything about your intent but you. And the reason it's so important to have a vision and then to have intent is because then your life is not led by your feelings. If you find yourself saying all kinds of, all the time, I didn't feel like doing it, then just be clear, you don't have intent, which means you don't have a vision. Because feelings don't matter when I have intent, when I'm captivated by a vision. And if I don't have vision or intent, eventually I'll start to complain about the means. And that's what I shared with you last week; what happens to so many people in churches is because they don't have vision or intent to live in the kingdom, they start to complain and criticize the means, the methods, the things that are available. So, the next time you find yourself complaining or someone else is complaining to you, stop and ask yourself the question, are they actually growing right now? Because maybe the reason they're complaining about the means is because they don't have intent or vision.

And what the church organizationally does in that dysfunctional scenario is we just keep adding means upon means upon means upon means, convinced that if we just give enough means, eventually it will move your intent and you will have a vision. The only problem is when we stockpile all the means, there are so many activities available, we get so overwhelmed we don't even know which one to do. Or we start doing all of them and we become so busy doing the activities of God that we don't actually become like God. Okay, neither of those are good. And what I've learned over time is that the people that actually change are people that have humility and hunger, which is why Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled." You will always eventually be filled with whatever you are the most hungry for, okay? That's where we got to last week and left it off. And what I want to do is I want to keep taking this conversation further with you and I want to give you a model for how people actually change. Like once I have vision, once I have intent, once I start pursuing means, how is it that I actually start changing?

And after doing this for a couple decades, reading the Scriptures a ton, studying, thinking about this a lot, a working theory, a working method for how people change, I think it's something as simple as this. If you're actually going to change and be formed, you've got a vision, you've got intent, you're pursuing means, this is you and it all starts with the Holy Spirit. You don't change yourself, the Holy Spirit changes you. Just like you can't save yourself, you can't change yourself. It's the Holy Spirit's work in our lives through two things. Its encounters and His daily activities. See, we change when we have encounters with God. See it all over Scripture. Moses has an encounter with God at the burning bush, his entire life changed. Jacob wrestled with God all night, his entire identity changed. Paul had an encounter with God on the road, his entire reality changed. The lepers encountered God. The woman at the well encountered God. The woman caught in adultery encountered God. And their lives changed.

One word, one moment, one experience, one encounter, one breath, one visitation from God can completely change your life. The Holy Spirit changes us through encounters, but also His daily activity. See, Jesus says to the disciples, "It's for your good that I go, because if I go, the Holy Spirit will come." And you are now the temple of the Holy Spirit and He resides inside of you. And every day, the Holy Spirit is active in shaping and forming and molding you. He convicts you of sin when you're on the wrong track. He guides you in truth when you need to know where to go. He points you towards Jesus. The Holy Spirit is constantly at work in your daily life, forming you into the image of Jesus. In fact, it says, "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious." The acts of the flesh, your life without God, this is the best you can do.

"Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions, and envy." That's the best you can do on your own. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." When the Holy Spirit is at work in my life, this is what He is producing and this is what He is forming in me. That's why Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. But apart from Me, you can do nothing." Which is why Paul says, "Don't grieve or quench the Holy Spirit." Be open and hungry and thirsty and let Him work. We change by the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

And then, as the Holy Spirit starts moving, He starts moving through God's Word. God's Word. God says, "My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge." We don't have knowledge about how the kingdom actually works, so we get destroyed. And you know this is true in your life. You need knowledge to find the way. You have to have knowledge to change a flat tire. You have to have knowledge to prepare a healthy meal. You have to have knowledge to file your taxes. And without knowledge, there is a destruction, which is why Jesus says, "You will know the truth. And the truth will set you free." He says, "My Word is designed to free you from the bondages that you don't even know you have."

