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RESTORATION HARDWARE

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

Danny Hall

My crowning athletic achievement was running a marathon. I have told the story before. That event has served as a reminder of many lessons in my life. I ran the marathon when we were still living in Vienna, in April 1986. It took place on a cold and blustery morning. It was an arduous day, and there were times when I thought I wouldn't make it. But finally I was heading into the finish line. At the finish line for the Vienna Marathon you go through huge stone arches into the Heldenplatz, which means "Plaza of the Heroes." It is where all the returning kings would come in to be cheered by their adoring subjects. So we were running through the arches past these glorious, old, stately buildings in downtown Vienna, and there was a cheering throng as we finished. It was an incredibly exhilarating feeling. I had actually made it! I had worked toward that marathon for a long time.

But you and I have a calling that is far greater than any accomplishment we might have in this world: we have been called out to be the people of God, and as the people of God, to be lights, to live out the glory of who Christ is in our world. What happens to churches over time, however, is that they tend to ossify into their routines, and their sense of that vision and purpose can wane.

One of the great things about studying the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is that in it Jesus has given us a vision of what we as the people of God are called to be and of the great potential we have. He radically redefines the people of God. The Sermon on the Mount is a description of what the kingdom of God is about, and it begins with a calling for us to be a certain kind of person, filled with the character of Christ, which we live out through the grace of Christ. We will then shine forth as lights in the darkness as we come together as the people of God. We will make a profound difference in our world for our King. It will happen in all kinds of arenas of life, all kinds of relationships, all kinds of scenarios, as God seeks to shine forth his grace and love through his people.

But in order to prepare us for that, Jesus teaches us some ways to be the kind of people God wants us to be. When we read the Sermon on the Mount—particularly this description of the wonderful character of the people who are followers of Christ, which we call the Beatitudes—it is very daunting. How can we do this? The truth is that we can't in our own strength. We can only do this when we are vitally connected to God himself.

As Jesus develops these themes and calls us to a radical, deeper understanding of what it means to be the people of God, in chapter 6 he addresses one of the chief ways that the nation of Israel, who thought themselves to be the people of God, were beginning to fail. There was an anemia in the spiritual life of their nation that was directly related to a gradual movement farther and farther away from a vital connection to God himself. It was exemplified by their belief that by holding on to the forms of their cultural and ethnic heritage, they were marking out for themselves distinctives that made them the people of God. Jesus says they have missed the point. Being the people of God is a matter of being vitally and personally connected to God himself.

In practicing the means of living out their faith that God had graciously given to them, they had begun simply going through the motions to draw attention to themselves. Jesus gives a strong warning against practicing one's faith simply to be noticed by other people: when we do that, we actually get what we want—but nothing

more. And while at some level that may make us feel good about ourselves momentarily, the truth is that we are cutting ourselves off from a vital connection with the living God.

In the last message (Discovery Paper 4909) we examined Matthew 6:1-18 from that angle. Now in this message we are going to look at those same verses from a different angle. Let's reread 6:1-18:

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way:

“Our Father who is in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

As we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]”

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Jesus uses as examples the three most commonly practiced and highly esteemed spiritual disciplines in the

Jewish community in first-century Palestine. He does not say, “*If you do this*”; in all three cases he says, “*When you do it.*” He assumes that his followers will practice these things. They have inherent value, because they were designed, as the Puritans used to say, to be a means of grace; that is, a means by which we experience more deeply the grace of God in personal relationship with him. In this message we’re going to examine these three spiritual disciplines and note some of the things they might mean to us, and then draw some conclusions about how these spiritual disciplines can help us in our walk with God.

I think of spiritual disciplines as tools of spiritual restoration, or restoration “hardware.” The first tool is giving to the poor.

