

Sermon – October 11, 2020
“After the Honeymoon Phase”
Crown of Life Lutheran Church
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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our resurrected Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

"And now Lord, open my mouth so that I can speak. Open our ears so that we can hear. And open our hearts so that we can change ... and truly experience peace through your grace, Amen."

Earlier we cited several examples of God's people getting off-track in their relationships with Him. I did not list those examples to depress you, but they lead to a really obvious question. "Why would we expect to be any different than many of the great men and women of God throughout the Bible? "

God says the phrase "do not be afraid" 365 times in Scripture. Why so many? Because during much of your Christian life, you will feel afraid. It could be fear of other's behavior towards you or fear of the Covid-19 pandemic. There will be many times when you won't feel God 's presence, even if you want to really follow Him.

How many of you have ever felt like you have gotten off-track spiritually? Before you answer, let me clarify that I'm not talking about full-on walking away from God, or not going to church for a while. Have you ever felt like you were not as close to God as you once were in the past?

We could have easily ended this series last week ... excited about tackling spiritual training, since we were encouraged to study our Bible more, pray more, and really try our best to practice the disciplines of solitude, submission and service in the previous weeks.

But what I've learned over the years is that inspiration and a plan are NOT ENOUGH to get us to the end point.

We totally see this all over the Bible. In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul lets the young believers know WHO they are in Christ. He says they (and we) are chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven ... we are God 's masterpieces ... just to name a few.

Then comes two and a half chapters of ENCOURAGEMENT from Paul to these same young believers. He gives them some clear ways to follow Jesus, for example, Paul says...

"Be imitators of Christ. "

"Make the most of every opportunity."

"Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church."

But what REALLY is interesting is what comes at the END of the letter. All of sudden, Paul talks about SPIRITUAL WARFARE.

Even though your identity is in Christ, which pumps you up; even though we've got a great game plan, since God's Word tells us what to do; we still need to know all about our

enemy Satan and his tendencies.

When God wants to build, Satan wants to battle. It would be a lot easier, if the devil just walked around with horns and a pitchfork and yelled at you while you read the Bible.

Then, you would recognize it was him. But the enemy is much more SUBTLE and DECEIVING. I want to spend the rest of our time today walking through four subtle ways Satan will try to DISCOURAGE you from growing your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Remember that the devil is a deceiver, so he will try to convince you to GIVE UP, or at least SLOW DOWN your pursuit of God. But if we can see his actions for what they really are, we will be better prepared to work through them, and keep going forward in our pursuit of mature faith.

The first myth is...

"I've Lost That Lovin' Feeling" Myth

We know God wants our relationship to deepen. So, in the times you don't feel as close, or are tempted to take a break from some of the spiritual habits you've learned, you need to actually do the exact opposite.

The most important days to have a quiet time with God are the ones I'm LEAST motivated to have one. What I've found is if I can just follow through in making time with God a priority, even though I don't feel like it, God will show up in a powerful way.

In our first lesson from Revelation 2, John wrote some convicting words to the church in Ephesus. First, Jesus praises the people for their deeds, hard work, perseverance, and lack of tolerance for false prophets. Then, Jesus says, "Yet I hold this against you..."

"You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." Revelation 2:4b-5

For all Christians there will come times when you just don't feel as close to God as you did before. When this happens, there is a guilty feeling that, somehow along the way, you have forsaken your first love. You just don't have the same passion for God as before.

It's at this point that the devil will take it one step further and put other thoughts in your mind.

"Maybe it is God who isn't as close to you as before."

"Maybe this whole Christian thing is just not for you."

"If I can't get excited to spend time with God, then I shouldn't fake it. Maybe I should just quit the church."

But here is what is interesting from this Revelation 2 passage ... it is the word, "love". The

word used by John for love here is the Greek word AGAPE, which isn't describing a feeling; it's describing a CHOICE.

John is not saying "you just don't FEEL the same way about God as you used to." He is saying, "You've stopped making the choices you did before to make knowing God and serving others a priority." We need to make better choices. The second myth is...

The Spiritual Comparison Myth.

The primary ways we learn to grow in our relationship with Christ is through reading and applying the Bible, and then for encouragement we look up to other Christians.

But here is the danger, when we do this, it is really easy to fall into a comparison trap. The devil will often whisper thoughts into your mind ... "You're not doing enough", or "You are not as committed as Jane Doe."

The problem IS that God never created you to be great at EVERYTHING. He uniquely shaped you to excel in the calling He has on your life. Nowhere in the Bible does it say we need to be awesome at EVERY spiritual discipline ALL the time.

It gets a little out of hand when we start comparing ourselves to some of the spiritual giants in history. Martin Luther got up at 3:00 am every morning to pray. I should tell you that I do not do that.

