

Letting Go
Our Journey with Jesus – Part 2
Philippians 2:5-8

Last week, we began a new sermon series that entitled, “Our Journey with Jesus.” And I chose that, first off, because our Christian life is a journey. It’s a process as we try to get from one point in our lives to another, as we try to get from where we are right now to where we want to be in our relationship with God.

But it is “**our**” journey because it’s a journey that we are taking together. We don’t travel alone. As the African proverb says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.” And so, we travel together and as we go, we encourage one another, we challenge one another, and when it comes to showing love, we practice on each other.

And it is our journey “**with Jesus**” because our goal is not just to travel, it’s not just to change. Our goal is to grow to be more and more like Jesus, so that we become a group of people who talk like Jesus, who live like Jesus, who love like Jesus.

And, as I said last week, we’re going to do that by looking at some spiritual disciplines — things that we can do, sometimes very ordinary things, but things that we can do consistently to bring about that change in our lives.

And so, this morning, I want us to take a look at the first of these spiritual disciplines. And I spent a lot of time struggling with exactly what to call this one.

In his book *Pilgrim Heart*, which is a book that helped inspire me to preach this series, Darryl Tippens calls this the discipline of “**emptying.**” And that’s certainly a biblical term. It’s used of Jesus in Philippians 2 where Paul said, *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”* (Philippians 2:5-8, ESV).

Paul says there that Jesus “emptied himself.” And it certainly is true that we also need to empty ourselves.

There was a sense in which Jesus required his apostles to literally empty themselves of everything. When they went out proclaiming the gospel, Jesus told them *“Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic”* (Luke 9:3). Basically, the apostles emptied their lives of everything except the absolute essentials. And Jesus himself seemed to do the same thing, because it appears that he didn’t own anything during his earthly ministry.

Since the very beginning of Christianity, followers of Jesus have tried to figure out exactly what that means for us. Some have taken Jesus' instruction here quite literally, even to the point of taking vows of poverty. There are other Christians who advocate a minimalist lifestyle which is basically living with only the absolute essentials, nothing more.

But, even if we don't go to that extreme, we do understand that Jesus gave a lot of warnings about possessions, against the accumulation of wealth for its own sake, or trust in material things. **And so, our journey with Jesus does require us to *empty ourselves of anything that might inhibit our travel with him.***

I love this quote from Søren Kierkegaard. He said, **"Everything which God is to use, he first reduces to nothing."** And I think that's part of what's meant by that phrase "emptying ourselves." But, in the end, I decided not to focus on that phrase.

I thought about using the phrase "denying ourselves" which, again, is a very biblical phrase. Jesus himself said, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"* (Matthew 16:24).

The word "deny" means to completely disown someone. It's the same word that's used to describe Peter's denial of Jesus. Three times, Peter was confronted with his relationship with Jesus, and each time Peter denied knowing him. He absolutely disowned his master.

And that's the kind of denial a Christian is to make in regard to himself. We are to utterly disown ourselves as the master of our lives. Denying ourselves means that we renounce our right to ourselves, the right to rule our own lives.

We sometimes sing the song, "All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give...I surrender all." And that's what it means to deny ourselves. It means that we fully surrender ourselves to God.

But, in the end, I decided not to focus on the phrase "denying ourselves."

I thought about using the phrase "giving up" which again is a very biblical phrase because there are a lot of things that we need to give up in order to follow Jesus. In fact, we need to be willing to give up everything for Christ.

But, generally speaking, the idea of "giving up" has a negative connotation. Giving up is what you do when you don't want to finish what you started. Giving up is what you do when you're totally exasperated. Giving up is what you do when you lose.

And so, I decided instead to use the phrase **"letting go."** If we are going to journey with Jesus, if we are going to learn how to live like Jesus, there are some things that we're going to have to let go of.

It's what someone has referred to as a "spirituality of subtraction." I don't think I need to tell you that we live in a consumer society where adding is the norm. And so, we feel the need to constantly be adding. We need to add one or more new computers—one for the home, one for the office, one for travel. Then we've got to add another cell phone, or add another room to the house, or add another TV for the bedroom.

And the result is that we have a lot of stuff. And so, we have to buy bigger houses to hold all of our stuff. I'm sure this won't come as a big surprise to you, but new homes today have three times the closet space of a typical 1950s home. Because we have to have somewhere to keep our stuff. In fact, many Americans own so much stuff that they actually have to pay somebody else to keep it for them. Self-storage units in this country bring in over 27 billion dollars a year, just so we can keep the stuff we don't need.