Generosity

Jesus says when you give to the poor, do it privately. Again, he assumes that the people of God will give freely and generously to the needs of the poor. We might wonder what this has to do with an intimate, personal relationship with God. The discipline of generosity and help for those in need weans us from possessiveness of the things of this world. (This theme will be developed further in the verses ahead.) It reminds us that all of the things of this world are transient, and what matters are the things that matter to God—and what matters to God is people. God has always had a heart for the disenfranchised, the poor, and the marginalized of the world, and he calls us as his people to be his hands and his feet ministering to them. When we sacrificially serve others through giving, we enter into God’s heart for people. Thus our intimacy with him is able to grow. For our Lord Jesus Christ had the riches of all eternity, and in Philippians 2:5-8 Paul reminds us that he did not hold on to all of heaven’s glory as something that belonged to him, but emptied himself of all that, and was humbled to the form of a servant, even to death on a cross for us. This was the ultimate gift to the poor, as Christ invested himself in our eternity.

Sometimes I wistfully remember my seminary days, many years ago, when Ginger and I were probably at the poorest of the poor stage of our life. We had very, very little. I was working part-time, we were trying to make ends meet, and God was supplying our needs in ways we couldn’t imagine. But it was so much fun. We sometimes didn’t know where the groceries were going to come from, and then God would supply us miraculously with some extra groceries. Do you know the first thing we would do? We would call somebody else and invite them over for dinner, because we knew they were probably as lacking in food as we were. We loved to share the little bit that God had provided us with others, and there was a lot of wonderful community around that.

But like most people, we acquired possessions, and we noticed that the more things you get, the more of yourself you invest in protecting your things and worrying about where you’re going to get your next things. But when we adopt an attitude of generosity toward others, it begins to free us from concentrating on preserving our things, and unites us, as I said, with the very heart of God, who is a giver from the core of his being.

The second tool of spiritual restoration is that of prayer.

Prayer

This one is more fully explained in this text, perhaps because prayer is the cornerstone of all spiritual disciplines. Prayer is the doorway to intimacy with God. As we pray seeking God instead of the praise of other people, we come into his presence, a communion in conversation with him that he graciously grants us.

Jesus warns his hearers against falling into some traps that the Pharisees and the pagans around them had fallen into. The Pharisees had gotten into praying ostentatious prayers that would make everybody notice them. The pagans had forms of prayer that were mostly characterized by repetition, ecstatic utterances, yelling out to their gods, and sometimes cutting of the flesh—efforts to show how deeply devoted they were to their gods. It was as if by crying out, by sheer repetition of words, by the eloquence of their speech, and by the intensity of their emotions, people were somehow going to get the attention of their gods. Jesus, almost tongue-in-cheek, points

out the foolishness of that. He says God already knows what you need before you ask. How silly it is to think that by volume or intensity or a clever turn of a phrase or some secret language we are going to get God's attention.

How, then, are we to really pray? Jesus gives us a model prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer, to help us. The Lord's Prayer merits in-depth exploration in its own message, or perhaps even a series of messages. But allow me to just survey its essential elements. The prayer is divided into two groups of three petitions each. The first three are directed toward God himself; the second three are directed toward our needs.

The whole prayer begins with the wonderful phrase "Our Father." The term "Father" used of God is not seen in the Scriptures until Jesus introduces it. In the Old Testament, prayers were directed to the creator God, the sovereign God, the Lord God, and Jehovah God, which was the personal name of God. (Jesus infuriates the leaders of the Jewish community by calling God "My Father," which claims for him a special relationship with God in a way that they considered blasphemous.) Here he is teaching his followers to address God as "our Father," opening up an intimacy with God that had not been offered to his people before. This intimate relationship with God as our loving, caring Father is incredible and revolutionary.

Next Jesus introduced three petitions related to God as not only our Father but the sovereign Lord of the heavens. The first is "Hallowed be Your name." This means, "May your name be esteemed as holy." This does not confer holiness upon God; rather, it is praising God for his holiness and praying that throughout the earth, people will recognize and honor the name of God. In the Bible one's name is synonymous with one's character, so this acknowledges God's character of holiness.

