

Made for Worship

Series: Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life

Date: 1 May 2022, 2nd Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 84; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Matthew 11:25-30

In John's gospel the first thing Jesus says is "What do you want?" John the Baptist has been talking about Jesus, and then 2 of John's disciples go to Jesus and he asks them, "What do you want?" Jesus asks each of us, "What do you want?" It's a penetrating question because our longings and desires are at the core of who we are. What we want drives what we do. Our desires spring from our heart, the centre of the human person. Proverbs 4.21 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." With all our wealth and technology it seems yet we deny ourselves nothing we desire. And yet we feel a great emptiness.

Because you're here, my guess is that amidst all the different things that your heart desires, you want God. You have a sense that all the delights of this world cannot satisfy the hunger of your heart. Many of us have been walking the Christian life for many years, but if you're anything like me, you're also still hungry and thirsty. The promise of life giving water is there and yet we feel dry and empty. We long for a deeper communion with God.

"What do you want?" You may also have a second desire, and that starts with a sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment with yourself. You are not the person you want to be. This is more than looking in the mirror and seeing thinning hair on your head and a bit of a tummy. These are habits and character traits of which you're not proud. Being a Christian is imitating Christ. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you'll know where you fail at that. I know I do. My hope and prayer for myself and for you is that you do want to change. That you do want to become more like Jesus.

Today we're starting a new sermon series called, **Habits of the Heart: Practices to commune with God and transform your life**. We've got a lot on as a church over the next couple of months. To help sustain us in that time I want to look at some spiritual disciplines, ancient practices of the church, that can help us do those 2 things - draw near to God and open ourselves to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. I'm following the structure of *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. I was given this book by Bishop John Harrower at my ordination to the priesthood. The book follows the acronym WORSHIP.

- Worship: practices that address the most important thing in life
- Openness: practices that let the light in
- Relinquishment: practices that lead to authenticity and surrender
- Sharing: practices that lead us to interdependency and community
- Hearing: practices that form the mind of Christ in us

- Incarnating: practices that let us be Jesus to the world
- Praying: practices that lead me to pray without ceasing

We'll work through each of those topics and look at one or two practices or "spiritual disciplines" that you can go home and try out at home. You could also read John Ortberg's *The Life You've Always Wanted*. My hope is that this will be a deeply practical series that will help each of us to grow closer to God and grow more like Jesus. Today we're going to look at how spiritual disciplines might do those 2 things, and we're going to tackle that question through the question of desire.

Worship and Desire

In his spiritual autobiography, the great 4th century theologian, St. Augustine, wrote

You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

There is so much wisdom packed into this one sentence.

First, Augustine tells us that we are made by God and for God. That is to say, in order to be truly and fully human, we need to find ourselves in relationship to the One who made us and for whom we were made.

Second, for Augustine, being human is not static by dynamic. That is, we are made *for* something. We have a direction, a purpose, a goal, something towards which we move. That is God himself.

Third, the centre of the human person, the thing which drives us, is our heart. That is the seat of our longings and desires. Augustine's word for our desires is our "loves". What we want, what we love, defines and shapes who we are. The apostle John writes that "we love because he first loved us".¹

Augustine's insight into the human condition is that because we are made to love the One who first loved us, we will find rest only when our loves are ordered to this ultimate end. But we find ourselves restless. Our desires are all mixed up. Our longings and desires don't always and don't naturally pull us towards God.

To be human is to have a heart. We cannot not love. The question is what you will love as ultimate. Our problem is that we love things other than God as ultimate. Our hearts naturally pull this way. The habits we learn from our culture - tv, social media, the world around us - teach us to love other things. Peter calls them these, "the empty way of life handed down by our ancestors".² You could call those habits and routines of life modes of worship. The American novelist David Foster Wallace, in no way a Christian himself, writes,

in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship -- be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles -- is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap

¹ 1 John 4:19

² 1 Peter 1.18

real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings.