And it's not just our possessions. When it comes to our time, we seem to keep adding — more work projects, more committee meetings, more travel, more activities for the kids. And we keep moving faster and faster. And all of this adding may not stop until our body begins to break down, or our relationships begin to suffer, or our stress level goes through the roof.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written, "Some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we are running on empty, and when the ones we love most are the ones we see least." (*Christian Century*, November 3, 1999)

And so, we keep adding more and more to our lives, until we eventually reach the point where we feel like our lives are completely out of control. And the irony is that even when we begin to feel that way, we somehow think that the solution to our problem is to add something else to our lives!

Meister Eckhart once said, **"God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by subtracting."**

We need to learn to say no to this tendency to keep adding to our lives. In fact, we need to learn to subtract, we need to learn to let go. Which may mean that we need to get rid of some stuff. Or it may mean that we need to cut back and do less. But, before we can make any progress in our spiritual lives, we've got to learn to let go of anything that stands in the way of us developing our relationship with God.

Many people and religious groups celebrate Lent each year during the 40 days preceding Easter. Lent is, in part, a time to give up something for a few days. I always thought that if were ever called on to celebrate Lent that I would agree to give up spinach or squash.

But there is something to be said for giving up something in our lives. What can I subtract from my life, so I can move closer to God? If I subtract an hour a day from watching TV, would that make a difference in my relationship with God? What if I subtract eating so

much food? What if I give up gossip? Or anger? Or pride? What is it that, if subtracted from my life, will draw me closer to God?

Letting go is an important principle of the spiritual life. We tend to want to *add* more, but God is much more interested in *subtraction*.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Leave your nets – leave your business – and come, follow me.” “Leave your father and your mother and come, follow me.” “Deny yourself – let go of this excessive attention to your own wants and your needs. Come and follow me.”

And it wasn’t just what Jesus taught. It was what he lived out as well. When Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, he faced the temptation of addition. Satan wanted to add fame, fortune, and reputation to Jesus. Satan tempted him with more power and more control. But Jesus knew that the core of life was not adding power, control, or money, but rather staying centered in God.

And so, to follow Jesus means that we need to let go of some things. Those first disciples had to drop what they were doing, even drop their material possessions, to follow Jesus. And they lived out what Jesus taught when he said, “Don’t worry about what you’re going to eat, or what you’re going to drink, or what you’re going to wear.” Because if you spend all your time worrying about stuff like that, you’ll gain the world, but you’ll lose your soul.

But it’s not just about saving our souls. It’s about providing us a higher level of joy in this life. Joshua Becker has written, **“I used to view Jesus’ teachings—on money and possessions and generosity and not stockpiling treasures on earth—as a sacrifice I was called to make.... But I began to realize that Jesus was just offering us a better formula for living.”** In other words, letting go of stuff isn’t just so that we can go to heaven; it’s so that we have a better life here on earth.

And that means going against the dominant culture. While culture around us cries for “more and more,” we need to be moving toward “less and less.” When we stop and think about it, most of us would have to admit that we need to eat less, we need to spend less, we need to work less. And by focusing on less, we can make more room in our lives for God.

This spirit of “letting go” is at the very heart of Christianity. But it goes against our natural tendency because we all have a tendency to hoard. And some of us are worse than others, but we all have things that we want to hold onto. For example, I don’t regard myself as a big hoarder, but I do sometimes find it difficult to get rid of things, even things I know I’m unlikely to need or use in the near future.

I especially have a tendency to hold onto computer related stuff. I’ve got pieces from the last ten computers I’ve owned which means that most of the stuff I have is absolutely useless. But whenever I start to get rid of it, there’s this nagging feeling of “what if I need that

someday.” And so, this week, I decided to let go of some of that stuff, and I threw out a whole bunch of stuff that had accumulated in my drawers and cabinets.

Recently, someone who was getting ready to move mentioned to me that one of the positive things about moving (and I’ve got to say, there aren’t many positive things), but one of the positive things about moving is that it gives you the opportunity to sort through your stuff and get rid of stuff that you don’t really need.

There are other times in our lives when we may be forced to let go of something, to unclutter or declutter our lives, and learn how to live on less — maybe because the economy forces us to take on that kind of a lifestyle, or maybe our health requires it, or maybe we get disenchanted with keeping up with the Joneses.

But what if we intentionally set about to get rid of stuff and de-clutter our lives for the simple reason that we want to have a better relationship with God?

Someone may say, “I just don’t see the spiritual value in doing that. So what if I have a closet filled with useless stuff. That doesn’t affect my spirituality.” But I think it does. Let me suggest a couple of reasons why.