The second petition is "Your kingdom come." This is a petition for the realization of the kingdom and sovereignty of God. There are two implications of this petition. First, it says, "Lord, expand your kingdom. Bring more and more people into intimate relationship with you and into the fellowship of the family of God." Second, it expresses a longing for the final revelation of God's sovereign rule in the future, when the Lord Jesus Christ will come again to establish his throne, and his lordship will be known once and for all and confessed by every tongue.

The third petition related to God is "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Now, all the eternal, heavenly realms respond to God's sovereign rule, and his will is done. So our longing is for God's will to be done here on earth. This is important for us to think about, because as we come to God in prayer, both individually and corporately, I would suggest that we often bring our own agenda. "God, I want your will, and I have an idea of what I want your will to be. Will you please put your rubber stamp on my agenda for you?" Individually we want God to rubber-stamp the plan we want for our life, and as a church we come to him with an idea of what we want our church to be—certain kinds of songs to be sung, certain kinds of ministries to take place—and we want God to bless that. We are all susceptible to that. But when our heart attitude begins to fall into that, we miss the heart of God. If we want to be vitally connected to God, our primary concern has to be not our agenda but God's. "God, what is it that *you* want to do in my life? What is it that *you* want to do in this church?" This is submission to his lordship.

In these three model petitions we see that entering into intimacy with God, drawing near to him, begins with this loving relationship with our Father in which we are more concerned about his honor, his kingdom, and his will than anything in our own lives. When we have approached our Father on the holy ground of these three petitions, totally submitted to his glory and his kingdom and his will, then we are free to ask for the things that we need.

What are we encouraged to ask for? First, "Give us this day our daily bread." The idea behind the word "daily" is most likely from the Hebrew notion of a day. Most workers were paid at the end of the day, and the new day would start at sundown and go into the next day. This is simply asking that God would provide for us at the end of the day what we are going to need for the next day. "Lord, when I go to sleep tonight, I want to rest in the fact that I know that tomorrow is provided for." When the nation of Israel was traveling in the wilderness, God

would provide the manna daily; they couldn't stockpile it (Exodus 16). In this he was teaching his people to live by faith, not by sight (as the apostle Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:7). So we trust him for our daily sustenance.

Now, I know that many of us have gone through ups and downs economically. Some have been out of work. Some have had a very hard existence from time to time, perhaps even right now. I wish I had an easy answer, but I can say this for all of us: God says, "I will provide what you need day by day, so ask me." It is an expression of our trust to ask that God will provide the sustenance that we need in this way.

The second thing we are to pray for is God's forgiveness, but this almost seems to have a little catch: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Jesus' commentary at the end makes it even more difficult: "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." This almost seems to say that our own forgiveness hinges on our forgiving others. But we don't earn God's forgiveness by being forgiving. I think here Jesus is revealing an essential aspect to drawing near to God.

We want God's forgiveness and we recognize the deep and powerful nature of the sin in our own life and our utter dependency on God's grace for our failings. But drawing near to God means that we want God to completely change us into the person he wants us to be. If we are going to recognize the ravages of sin deeply enough in our own life to call out for God's grace, then we have to recognize the need for grace and forgiveness of everyone else as well. So we can't harbor bitterness or an unforgiving spirit in our heart. If we are unwilling to be forgiving toward another, it reveals how little we understand about our own sin—we are not at the point of full repentance. God longs for us to have deep intimacy with him, but it will be thwarted by our unwillingness to be honest about our sin.

The third thing we are to pray is "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The word translated "temptation" can also be translated "testing." It can be understood as temptation, but the problem is that we know from elsewhere in the New Testament, e.g. James 1:13, that it is impossible for God to tempt us. So praying, "God, don't lead us into temptation" is almost like praying that God will not do what he already cannot do. So what is the meaning here? I think it is probably better to understand the word here as "testing"; yet testing is sometimes held up as something God uses greatly in our lives.

