



Superficiality, it has been said, is the curse of our age. We want quick fixes, instant results and rapid response. We live for the most part in a shallow world where we often play a superficial role and the truth is that it does not satisfy – it aches.

In an age where we have more opportunity and more material wealth than ever before, we rush to cram more and more into our lives and yet find, paradoxically, that we have less and less of meaning and significance. We hurry and rush and skim the surface and become superficial in our relationships with our friends, with our children, and with our partners. We have exchanged breadth for depth – and it does not satisfy.

And what is true of our lives in general is true of our Christian experience as well. We want something quick and easy, a sort of micro-waved spirituality. Yet when we get it, it does not endure and it's not enough to fill our soul. Perhaps that's the greatest tragedy of all – that we feed on the crumbs and ignore the banquet. We go away dissatisfied when God longs to connect with us deeply to bring meaning, purpose and life in all its fullness. 'Deep calls to deep' writes the Psalmist expressing the belief that God's Spirit calls to our spirit and longs for us to connect. Do you sense sometimes in your spirit that deep call of God?

How is your soul today? How deeply are you connected with God and he with you? Is there anything that you and I can do to deepen our connection with God? Actually, yes there is.

In Luke chapter 5 we are told that Jesus was once so pressed by the crowds at the lakeside that he got into a boat and told Simon Peter to push out a little from the shore. Peter did so and Jesus sat down in the boat and began to teach. After a while Jesus turned to Peter again and said '*Push out into the deep*'. Now I suggest that Jesus would say that to many of us today. *Are you tired of feeling empty and disconnected? Are you weary of trying to cram everything into your busy life and feeling it won't fit? Does it feel like you've fished all night and your nets are empty? Do you long to connect in a deep and meaningful way with God and with other people? Then push out into the deep.*

How do we do that? By using something called the Spiritual Disciplines. Christians have for centuries recognised that certain practices and activities can help to deepen their spiritual life. During the six weeks of Lent we're going to look at some of these Spiritual Disciplines and encourage each other to work at them. Things like meditation, fasting, prayer, slowing, solitude and celebration. And what will really help us all to engage with these things is to be in a Life Group with one or two other people as I suggested a couple of weeks ago on SHARE. Have you managed to organise that yet? Are you willing to try it?

But back to the Spiritual Disciplines. Imagine for a moment if you will that a letter arrives to tell you that you've been selected to run for England in the next Olympics. How do you react? At first of course you think it's a mistake. But no, the letter is quite clear, you have been selected. You begin to get excited and imagine being at the games, rubbing shoulders with all those famous athletes. And of course that moment on the podium with the lowered flags beginning to rise and the national anthem booming in the background. What a moment!

Then reality begins to set in. It's quite a while since you went for a run. In fact, if the truth be known, you'd get breathless running for a bus! No matter, this is an important occasion. It's only right you give it all you're worth. You will simply try as hard as you can and all will be well.

Of course, all will not be well. We know that from our experience. Success is not just a matter of trying harder, you will also need to train, to practise. You see there is the world of difference between **trying** and **training**. Trying suggests that by my effort alone I will succeed. Training will take lots of effort but recognises that as we repeat activities again and again we become better at them. If you're serious about running a marathon you will need to arrange your life around certain practices and priorities.

And you will need to train (not try) to succeed in most activities whether it be a sport, playing a musical instrument, driving a car, or deepening your spiritual life. And that's the point I want to make – that if we want to connect deeply with God and be changed by him, just trying harder won't do it.

Sometimes I can be very impatient. I snap at people and situations and growl at the children. Reflecting back at the end of the day, I'm sorry about how it's gone. I know that's not how I should have been; it's not how I want to be as a Christian. So I resolve that the next day to be more patient. Have you ever tried to be patient with four teenage children? Have you ever started the day deciding that you're going to try harder to be patient? Have you discovered how hard it is to be patient by just trying to be patient? It doesn't work. It's almost as if the harder I try, the worse it gets!

If I am to be transformed to be like Jesus, I will need to **train** rather than **try**. Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder but of training wisely. Paul writing long ago to young Timothy advises him: *'Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for the present life and the life to come.'* 1 Tim 4:6-8

We have clearly come to understand in recent years that physical exercise is good for us. If we want our bodies to go on functioning well we will need to exercise regularly – to walk, to play sport, to jog, to swim, to train at the gym. It won't happen on it's own and we won't get there by just trying – we need to build it into our routine. Clearly, as Paul says, physical exercise is of value. But the same is true in the spiritual realm. If we want to be healthy spiritually, we need to train. Paul says, *'train yourself to be godly'*.

