

“Living a God-Shaped Life: A Disciple’s Disciplines”

(first in a series)

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Luke 6:13, 1 Timothy 4:7b-8

A Sunday school teacher was having a discussion with his first grade class. They were talking about the first men Jesus called to be his followers. *“What were those men called?”* he asked. He was looking for the word “disciples,” of course.

There was a long pause, then one child eagerly raised his hand: *“I know, I know, the recycles!”*

Actually, that is a pretty apt description isn't it? Uneducated fishermen, hated tax collectors, feared persecutors of the Christian community were “recycled” into dedicated, useful servants of God because “they had been with Jesus.” As those original disciples walked with Jesus over the course of three years they began to take on more and more of the characteristics of their Master. They were “recycled” if you will -- they became new and different people for having watched and learned from Jesus. They were becoming more like him every day.

That should be the goal of every present-day disciple– to become more like Christ: *“A student is not above his teacher,”* said Jesus, *“but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.”*

I was reading about a man named Harry Hahn who has acted like Abraham Lincoln so long that he is even beginning to look like Lincoln. He lives in Mt. Pulaski, Illinois, not far from Springfield, where Lincoln lived. Several years ago, they had a centennial in Mt. Pulaski, and all the men were asked to grow beards. Harry Hahn, who is six feet four inches tall and weighs 180 pounds, discovered that when he grew his beard he looked a lot like Abraham Lincoln. He was the same size, had the same lines in his face, and pretty soon, people were saying, “Hey, here comes Abe Lincoln!”

That inspired Harry Hahn to buy a long coat and a top hat and some nineteenth-century looking boots and to start making appearances as “Abe Lincoln” at fairs, school assemblies, and service clubs.

Harry Hahn became so fascinated with Abe Lincoln that he began to collect all the books that he could find about Mr. Lincoln. He read, and continues to read, all about him. He memorized Lincoln’s speeches and anecdotes.

When he is out in public, Harry Hahn takes on Lincoln’s persona. You would swear Lincoln has come back from the dead! He is dignified and kind and humble and humorous. People in Springfield say, “He’s even beginning to walk like Abraham Lincoln.”

So it ought to be said of those of us who study and follow Christ: “You know, you are a lot like Jesus.”

This assumes, of course, that we want to be like him. It assumes that we are so in love with Jesus Christ -- so in love with his character and quality of being -- so fascinated by his life -- that we want to

study him and reflect him in all that we think and say and do. It assumes that Jesus is our greatest "hero" whom we want to emulate.

So how are you and I who call ourselves Christ's followers doing on that score? Are we becoming more like Christ each day? Are we being shaped into his image, so that when people look at us they see something of Jesus?

Let me ask you something: There is something like 2 billion Christians on earth – it is the world's largest religion, 1/3 of the population of earth. What would this world be like if every Christian thought and acted like Jesus? Can you imagine? We wouldn't recognize this place. Love would abound, forgiveness would reign, broken relationships would be restored, the hungry would be fed, the naked would be clothed, the sick and the dying comforted...peace would rule the day. If all 2 billion Christians thought and behaved like Christ, this world would be turned upside down.

Obviously, that isn't happening. It seems that lots of Christians claim Jesus is their Savior - they figure they are going to heaven – praise the Lord, their sins have been forgiven they have been saved! - but it has led to no change in their life; they think and act no differently than the non-Christians around them. Since they assume the Holy Spirit is in their life – that is, if they know there is a Holy Spirit - apparently they think no effort on their part is required – with predictable results. You can understand the comment by the German philosopher Nietzsche: *"I might believe in the Redeemer if His followers looked more Redeemed."*

If the great need of the hour is for Jesus' followers to look more like the Redeemer, what must they do? What must *you and I* do?

I can tell you it is not enough to simply stop every turn and ask ourselves *"What would Jesus do?"* and then do it. That's okay as far as it goes, but there is a sense in which we shouldn't even have to ask the question. We should know Jesus so well and he should be so much a part of our lives, that we just naturally and almost instinctively reflect his character and actions in our daily lives. It is like that guy who "became" Abraham Lincoln. He knew Lincoln so well that didn't have to ask himself at every turn, *"What would Lincoln do? What would he say?"* Lincoln was so much a part of him that he acted like him naturally. He "became" Abraham Lincoln.