I think the best way to understand what Jesus means in this model petition is to take the statement as a whole: "Do not lead us into [testing], but deliver us from evil." The word "evil" can be understood as evil generically or as the evil one, that is, Satan himself. I think it is better in this context to understand this as the evil one. Just before this sermon Jesus had come out of the time of testing by Satan in the wilderness. All of this, I believe, leads us to the idea that as the people of God called out to live for him, we are in the midst of a huge spiritual war. We need God's grace and strength to stand in the day of testing, to be protected from the wiles of Satan, who would trip us up and destroy our lives in many different ways. In the midst of the spiritual battle, our only hope is for God to be present with us, protecting us, leading us, guiding us, and strengthening us.

The familiar ending to this prayer, "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever," is probably a later addition to the text. It is not in most of our earliest manuscripts. But it certainly reflects the tone of the prayer that God would be glorified in all that we say and do.

This prayer models submission to God, connecting with God, fellowship with God, and trusting in God. These are characteristic of the people of God, who long to know him and seek him out.

The third tool of spiritual restoration that Jesus teaches about is that of fasting.

Fasting

I call fasting a discipline of focus. There is a long and beautiful history of fasting among the people of God, in both the Old and New Testaments. Fasting is a denial of our physical need for food for a time so that we can

focus completely on God. It is almost always associated with other spiritual disciplines, primarily prayer. It is a discipline whereby we remind ourselves that we do not live “on bread alone” (Matthew 4:4), and it elevates our relationship with God above all else, even the satisfaction of our physical needs. It is taking a pause in our busy pursuit of satisfying all our needs and saying, “God, you are what really matters. I give this time completely to seeking your face, denying myself even the satisfaction of basic bodily needs for the sake of knowing your heart.” It speaks of longing, intimacy, purpose, and direction in life. Jesus calls us to have seasons when we focus this much on God.

All of these disciplines—a generous spirit, a prayerful life, and a life that includes seasons of fasting, of complete spiritual focus on God—are tools by which we can draw near to our Lord. For what he longs for is to live in a personal, deep relationship with us.

Seeking God

Throughout Scripture there are examples of great heroes of the faith who practiced setting apart time with God in order to be strong. I encourage you to sometime read Exodus through the end of Deuteronomy and just mark out all the conversations Moses had with God. What a relationship! Moses argued with God, pled with God, praised God—he had just about every kind of conversation you can think of with God. Perhaps the greatest moment of spiritual crisis for the nation was the episode with the golden calf, when the people made an idol and worshiped it while Moses was up on Mount Sinai with God (Exodus 32). God and Moses had some interesting conversations as they decided what to do about that. Moses pled for the mercy of God on the people. At the end of that encounter, in Exodus 33:18 Moses cried out to God, “Show me Your glory!” God said in effect, “If I do that, Moses, it will blow you away. But what I am going to do is show you myself from behind.” And he hid Moses in the cleft of the rock and passed by with his glory. I like to translate Moses’ request into this language: “Give me every bit of you that I can handle!”

How many of us have longed for that kind of knowledge of God, that kind of intimacy, where the prayer of our heart is “Show me your glory—I want everything of you that you can give to me”? That is what God invites us to.

Think of the story of David, the poet warrior, alone as a shepherd boy, writing psalms of praise. The psalms that David wrote include songs of anger and frustration as well as prayer and love. All of that time of aloneness with God prepared David for the great crises of life. When Goliath came to challenge the nation of Israel and all the nation cowered before him, David, the young shepherd boy, stepped forward, having forged trust and reliance on God in those times alone with him, and he conquered that great enemy (1 Samuel 17).

But David’s time alone also prepared him for another great crisis in his life: his own horrible moral failure as the king when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband murdered (2 Samuel 11:1-27; 12:1-17). David failed himself and his God and his family and his nation. Where is David in the aftermath of that? We find him in a prayer of confession and contrition before God. I would suggest that David’s time alone with God not only prepared him to win great victories, it prepared him to deal with defeat.

