

Let's Practice Together- Acts 2:42-47

Welcome to Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, symbolically stating that he was a conquering king! Generals who led armies rode on horses. Kings who had already conquered their foes rode on a donkey. For the first time in his ministry, Jesus declared to the nation that he was the Messiah, the promised king from the line of David, and he came in victory, not defeat.

The people on the road with Jesus that day were ready for a celebration. They were already excited to be coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover. These feasts commemorated God's deliverance of his people from the slavery they experienced in Egypt. What better time for Messiah, the long awaited deliverer from God, to come and declare himself to the people. Soon the Roman oppression would be over if Messiah comes...

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day the people knew he was declaring himself as the Messiah! They shouted and celebrated as Jesus and his followers made their way down the road to Jerusalem. Most of the people in the crowd were pilgrims from Galilee, come to offer their Passover lambs. These people had seen the miracles of Jesus, heard his teachings and had hoped he would be the Messiah. Today their hopes were becoming a reality. Messiah had come. His name was Jesus!

Five days later this crowd is silent. Five days later Jesus will be arrested and another crowd will gather around him, but this crowd will not cry, "Hosanna!" but instead will cry, "Crucify him!" Five days later Jesus the king of the Jews will die on a cruel Roman cross.

This is part of the mystery of Palm Sunday. Where did the crowd go that hailed Jesus as king? It is true Jesus came as a very different king than the one they expected, but seriously, no one stayed with Jesus? No wonder Jesus wept as he rode into the city that day. He knew this crowd would not stay true to him. They were not ready to enter God's kingdom on his terms- through surrender and sacrifice.

Before we get too hard on the crowd that entered Jerusalem with Jesus that day, we must remember that they had not yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit. What a difference He would make in the lives of the disciples. As Jesus promised, His followers did receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them.

But even after the grace of God was poured out on his people through the Holy Spirit, many still shouted "Halleluiah!" one day and "Crucify Him!" the next.

I met Bill (not his real name) when he started to attend our church services in another community. He was young, ambitious and seemed to have the world by the tail. He had money, a lovely family and now he came to church all excited: he had invited Jesus into his life. He was so excited. He told how the burden of his past – and it was a checkered past – was gone as he

confessed his sins to Jesus. He was filled with joy and hope and he was singing, “Alleluia!” as loud as anyone. He was so excited about what Jesus did for him, that he thought he should go on a tour across Canada and tell people about what Jesus did for him.

Turn the calendar ahead just a few months. Bill no longer attended church. He had quit his old job, but never seemed to find the next job. He was seldom at home with his family, and there was no more talk about a tour to share his faith. In fact, there was little talk at all about Jesus. Turn the calendar forward a few years and you will find Bill broken and on the street, an addict without a home or family. What went wrong?

Bill represents the people in Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seed. In that parable, Jesus says that the seed is the Word of God sowed into the hearts of people. Some seed falls on hard ground: these people simply are not wanting to hear about Jesus. Some seed falls on ground that has very little dirt. The seed grows up quickly – like it did in Bill’s life – and then soon dies out because there were no roots. Some seed falls on soil and grows up, looking so great until weeds grow up and choke the new plants out. This is the believer who starts well but soon lets the things of the world get in the way of their relationship with God. Finally, some seed fell on good soil and grew up and produced a great crop. Of course that is what Jesus wants for everyone of his followers; that our lives would be fruitful.

Is there anything that can help a believer stay true, help them grow good roots so they can produce fruit in their lives?

We said God’s grace touches our lives even before we came to Christ. God through the Holy Spirit was working in our lives drawing us to Himself. That was prevenient grace. Then God’s grace opened our eyes and hearts so that we would repent of our sins and receive Jesus as our Saviour. Saving grace would change us from lost sinners to children of God, his holy people. Last week Pastor Wayne introduced us to sanctifying grace, the presence of God through the Holy Spirit transforming our lives into the image of Christ. As we yield ourselves to Jesus, he not only declares us right before a holy God but he starts to transform our lives as we yield ourselves to Him. Through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit we start to bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, goodness, gentleness and self control.

This is great, but people have this terrible tendency to forget things, to get lazy and find the path of least resistance. What if we do that in our spiritual lives as well? No doubt Satan would love to feed that part of our human nature, and cause us to “drift” spiritually, as the writer to the Hebrews calls it in 2:1. Has God made any provision for our humanness?

The answer is “Yes”! God’s grace does not stop working in our lives the moment we accept Jesus as our Saviour. No, the presence of God through the Holy Spirit continues to work in us and through us to help us grow in Christlikeness. David Busic calls this sustaining grace.

How do we “tap into” this sustaining grace? Are there things we can do that open us up to this ongoing work of God in our lives?

Have you ever heard of spiritual disciplines? These are practices that we do on a regular basis not to earn favour with God or to earn our salvation, but so that we might draw near to God and hear His voice in our lives. As the great E. Stanley Jones said, “You cannot attain your salvation by disciplines – it is the gift of God. But you cannot retain it (or keep it) without disciplines.”¹

In the book of Hebrews we read of spiritual discipline in 12:11 where we read, **“Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have attained it.”**

Before COVID I would go every week to the swimming pool and swim about three kilometers. If I missed a week, I knew it would be hard to complete my laps the next week. Today I could not complete the laps as it has been two years since I last swam lengths. By why did I discipline myself to do this? Because I knew the District would call me to be a lifeguard at the camp, and I needed to be ready to swim. Last year at the camp a cabin of 6-7 year old girls wanted to swim, but were afraid. The water was over their heads, and even with lifejackets, they were frightened. So I went into the water and promised to catch them as they came off the waterslide. For the next hour there were squeals of delight as those girls slid down the slide non-stop, all the time I was treading water so I could catch them. I could never have done that if I had not disciplined myself earlier to swim each week.