Perhaps we think we need to share our faith as boldly as Billy Graham, but none of us do. Should we feel guilty?

When you stop comparing yourself to other Christians, you are finally free to focus on becoming the unique person God made you to be. Instead of feeling inadequate, celebrate the gifts God has given you.

In Ephesians 2:10, we are CALLED a masterpiece. That means you are a one-of-a kind-creation of God. Don't fall for Satan's lie that you must measure up to all the best spiritual practices of all Christians throughout history.

Remember in our Gospel lesson from Mark 14, Jesus is anointed by a woman with a shady background, which the Pharisees didn't like, because she was a sinner. Listen again to Jesus response...

"She has done what she could ... Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." Mark 14:8-9

Jesus said, "She did what she could." God does not call you to do everything everyone else is doing. He calls you to do what YOU CAN. The third myth is...

The Serial Recommender Myth

As you mature in your faith, there will be times when you have a setback.

You thought you had moved past struggling with that sin, but you were wrong. You

thought you had this spiritual habit down pat, but somehow, I didn't open my Bible all week.

At this point, the devil might sneak in a lie that on the surface seems like it could be God talking to you.

Satan says, "You just need to make a recommitment in your faith."

The lie is NOT that you should recommit yourself to following God; it is that the recommitment to follow God alone is ENOUGH.

God does not desire continual recommitment for us. In our second lesson today from Romans 12, Paul informs a group of believers that their whole lives should be worship to God, not just when they are worshipping on Sundays in church.

In verse two, he walks through how to practically do that.

"...do not conform to the pattern of this world."

In other words, follow God's way and not the world's way. Seek holiness, not selfishness or sin.

When we fall short, the devil's lie is that ALL we need to do is make another commitment to TRY harder next time. The only problem is unless we do something differently, we have done nothing to help make sure next time turns out different. We CANNOT just TRY harder.

Remember the old saying, "the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expect different results."

If we keep on failing, and keep on making recommitments, at some point we will come to the conclusion, "What's the point? I am never going to get there, so why keep trying?"

Often, this is one of the first steps of completely walking away from God.

So, here is the issue that leads to continual recommitment ... we only read the first half of Romans 12:2. Paul GIVES us the answer to this myth in the rest of the sentence when he says...

"...be TRANSFORMED by the RENEWING of your mind."

We CANNOT recommit ourselves to spiritual growth; we NEED to RENEW our minds for spiritual growth. That happens when we INTENTIONALLY fill our minds with God's wisdom, NOT the world's wisdom.

Replace the magazines you read with literature that will draw you closer to God. Look closely at the people in your life, who you have allowed to influence you. Listen again to the last sentence in Romans 12:2...

“THEN you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:2

Once you allow God to renew your mind, He will give you the power and wisdom to know His good, pleasing and perfect will for your life. Then, you can recommit your faith in God through stronger spiritual disciplines.

The final myth in this message for today is...

The “Early Arrival” Myth

Scripture says that God has a perfect will for your life, and He has uniquely shaped and called you to live it out.

But this should never be an excuse for not growing spiritually. While it's unhealthy to constantly compare our spirituality to others, that does not mean we should just get comfortable. If the devil can't make us bad, he will often lead us into a complacent routine.

If you get into the habit of reading your Bible and praying every day, that's fantastic, but don't fall into such a rhythm that you never explore other ways to encounter God.

There are dozens of spiritual disciplines that God would love to have you try out. God wants our relationship with Him to be fresh. He wants us to enlarge the circle of people we care about. He wants us to grow in how we interact with Him, and continually step out of our comfort zones.

Listen to what Paul said to a group of believers in Philippi...

“...I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me ... forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me...” Philippians 3:12-14

It is often NOT healthy to compare yourself to others, but how about COMPARING yourself TO yourself?

Is the fruit of the Spirit more alive in you NOW than it was last year? I am talking about attributes like love, joy, peace, patience, goodness...

Do they flow out of you more naturally than before? Are you more patient than before? Are you more generous with your money? Are you becoming more and more a person of peace, instead of being stressed out?

Our model is Jesus, which means we are never going to live perfectly until we are with Him face-to-face in Heaven.

My prayer is that just knowing about these myths will strengthen your faith, and help you stay ON-TRACK with Jesus in the future.

God wants to do great things in and through your life, but He does not just give us a pep talk and say good luck. He wants us to be prepared to face the temptations and trials that

we WILL run into.

As we pursue growing more and more like Jesus, let us constantly remember that He has gone before us and invites us to walk with Him every day. And I assure you that HIS INFLUENCE is far better than an ice chest and a cold towel around your neck. Remember always, He PROMISES US Himself. Amen