Think about how God's Word talks about God's Word. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." "God's Word is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating soul and spirit, joint and marrow." "He sent His Word and healed them." "My Word is a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path." "The words I speak to you are spirit and they are life." "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand." "Change your mind, the truth has come." This is why this verse says, "All Scripture" – God's Word – "is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training" – the word we've been using – "in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every work." What a verse to sit on and meditate on. That God's Word is His breath, training us to become who He has created and called us to be. This is why we need God's Word in our life, through Scripture, through Bible reading, through study, and through preaching. This is why we have such a high view of preaching because preaching is God's Word declared over your life to shape and form you. Just like Ezekiel preached to Moses and prophesied to the dry bones.

When God's Word, like right now, is being spoken over your life, dead things are coming to life. Things within you are awakening. Dreams are being released. Destinies are being released. Revelation is being given. Movement is happening. Healing is taking place. And the best thing that happens is seeds get planted in your heart and they begin to grow, night and day, whether you're asleep or you're awake. You don't even know how, but it starts to change you from the inside out. How are we ever going to become like God if we don't first learn to think like God?

So, am I open to His changing Word? Then the Holy Spirit starts to work in our lives through godly relationships. And notice it doesn't say friendships, acquaintances, community. This isn't the girls' night out girls. This isn't fishing buddies. This isn't that student that I think is cool and I want to be around. This is another disciple of Jesus in my life. Another person who knows what a disciple is and has decided to be one. I need at least two or three of those directly involved in my life where they're saying, "We're going to do this thing together." Think of elite athletes. No elite athlete ever trains alone. They know they need other elite athletes in their life to push them to be their best. Come on, think about what the Bible says. "Confess your sins to one another and pray for each other that you might be healed." "Spur one another on towards love and good deeds." "Encourage one another." "Forgive one another." "Build up one another." "Strengthen one another." There are so many "one another's" in the Bible. Who are the one another's in your life? "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Who are the other elite athletes that you're training with to become who you say you want to become?

"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will" – not, "I will;" not, "you will" – "We will in all things grow, change up into Him who is the head that is Christ from Him, the whole body connected, joined and held together by every supporting relationship grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work." Like, I can't become who I'm called to be without you. I need another disciple or two in my life that is helping form and shape and mold me. So, my

question for you is this. Is there anybody in your life that you can confess sin to? And when was the last time you did it? Is there anybody that will love you enough to forgive you when you mess up and point you towards Jesus? Have you built any relationships where you spur one another on towards love and good deeds? Because you become like who you hang around.

So, the Holy Spirit works through godly relationships and then through trials – hardships, grief, suffering. This is the one we probably like the least. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." It says trials help us become mature and complete. Trials, like that marriage that falls apart, like that broken relationship, like that sickness in your body, like the lost job, like the financial hardships, like the, like the wayward trial. Yeah, those things are the things, when we're surrendered to God, that He uses to make us mature and complete.

Remember, God tests you to strengthen you. Satan tempts you to break you. And there's a big difference. God is not tempting you in your trial. He's testing you to remove the things in you that aren't supposed to be there. And this is why He says, "Consider it pure joy." How? Joy is a pervasive sense of well-being. And if I have a vision and intent to become who God has called me to be, then when trials show up in my life, I can actually have joy because I know they are part of the means of what God is using to help me become who He has called me to be. Or how about, "In this you greatly rejoice" – there it is again – "though for now" – for a little while – "you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials, these have come" – why are they here? – "so that your faith of greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire may be proved genuine." He says, "Rejoice because the trials are refining you."

See what trials do in our lives is they break us. They break us open. They humble us. And they bring us to this place of submitting and surrendering to the Lordship of Jesus, like a big storm that comes in and it unearths everything that was really there. All the things that we didn't even think were inside of us, they get exposed, they get laid bare, and God invites us to surrender them to Him. And trials remind us of what's really important in this life, and what really matters. In fact, this is why it says that famous verse that we know, that "In all things God works for the good of those who love Him..." Listen, you wouldn't have to say God is working for the good if you thought it was good. So, it immediately implies trials, suffering, grief. "...who have been called according to His purposes." We like that verse. It's on your pillow and your knick-knacks and your frames. But the next verse tells us why. "For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son."