They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.³

The question then becomes how can we worship the true and living God, who will not eat us alive, but who has instead given his life for us that we might live? How can we retrain our hearts to love the One who first loved us? How can our restless hearts find rest? That last word is a clue. By invoking rest Augustine takes us to Jesus' words in Matthew 11.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. **29** Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. **30** For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

We find rest as we come to Jesus. Our Creator, is in fact our God and Father who has made himself known to us through the person of his Son. It is only as we come to the Son that we will find rest in the Father. This is, I think, at least a little of what Jesus means by what he says just before his invitation to come and find rest.

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.⁴

To find rest in Jesus is somehow to be drawn into the life of the Triune God. The first way we find rest is to come to Jesus. The second is to take his yoke and learn from him. That is to submit to him, to listen to him, to let him guide you, to obey him.

What does all this have to do with Spiritual Disciplines? Well, this is their goal - to help us come to Jesus, to walk under his yoke, to learn from him, and so find rest. In her book Adele Calhoun says that

³ David Foster Wallace, “Plain Old Untrendy Troubles and Emotions,” *The Guardian*, 20.9.2008 (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/sep/20/fiction>)

⁴ Matthew 11:27

spiritual disciplines are practices, relationships and experiences that give space for us to keep company with Jesus. The disciplines start from that place of desire, our hunger and thirst for God, amidst the cacophony of competing desires. The disciplines help us attend to that desire for God and to bring all our desires to him so that they are purified in the light of his presence. Notice how Jesus' words encompass both longings - both for communion with God: Rest; and also for transformation: taking his yoke and learning from him. The spiritual disciplines are about recalibrating our desires and reforming our hearts. They help us step back from the maelstrom of the world and look up to God, to be still and know that he is God.

This of course is what our corporate worship together on a Sunday is meant to do. We unplug from the world and worship God. We sing his praise, we hear from his word, we feed at his table, we meet him in prayer. All these retrain our hearts to love him before all else. We finish our formal worship by being sent out into the world, to be Christ's hands and feet. This too is worship. Paul writes in Romans 12:

Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship.⁵

Worship is not just about our hearts, it flows into all of our lives: what we think, what we say, what we do.

The spiritual disciplines are about helping us worship in all of life, not just on Sundays. They are like going to the gym to train our spiritual muscles. In 1 Corinthians Paul uses the picture of an athlete training to describe the Christian life.

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.⁶

I wrote this sermon listening to Bach piano sonatas. You can't just sit down at a piano and play Bach. You have to practice. The spiritual disciplines are like that. They train us to do what we cannot do by willpower or effort. They train us to pay attention to the God who is always there. They train our muscles of faith and obedience and prayer, so that when we need them we'll be able to be and do what God calls us to be and do. They are not a technique to manipulate God and make him come near to us. They are not a barometer of our spirituality. They are not a way to earn favour with God. They are simply a way of cultivating our desire for God and deliberately opening ourselves to his presence and inviting the Holy Spirit to change us.

In terms of change, the disciplines look at two things. Sins of commission and sins of omission. That is doing something we shouldn't and not doing something we should. Disciplines of abstinence are those which refrain from things - like fasting or solitude or silence. They build muscles to help us stop doing things we shouldn't do. Disciplines of engagement are things like worship, study, service, hospitality. These build muscles to help us do what we should do.

⁵ Romans 12:1

⁶ 1 Corinthians 9.25

As we embark on this journey through some different spiritual disciplines, I have to confess that I'm doing this as much for my own sake as yours. I want a closer walk with God myself and I want it for you. This is not something from the tradition that I've grown up in. The spiritual disciplines are not something I'm intimately familiar with. I'm going to be learning along with you. There's not one size that fits all. We're at different stages of life and have different temperaments. We're going to look at at least 7 disciplines. If only one works for you, that's fine.

Are you hungry and thirsty for God? Fantastic! This is what God has made you for. Now cultivate that desire. If I had to give you one verse from Scripture on God's purpose for our lives, it would be 2 Corinthians 3.18.

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Paul goes on a few verses later to say,

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God displayed in the face of Christ.⁷

To contemplate the Lord's glory then, is to gaze upon the face of Jesus. And it is as we do so that the Holy Spirit will transform us more and more into his image, the one in whose image we were created. Are you hungry and thirsty? Are you weary and burdened? Is your heart restless? Come and gaze upon Jesus and you will find that by the Spirit God will make more of you than you thought it possible to become.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:6