The apostle Paul, a man of great prayer, writes these words in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27: “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” Paul understood the powerful temptations in life that could attack him. He knew his own vulnerability, and he said, “Even after I have preached so much and planted churches and done all this wonderful work, I still discipline myself to seek after God, to be strong so that I won’t fail.” In Philippians 4:6 he reminds the Philippian church, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” All of Paul’s letters are filled with encouragement to pray and examples of his own prayer for those he ministered to. All through Scripture, the great heroes of our

faith are men and women who drew near to God.

This idea of spiritual disciplines does raise the question for us of grace versus legalism. Sometimes we wonder, “If I begin to do these things, won’t I fall into the trap of just doing them so that I can check them off? ‘I prayed today, I read my Bible today, I fasted once this month [or this year], and I gave some money to the poor.’” Yes, Jesus warns against that. It is true that it is a temptation that we have to guard against. But I am afraid that in our effort to guard against a performance-based, legalistic approach to our faith, we have sometimes wrongly assumed that there is not to be any effort in our faith. Our faith is a real, vital relationship with God, and maintaining a relationship takes effort.

Ginger and I have been married almost thirty years, and I could make all kinds of assumptions. Yesterday was her birthday, and I could have decided, “I don’t need to do anything about that. She knows I love her. I told her that thirty years ago, and nothing has changed.” If I did that, the relationship would suffer, wouldn’t it? In the same way, our relationship with God takes effort. There is a difference between earning merit and cultivating a relationship, and that is what Jesus is talking about here. We are not trying to earn merit, either from other people or from God; we are trying to cultivate our relationship with him. That is why God calls us to draw near to him through these spiritual disciplines.

So what indeed is at stake? First of all, to become the kind of people we are called to be, we need the strength and spiritual transformation that comes from drawing near to God. Most of us in the moment want to do the right thing. Most of us want to be the kind of people God wants us to be. What Jesus is saying to us is that we can get there by drawing near to God, by cultivating our relationship with him. So what is at stake is the very power of our calling as the people of God in this time and place, being equipped to be the kind of community of faith that our world needs us to be.

When individuals and congregations like our own cease to have as their primary focus seeking the heart of God, connecting with him intimately and powerfully, then there is a loss of life and a loss of a sense of purpose about why we are here. Then, ironically, we fall into simply maintaining the forms, and that leads to trouble. We start squabbling about what the service ought to look like, who ought to do this or that, what kind of music we ought to sing. We argue about those things on the level of what we want most. When we do that, where is the witness, the power, the purpose and vision for us as a body? These come only when we passionately seek the heart of God.

When we stop seeking the heart of God, we can also get stuck in the past. The past ought to serve as a foundation of God’s faithfulness for us to build on. But we can keep trying to recreate it in hopes of restoring its glory, when what God wants is for us to believe his faithfulness in the past as a foundation to trust him for the future. We get that by drawing near to him, being individuals and a community of faith who are passionately committed to personal, deep intimacy with God.

I wish this were easy, but it is not. I like to run a lot now, particularly on Saturday evenings, to clear my head and pray. A couple of weeks ago on Saturday evening I was out for a run, and I passed by a storefront near where I live. Painted in large block letters on the window were the words “LOW-CARB SUPERSTORE COMING SOON.” I realized that what used to be in that building was a business that sold exercise equipment. I began to think about that. The exercise equipment store went out of business. The low-carb approach seemed much more appealing because we all wish we could just take a pill or adjust our diet without doing any work, and presto! we will be thinner. Sometimes we wish things like that were true in the spiritual realm as well. God invites us into intimate fellowship with him, but as James writes, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). It takes effort.

When I ran through the arches of the Heldenplatz to finish my marathon back in Vienna in 1986, I didn’t just wake up that morning and say, “I think I’ll run a marathon today.” If I had done that, I probably wouldn’t have gotten to the finish line. Rather, I spent months preparing and disciplining myself, not for anybody to think better of me, but simply for the goal of finishing.

How much more should you and I be willing to do whatever it takes to draw near to the living God, to be a body of people vitally connected with him?

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Tenth Message
Danny Hall
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