Those trials have come and they're good because your destiny is to be shaped into the image and the likeness of Jesus. Are you open to what God wants to do in your life, in trials? And then there's the spiritual practices that form and shape us. These are the things we've been talking about. Training, habits, this is: we can't do it without God. But He won't do it without us.

This is why we have verses like this. "Since you have taken off your old self with its practices" – the way you used to live in the world – "and have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." We actually have a responsibility to partner with what God is doing in our life, how He is changing us. That's the practices, the disciplines. That's primarily what this series is about, and then time. Maybe we like this one even less than trials.

In our instant, immediate, convenient, overactive, under-meaning lives, we don't like time. We want it now. We want it instant. We want it yesterday. But that's not how it works. It's a process. "Let us not become weary in doing good for at the proper time, we will reap a harvest if we don't give up." Most of Jesus' teachings on the kingdom revolve around agriculture. Plants, trees, seeds. What do those things take to grow? Time. And if you're going to change, it's going to take time. This is a working theory for a big word: spiritual formation. How God actually forms you into the image and likeness of Jesus. But it's not just the image and likeness of Jesus. See, this is how people change. And if you have time, you should think through this later on your own in every area of your life that you're a part of. How do people actually change?

But just let me invert one for you. The spirit of the world, the spirit of the world has a plan and a destiny for your life. And what does he start with? Teaching. God's Word could be teaching. Indoctrination, ideas, images, media, lies. Lies deceived as truth. Or, what would be the word? Hidden, covered. I don't know. Disguised, thank you very much. Disguised, that's the word I was going for. Disguised as truth. Community. Finding other people that are moving in the direction of the world. You become like who you hang out with. That's why who you hang out with really matters. The spirit of the world wants to use the trials to get you to pick up ungodly beliefs, to be offended at God, to question His goodness and His love and make you become bitter and hard-hearted. He then wants to cause you to start practicing, training, picking up habits of the world. Enjoying the temporary pleasures of sin.

And then over time, he has shaped and molded you into the image and likeness of the world. This is spiritual formation. And everybody gets one. Whether you want it or not. Hitler had one. Mother Teresa had one. Osama Bin Laden, the Pope, your mom, your boss, and you. The only question is, is it intentional spiritual formation or unintentional spiritual formation? Because you are being shaped and molded into a kind of person. Is it the kind of person you want to be? And I get it. Spiritual formation, big word, not a word we use a lot around here. Let me just define it for you. Spiritual formation is the process of being formed into the image of Christ to become a person of love. Spiritual formation, which was that graphic I was showing you, it's a process. It's not an event.

It's not a one-time moment or an experience. It's a journey. It's an ongoing lifestyle and it is not linear up and to the right. There are good days and bad days. There are moving forwards and moving backwards. There is up and there is down. There is failure and there is victories. It is a

process of being formed. Notice, it doesn't say that you form yourself, because I can't form myself. I'm being formed, which means I don't have control. But I have to partner with God. He won't do it without me. I can't do it without Him. So, I'm the clay and I put myself on the potter's wheel, I'm the gold and I put myself in the refiner's fire, I'm the garden and I open up the gate and ask the Master Gardener to come in and work the soil. I am being formed, but I work with God in that process into the image of Christ. He is the prototype, the standard, the source of humanity of who we were created and called to be and ultimately to become a person of love.

That's the end result. A person that knows and relies on the love of God. A person who has good will towards God and towards others. A person who actually starts to live like, think like, act like, and believe like Jesus. That's spiritual formation. And you have one, whether you realize it or not. You've already had one. The question is now, what kind of one do you want going forward? Because you've been formed by the spirit of the world and by the Holy Spirit in different ways. What do you want to be as you go forward? Which is why we keep using this verse, "Train yourself to be godly." Don't try to be godly. Don't wait for God just to zap you and make you godly. Don't just will yourself to godliness. Don't train to be worldly. Train yourself to be godly.