What kind of spiritual disciplines do we have as Christians?

Look with me to the early church described in Acts 2:42-47 and see what disciplines you see being practiced there.

- read text -

The first discipline was studying scripture. They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching which means it was not a “take-it-or-leave-it” proposition for them. Daily they studied scriptures. Interesting to note, Jesus also was in the habit of reading scripture. When was the last time you cracked open your Bible? How can this be a life-giving habit in your life? As Jesus said when rebuking the devil in the wilderness, **“Man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4)**

It goes on to say that they fellowshiped together. I am not sure if that was pot-lucks or Bible Studies. I do know that gathering with other believers for worship, and study and accountability helps us grow in our faith. John Wesley organized the church into many different groups, but the most important group was the Class Meeting. In these gatherings they may read scripture and pray, but the most important question that would be asked was, “How are you doing spiritually?” In this fellowship of mutual care and support God was able to shape and mold His people for service and witness.

¹ E. Stanley Jones, “Conversion” (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 281.

The next thing we read of is breaking bread together. This makes us think of sharing the bread of Communion together. The Lord's Table is a great place to experience the grace of God. In fact, John Wesley believed that God was so present at the Communion table that people could respond to the invitation of Jesus to come follow him even as they took communion. In other words, people could be saved as they, by faith, received the life of Christ through the bread and wine. Do you believe that is possible? I do, for I have seen it happen, where someone repented of their sin and received Christ as Saviour as we shared the bread and wine together.

It goes on to say that the early church prayed. What a wonderful way to hear the voice of God directing our lives. Prayer is far more than making a list of things we want from God and reciting it before him. It is about listening as well, and praising and thanking Him.

Our passage goes on to tell about the lifestyle of generosity, sharing what they had so everyone was looked after. Yes, even as we do good to others, and help out those in need, we become recipients of God's grace. When we are walking in love, Jesus will be there.

There was worship and there was visitation and sharing the Gospel message with those outside the church family. All these are practices they learned from Jesus, and each one opened the door for the believers to receive more grace, and grow "in wisdom ... and in favour with God and man."

As you read Acts 2:42-47 did you notice certain words being repeated? The first word is the word "they." A second word repeated several times is the word "together."

There is a message for us here. Our journey with Jesus is very personal, but it is not done in isolation. Hear again what David Busic said about this in our Home Group study book:

"Discipleship can be personal, but it must not be private. Isolated Christians are in danger because insular faith produces weak and unfruitful disciples... the secret to healthy and happy growth in grace is in Wesley's repeated phrase, "watching over one another in love.""²

Friends, one of the reasons the church is concerned about those members who do not attend services regularly, do not participate in and Bible Studies, don't join any prayer groups is because we are concerned for their spiritual well-being. It not just about how many people can we gather so stats look good, but how many people will join in the journey of grace with us? Those who will not join in the spiritual disciplines, are often in danger of drifting away.

Sustaining grace – God's willingness to help us stay on the straight and narrow way that leads to life by giving us practices that feed and nourish our souls. It does not come naturally to participate in these things – like prayer, and study, and witnessing, and giving, and forgiving, and that is why they are called disciplines. But God never planned for us to walk on this journey alone – he gave us the church, brothers and sisters in Christ who will help each other.

²² David Busic, *Way, Truth, Life* (Kansas City: The Foundary, 2021), 134.

This morning we will participate together in Communion, or the Lord's Supper. In the Protestant Church this is one of two sacraments we hold to. The second sacrament is water Baptism. Baptism is a one time event that witnesses to our salvation through faith in Jesus and marks the entrance into the church of Christ. All Christians should be baptised. It is a wonderful means of grace as we obediently follow Jesus into the waters of baptism. If there is anyone who has not been baptised and would like to be, please do not hesitate to talk to me.

Communion is a recurring event, and because it is such a wonderful opportunity to experience the grace of God, it should be done as often as possible. Some churches share Communion every week. We share in Communion once a month.

Communion is certainly a community event. It is not something you go do by yourself, but something you do with the body of believers. Together we enter the presence of Jesus as we come to His Table, and together we eat the bread and drink the cup. Together we remember the basis of our salvation, the sacrificial death of Jesus, and together we offer up a prayer of thankfulness. Together we experience God's sustaining grace.

The Table of the Lord is open in our church, a place where you are welcome whether you are a member of this church or not.

Yes, Communion is a spiritual practice, so my invitation to you this morning is "Come, Let us practice Together."

Jesus rode into Jerusalem as a conquering king that first Palm Sunday. Today, we celebrate that he is the conquering king by remembering how he defeated our enemies – sin and death. It was through his death and resurrection. The bread and wine remind us of the cost of his victory, and stirs within us a prayer of gratitude and wonder. We are loved that much... amazing grace.