So then, how do we become like Christ?

Unfortunately, there are no short-cuts to Christ-likeness. There are no spiritual quick-fixes, no crash courses in spiritual growth. Transformation into the likeness and image of Christ comes only through effort as we take time to practice certain time-honored spiritual disciplines that have always shaped God's people . I am talking about the need to regularly engage in such practices as worship and celebration, solitude and silence, prayer, self-examination and confession, reflection on scripture, service, simplicity, secrecy – to name a few. As we practice these disciplines we train our spirit to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, so that – to use the Apostle Paul's words – *"Christ is formed in us."* Christ-likeness is the result of a life-long spiritual shaping process. The key is to undergo training: *"everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher."*

Many of us are so careful to keep ourselves physically fit. Every day we go to the gym or we take our walks or ride our bikes. We all do that, right? No one wants to be physically flabby. What is true in the physical fitness realm is also true in the spiritual realm. Training is key: *“Train yourself to be godly,”* says Paul to Timothy, *“For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”* Spiritual training pays eternal rewards . . .

John Ortberg, in his book, *“The Life You Have Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People,”* says there is immense difference between *training* to do something and *trying* to do something. The distinction really is important and helpful.

Ortberg says:

Imagine a group of people coming to your home and interrupting your Twinkie-eating, TV-watching routine with an urgent message: “Good news! We’re from the United States Olympic Committee. We have been looking for someone to run the marathon in the next Olympics. We have statistics on every person in the entire nation on computer. We have checked everybody’s records – their performance in the president’s physical fitness test in grade school, body type, bone structure, right down to their current percentage of body fat. We have determined that out of two hundred million people, you are the one person in America with a chance to bring home the gold medal in the marathon. So you are on the squad. You will run the race. This is the chance of a lifetime.”

You are surprised by this because the farthest you have ever run is from the couch to the refrigerator. But after the first shock passes, you are gripped by the realization of what’s happening in your life. You picture yourself mingling with the elite athletes of the world. You allow yourself to imagine that maybe you do have what it takes. At night you dream about standing on a platform after the race and hearing the national anthem, seeing the flag raised, and bending low to receive the gold medal.

You begin to feel a sense of urgency. It will be your body wearing those little racing togs, with a billion people watching on television. But greater than any external pressure is the internal drive that says, “This is the race I was created to run. This is my destiny. This is why I was born. Here’s my chance!”

This race becomes the great passion of your life. It dominates your mind. It occupies every waking moment. To run the race well – to win it if you can- becomes the central focus of your existence. It is what gets you out of bed in the morning. It is what you live for. It is the chance of a lifetime.

Then it dawns on you: Right now you cannot run a marathon. More to the point, you cannot run a marathon even if you try really, really hard. Trying hard can accomplish only so much. If you are serious about seizing this chance of a lifetime, you will have to enter into a life of training. You must arrange your life around certain practices that will enable you to do what you cannot

do now by willpower alone. When it comes to running a marathon, you must train, not merely try.ⁱ

Ortberg reminds us that this need for training is not confined only to athletics. Training is required for people who want to play a musical instrument or learn a new language or run a business. Indeed, it is required for any significant challenge in life - including spiritual growth.

The point is this: Becoming like Christ is not a matter of just trying harder. We will *never* get there, if that's the case. I think we preachers are perhaps guilty of preaching too many sermons that simply urge the people in the pew to just try harder. It doesn't work. But we can begin to *train* ourselves, through the practice of certain spiritual disciplines that, over time, will shape us into the image and likeness of Christ. *It is not a matter of trying harder; it is a matter of proper training.*

In the next few weeks, we will explore some of these spiritual disciplines that will help us along the way to Christ-likeness. I know we hate that word "discipline." But you will notice that the root of that word is "disciple." A disciple is one who, by definition, practices disciplines to become like his teacher. But these disciplines need not be wearisome or unpleasant. In fact, if they draw us closer to Christ, they should bring joy. The discipline we explore next week is "Celebration and Worship." That should lead to all kinds of wonder and gratitude. That doesn't sound so bad!

So these weeks before Easter will be training season for us. Feeling spiritually flabby? Join the club, and let's work out together . . .

ⁱ John Orberg, [The Life You Have Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People](#), Chapter 3 (kindle edition)