And he uses the example of physical training and we've been talking about this in this series, that we all inherently know, I can't just run out and play for the Cowboys. I can't just put on a helmet and a jersey and run out there. If I really want to do that, I've got to train. I've got to practice. I've got to build habits. I've got to totally have a different, have a different routine. I've got to do all the things that professional athletes do. If I want to play Mozart, I can't just sit down and play at the piano. I've got to back up and practice every day, scales and chords and charts for long periods of time to be able to do that. If I want to speak Mandarin and just go to Beijing and drop in and fluently talk to people, that's illogical, and we all know it is. But I can do Duolingo and practice and learn and read and study. If I want to run a marathon, we all know we can't just run out of here and go run a marathon. But you can get sneakers and walk to the mailbox, the next day around the block, and the day after that, a mile, and so on and so forth and build up. We all get it in all the other areas of life, but for some reason when it gets to godliness, that logic goes out the window.

No longer do we think we need to train. We just think we become. I'm here. Poof, yes. Let me give you an alternative way of trying to understand this. Think of the area that we live in and how parents are very focused on having a training plan for their children to become who they want their children to be. The area we live in, there are lots of people who want to train their children to be great athletes. They're not just trying, they're not just willing, they're not just hoping. They actually have a plan. We're going to join this team and make this select and get on this travel squad and get this coach and this trainer and go to this gym and practice here and do there, it's a very clear plan. Why? Because they have such a vision and an intent to have

their kid be a great athlete. There's a lot of families that want to train their kid to be a great musician.

It's not arbitrary. They have a plan. We're going to be a part of this studio and have this teacher and be a part of this band and go to live in this school district so we can be a part of that one because that guy is the best director. And we're going to go to this practice and this training. There's a lot of families that want to train their kids to be educated. It's not arbitrary. You're going to go to this school, we're going to take these classes. You're going to get this tutor. You're going to go to this prep thing. You're going to take this study class. You're going to read these books. It's not arbitrary. Fair?

Okay. So, now if you ask those same families what their plan is to train their child to be godly, what's the answer? Let me ask you this. If you're a parent in this room, what's your plan to train your child to be godly? Do you have one? Have you ever thought about it? And if the answer is, "Well, we come to church one hour a week on the weeks that we're available," that would be like saying I'm trying to help my son be a professional golfer and I take him to the golf course one hour a week on the weeks that I'm available.

We all know that's absurd and doesn't work. And we've been called by God to train our children in the way they should go. So, what's your plan? And if you're sitting here and you're like, "I don't know. What should my plan be?" You know why you don't have a plan? Because you probably don't have a plan to train yourself to be godly. The greatest plan to train your child to be godly is to have a plan to train yourself to be godly. You are the greatest vision and means your child will ever see. Vision, you can't become what you haven't seen. Means, we need someone else to show us the way. And when I choose to train myself to be godly, I am now a vision for my kids to see and I can say, "Come follow me as I follow Christ."

I can't move their intent, but I can certainly cast a compelling vision and means by my life. This is why it says, "Remember your leaders consider the way of their life and imitate their faith." Just so you know, your kids are considering your way of life and imitating your faith, or lack thereof, whether you realize it or not. And I get it. I want my kids to be great at the other things that God has created and called them to do, too. But I want them to be godly more than anything else. I want them to live in the kingdom and I want them to be disciples, which means I have to train to live in the kingdom and I have to train to be a disciple, because I can't take them where I haven't gone.

I get it. Those other things, he says, have value. There's some really good value in the sports and the education and the music, all the things. But godliness has greater value because what good is it for your kid to gain the whole world and lose their soul? What good is it for you to gain the whole world and lose your soul? It's amazing how anytime I talk about the next generation, the whole room is like, "Yeah!" I want to be like, "But you, man. But you." Who cares if you make that money, get that job, accomplish that thing, win that trophy and have a



darkened, blackened, distorted, broken soul? At some point in time, I have to acknowledge I'm being formed and shaped either by the spirit of the world or by the Holy Spirit, and I get to choose which one I really want to go towards.