So as we seek to exercise and practise the Spiritual Disciplines, God can be at work in us to transform and change us. And that's an important principle to keep in mind – that God needs to be at work. The Spiritual Disciplines are a means of grace; a training pattern that allows God to be at work.

In wanting to pursue God, in wanting to know him better, there are two errors we can fall into. The first is to believe that there's nothing we can do; it's all down to God. The sort of prayer that says, *'I know I'm a bit of a mess. I know my life isn't the way it should be. I've tried to change but I can't. I've tried to be more patient but it just gets worse. So over to you God. If I'm going to change, you're just going to have to zap me! I'm here. I'm ready and waiting; just get on with it!'*

The second error is to believe that it's all down to us; that we can somehow by our own efforts be changed. The Spiritual Disciplines will not make us holy; only God can do that. In fact, wrongly handled, the Disciplines can easily become soul-crushing laws. We must do this, tick that box, complete that activity, finish this task and my, look how holy we've become! Surely we must be holy because we're spending all this time doing all these holy things! I'm fasting once a week now; wow what a wonderful person I am. Or, I'm giving so generously, it's got to be earning me points in heaven. No, quite the opposite. We've simply become pharisaical and judgmental of others. There's nothing meritorious about practising the Spiritual Disciplines.

The needed change within us is God's work not ours. The need is for an inside job and only God can work on the inside. The Spiritual Disciplines open the way for God's grace to be at work; they put us in the way of God, if you like. The Disciplines will not change us but they can put us in the place where change can occur.

So are you willing to try the Spiritual Disciplines and put yourself in the place where God can be at work? Perhaps you're interested but you think *'I'm not up to this. This is not for me.'* Let me quote Richard Foster who wrote Celebration of Discipline:

'We must not believe that the Disciplines are for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach, or contemplatives who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. Far from it. God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary beings; people who have jobs, who care for children, who must wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our daily activities. If they are to have any transforming effect, the effect must be found in the ordinary junctures of human life: in our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbours.'

Beginners are welcome. In fact, there is a very real sense in which we are all beginners. Perhaps the word 'discipline' puts us off as suggesting something dull and full of drudgery. But that would be to misunderstand the Spiritual Disciplines whose purpose is to liberate us to be the people we were meant to be. To free us to be more like Jesus and to be more fully human than we were before. When our inner spirit is set free from all that holds it down, that can hardly be called dull drudgery. Singing, dancing, joy and celebration would all characterise the Disciplines of the spiritual life.

One final picture may be helpful. Consider the difference between setting out on a journey in a motor boat or a sail boat. With the motor boat, you are entirely in control. You fill the tank with fuel, start the engine and set off on your journey. With the sail boat, you may hoist the sails and set the rudder but you are still entirely dependant on the wind. If the wind doesn't blow, you won't move. You seek to do whatever we can to help us catch the wind.

So with spiritual transformation. We cannot do it by our own efforts. The wind, the Spirit of God, must blow. We can open ourselves to transformation by certain practices. We can put ourselves in the way of God, but we cannot make the wind blow; and nor can we take any credit when it does blow!

Sailors who depend upon the wind know that their main task is to be able to 'read' the wind; to discern what the wind is doing. Our Spiritual Disciplines will help us to hoist the sail and set the rudder. The rest is up to God.

So will you me in exploring these Disciplines together during Lent? Jesus expresses his belief in us by inviting us to come and follow him. Whatever we may think of ourselves, he believes that we can do it, that we are capable of following him, of knowing him better, of living like him and for him.

John Ortberg reminds us: *'Jesus came with the gracious announcement that it is now possible to live in the presence and under the reign of God – that was his Good News. It is possible to live in such a way that when people see us, they will say to themselves, 'Wow! I didn't know a life could look like that.' It indeed happens. It has happened for many who have followed Christ, and it is really possible for us. This is the 'pearl of great value' for which any sensible person would sell everything. This is the race for which we were born. But we will not drift into such a life. We must decide.'*

What pictures does the word discipline conjure up for you?

Have you ever trained hard for something?

Are you more willing to train for something physical than something spiritual?

Read 1 Timothy 4:6-8, 1 Corinthians 9:24-26, Galatians 6:1-10

Will you agree together to explore the Spiritual Disciplines (hoist the sail and set the rudder) and see what God will do?