At some point in time, you have to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and act according to his purpose." Like I can't do it without God, but He won't do it without me. And if I've really been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light, I've got to work that salvation out. Like, I got to walk it out. It's got to kind of now mean something and my life should probably be different.

And there should be some fear and some trembling and some awe and some wonder and some gravity and some urgency and really thinking through, "What does my life look like in regards to this salvation that I now claim that I've experienced?" Because it should be different than the world around me. And God is working in me to help me become who He has created and called me to be. And this is where the spiritual practices come in. This is where spiritual disciplines come in. Are you still with me on this? A discipline is simply doing what I can do now so I can do what I want to do later. It's doing what I can do now so I can do what I want to do later. For example, I can't play Mozart. But if I have a vision for it and an intent and I really want to do it, then I can back up here and every day for the next two years, I can practice 15 minutes of piano. And discipline will allow me to do what I can do now, eventually I'll be able to do what I can't do or what I want to do later.

If I can't run a marathon right now, I can't do it. But what I can do is every day, go for a walk that becomes a jog, that becomes a run. I can do what I can do now, so eventually I can do what I want to do later. Okay. A spiritual discipline, a spiritual practice, is simply doing what I can do now to open myself up to God's grace, so I can do what I can't do later. That's all it is. A spiritual discipline or a practice is doing what I can do now to open myself up to God's grace. I can't change myself. But I'm the clay and I can put myself on the potter's wheel, and I'm the gold and I can put myself in the fire, and I'm the garden and I can open up the door and ask God to come in and move. I need His grace so that eventually I can be empowered to do what I want to do later.

Spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices are simply opening yourself up to God. They're submitting. They're surrendering. They're offering your body as a living sacrifice. There's nothing magic in them. What they do is they open you up to God, so God can do what He wants to do in you.

Because as humans, we have an amazing ability to be completely closed off. And the practices open us up to God's grace, so He can do what He wants to do in our lives. You see, a disciplined person is someone who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. That's all it means. A disciplined person is someone who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. A disciplined businessman is not someone who gets up at four in the

morning, works out, does all his emails, prepares for the day. A disciplined businessman is someone who can make the right decision in the middle of the day when it needs to be made.

A disciplined athlete is not an athlete who is in the gym all the time, training all the time. No, a disciplined athlete is someone who can make the play when it needs to be made. They just know I can't make that play if I don't practice a whole bunch. Okay. A disciplined Christian is not someone who does the disciplines all the time. They're someone who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. Like be wise when wisdom is needed, be loving when love is needed, be joyful when joy is needed, be peaceful, forgiving when that's needed. That's a disciplined person. And if we're honest, we look at that and we're like, "I can't do that now." I know. So, we back up and we say, "But I can do this, and that's going to empower me to be able to do that later." Are you with me on this?

It's simply opening ourselves up to God's grace. Ah, we got to skip. We got to skip. We got to skip. And here's the deal. These are the practices that we're going to talk about. These are ways you can open yourself up to God so you can do what you can do now so you'll be able to do what you want to do later. The lifestyle of Jesus, so you can live the life of Jesus. And if this overwhelms you, don't worry. You don't need to do all of these. We're going to talk through them and they're tools of grace. Means of opening yourself up to God, so He can do what He is really good at, which is changing us from the inside out. I just have to open myself up to Him. And what you'll see is that there are practices of abstinence and practices of engagement. Practices where I do something and practices where I practice not doing something. And those are meant to help me because the sin in my life is either sin of commission, I do something, or sin of omission, I don't do something that I should do. And they counteract.

So, let's say you have a sin of commission, anger. You just explode with anger. You can't control it. Well, that's commission. You would need to practice practices of abstinence. Like Sabbath, and simplicity, and fasting. Let's say that your struggle is, you can't forgive someone else. A sin of omission. You're not doing what you know God has asked you to do, to forgive. What do you need to practice? Practices of engagement. Like generosity, service, celebration. Let's say your struggle is pride. You're just a really prideful person. Acknowledge that and then look at the list and you say, "How can I counteract that in my life? Well, I probably need to practice service, and confession, and repentance. And probably some simplicity or some Sabbath." And if you'll take time to think through this, it's going to make sense to you. You see, as we get started, I just want to give you these guardrails as we go through these next bunch of weeks, because this was all the foundation. And this is really simple.

Spiritual practices are not a measure of maturity, okay. This is not a measure of maturity. You doing all the practices every day, eight days a week, does not mean you're mature. The Pharisees did all kinds of religious practices and activities and yet they were broken and decrepit on the inside. They had a great external, but a really broken internal. Jesus is going for the inside out. So, it doesn't matter if you do the practices, they are not a measure of maturity.

You know what's a measure of maturity? Love and obedience. The Fruit of the Spirit. See if you can catch it like this. The point of practicing piano is not practicing piano. The point of practicing piano is to become a really good piano player. And if you can be a great piano player without practice, go for it. The point of the spiritual practices are not the spiritual practices. This is so important. The point of the spiritual practices are to help me become like Jesus.

And if I can become like Jesus without them, go for it, because they are not the measure of maturity. Second thing is spiritual practices are an invitation, not an obligation. Okay, these are all invitations. Hear me, hear me, hear me. You don't have to do any of these. Yes. None of you. I don't care if a Circle leader tells you, a staff member tells you, a serve team member tells you, your spouse tells you. If anyone tells you you have to do them, you can just say, "Hey, point back to week four, John said I don't have to do them." You do not have to do any of these. In fact, if they're obligations to you, please don't do them, because you will hurt you and everyone else around you. You're free. These are not commands. These are invitations from Jesus. He says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and you'll find rest for your soul." So, hear me. If you're vibrant and free, and your soul is at rest, carry on.

But if your life is weary and burdened and there's unrest in your soul, Jesus invites you to a different way of living your life. Third thing is, these are not one-size-fits-all. Not everyone needs to do the same practices. You find one you like, it doesn't mean your friends or your family needs to do that same one. And you don't have to do all of them. We need God to show us which ones to do, when to do them, and how to do them. Like if you're an introvert, you probably don't need to practice silence and solitude. What do you need to practice? Community. If you're an extrovert, you do not need to practice community. You need to practice silence and solitude. Yes. If you're a thinker, you probably don't need to practice meditation. You probably need to practice prayer. And if you're a feeler, you probably don't need to practice prayer. You probably need to practice meditation. Are you catching me?

Whichever one you're the most concerned about me talking about, that's the one you need to do, because your flesh is already crying out saying, "Not that one, not that one, not that one, not that one. Uncomfortable, inconvenient, I don't feel it. Nope, nope, nope, nope. Let's be sick on that week. We're not going. Nope." That's the one you need to do. In all seriousness, whichever one on that list you're already like, checked off, that's the one. In all seriousness, that's the one, because that will be the one that actually forms you. They're done with God, not for God. We don't do these for God as some religious merit, as if He is going to like, somehow give us favor because we do it. No, no. We enter into all these practices with God to know God. To be with God. In fact, the spiritual practices aren't something we do for God. They're something He does for us. If we will enter them with Him. And then they are done in the secret place.

This isn't about you running around telling everybody, posting on social media, making sure everyone knows you're practicing the day of Sabbath. Like, if you had to post on that, it wasn't the day of Sabbath, just so you're clear, you know. Jesus says, "When you pray, when you fast, when you give, do it in secret, and your Father who sees will reward you." It doesn't mean that you can't tell family or friends or the godly relationships you're walking with to help you to grow. I'm just saying, the point is not virtue signaling where everyone else sees and is like, "Oh, you're so mature." Why? Because it's not a measure of maturity anyways. You can be the meanest, nastiest person that practices every discipline there is. Or you can be a really loving and gracious person that's learning how to walk with God.

See, what I'm trying to tell you in all this, concept of change, and disciplines and practices is, this is a lifestyle. I am not talking to you about habit-stacking, about fitting this into your already-busy life, about doing these things while you're doing something else. This is about arranging and rearranging your life around Jesus and His lifestyle. If you were actually going to train for a marathon, you couldn't habit-stack your way into it. You couldn't fit it in your already-busy life. You would have to change some things. So, if you're actually going to walk a different way, you're going to have to change some things. I'm just going to tell you right now, it'll be awkward. It'll be uncomfortable. It'll be foreign, unfamiliar. It's a little unknown. Why? Because we've been so deeply shaped to live like this world that a different way feels very out of control. It feels very uncomfortable. It will actually be hard. And you're like, "I thought the way of Jesus is easy and light?" It is easy and light, once we have learned to walk in it.

It is very hard though to go from the way you've been living your life for 50 years to now trying to do the things that Jesus did. So I have to acknowledge that and ask for grace. And we're going to practice. We're going to try. And we're going to train. And we're going to struggle. And you're going to fail. And you're going to fall. And junk inside of you that you thought you already dealt with is going to come raging back to the surface, and you're going to be like, "I thought that was gone." And God is going to be like, "Hey, we're going to do a new level." And you're not going to get defeated and you're not going to get discouraged because you realize there's thousands of other people trying to do the same thing with you. And we're going to keep our minds set on Jesus. We're going to keep gathering back. We're going to keep encouraging each other. And we're going to say there actually is a way to live a different way in this world. I can actually be someone that does the things that Jesus did so I can do the things that Jesus did. And we're going to change. But change isn't the point. And you're going to grow. But growing isn't the point. And you're going to get a better life. But the better life isn't the point. The point is that I want more of God.

The point is not the disciplines. The point is that He is my one thing. And I want to offer my body as a living sacrifice. And I want to know You, God. I want You to teach me how to live in Your kingdom. I want to be Your disciple. I want to do life with You. And I want to move deeper into Your heart and actually become a person of love. This week, last prayer that we're going to

pray like this. Just Jesus, help me be open to Your changing grace. That's what the spiritual practices and disciplines are. Presenting ourselves to changing grace, not just saving grace.

Yes, grace saves you. But grace empowers you to do what you could never do on your own. It changes you from the inside out. And the reason I've been asking you to pray these little prayers, and I'm not sure if you write it down and forget about it all week, or you don't even write it down, or you don't think about it, or you do it once. Here's all these little prayers that I've done for these four weeks have just been to try to get you to crack the door of your life, so a light beam from God can shine into some of your darkness. And as your eyes begin to see, maybe, just maybe it's going to make you hunger and thirst to open up the door even more so that His life will be your light and flood all the dark places of your life and show you what's really available to those who want to walk a different way. So, close your eyes with me. I know that was a lot. And I know in a lot of ways today that was just a foundation setter.

Just trying to bring some clarity to you of how this stuff actually works. But what do you feel like the Holy Spirit is just stirring up in you today? He is so gracious and compassionate. He will not force us to be who we don't want to be. If we want to live like the world, He will let us. But when we have a vision for a different way, He will even help us have an intent that is greater than our feelings. And He will give us the means, one next step at a time.

My sense is for some of you, it's just like, super overwhelming. Don't be overwhelmed. The Holy Spirit is showing you where we're headed and what's available for you in the future. And then He is bringing you back to what's the next step. Every journey starts with a single next step. And it might just be that prayer, Jesus, help me be open to Your changing grace. Jesus, help us believe that we can change. Help us experience the spiritual formation that turns us into people of love. And help us to consider the ways of our lives because You offer us a different way. A much better way, because Your way leads to life. In Your name we pray. Amen.