First of all, letting go of stuff forces me to ask myself the question, “What do I really need?” Because while we like to say (especially while we’re at church) “All I need is God”, the truth is, we have an awful lot of stuff that we think we need. And going through it forces us to make a decision about what we truly need in life.

But there’s a second reason why I think this process of letting go is so important. I love this quote from Augustine. He said, **“God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.”**

I think that’s what Jesus meant when he said, *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. ...But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry”* (Luke 6:20-21,24-25).

God has so much to offer us, but if we are already full – full of ourselves or full of the things of this world or full of activities — then we have no room to receive what God has to offer. In fact, we may be so satisfied with what we have that we don’t even feel the need for anything else. That sense of being full to the point of excess, is as dangerous to the spiritual life as obesity is to the body. In contrast, emptiness or hunger can be a good thing, if it awakens us to what it is that we lack, and it prompts us to try to find what we really need.

And so, perhaps we would all do well to ask ourselves the question, “Is my life so full, full of stuff and full of activities, that I don’t feel the need for anything that God has to offer?”

Because before we can make any progress in our spiritual lives, we've got to identify what it is that's keeping us from getting to where God wants us to be.

But identifying the problem is only half the solution. The other half is that we have to actually let go, and that can be very difficult.

I think there are several reasons why we are hesitant to let go.

Part of it has to do with *security*. The more we have and the fuller our lives are, the more we feel secure, because our sense of security comes from what we have. And so, the more we let go of, the greater our need to put our trust in God.

But I think there's a second reason. As we undertake this process of letting go, of emptying our lives, something profound begins to happen. Because once the clutter of our lives is cleared away, we reach a place where it's just us and God. **When you clear out all the clutter, what you're left with is *emptiness*.** There's a saying that "nature abhors a vacuum," and what that means is that any space in this world that has nothing in it will, by nature, suck in everything around it so that it's not empty any more.

I think it's also accurate to say that we as humans abhor a vacuum. I think from a very early age we are conditioned to dislike emptiness and silence. We're taught that it's better to fill your life with things, to always keep busy, to always keep the television or radio on just to have some noise.

And so, more and more, our attention today is constantly being drawn to something or another. With the internet and smart phones, we are constantly plugged in, and always on the search for something to read, something to watch, some new stimulus for our idle minds. And, as a result, it's a constant struggle to keep people off their phones during meals, or while on vacation, or during Sunday service.

We have lost touch with the ability to be still and be silent, to the extent that some of us are afraid of silence, and we see it as something strange and uncomfortable. But it's in those moments when we strip away everything else that we have the ability to fully appreciate the presence of God.

And once we embark on this process of emptying our lives, of letting go, then this communion with God becomes the way we get filled up again. It's like a reservoir. If you want to build a lake, you've first got to create a big empty space – you dig out all the dirt and you get rid of it. Once you've done that, then you fill up that space with water from a stream or a river.

And we've got to do the same in our spiritual lives. We've got to clear away all the clutter and create a space so that we can then fill that space up with living water. And it is

when we begin to fill ourselves up with the presence of God that we begin to manifest the likeness of Christ in our lives.

God expressed this principle when he said in Psalm 46, *“Be still, and know that I am God...”* (Psalm 46:10). The Hebrew word for “be still” (raphah) is a rich Hebrew word that means much more than just “be quiet” or “don’t move.” It also means “to let go,” “to be faint,” “to be weak.” For example, in Ezekiel 7:17, God said of his enemies, *“Their hands will hang limp...”* (NLT). That Hebrew word “raphah” doesn’t just describe hands that are sitting still, but hands that are weak.

So, when God says, “Be still and know that I am God”, you could just as easily translate that, “Be weak and know that I am God,” which is strange counsel, indeed, if we’re considering it from the viewpoint of a do-it-yourself philosophy of life. But when it comes to spiritual growth, our human effort sometimes gets in the way.

Because we tend to think of spiritual growth as mostly a matter of addition — adding more and more to our lives. And so, we talk about the need to study more, pray more, help more people, do more things, attend more worship services. And don’t get me wrong, there are things that we need to do.

But the problem is that if we try to add more and more to our lives when our lives are already full, we’ll only get frustrated, and eventually we’ll give up. Because you can’t add something to something that is already full. And so, the first step of spiritual growth has to be letting go of those things that we don’t need, letting go so that there is room in our lives for God.

And there’s an important point in spiritual growth that I think we often overlook, and it’s this — **transformation is not accomplished by our own strength and efforts.** Being formed in the image of Christ is not our doing. Rather, it’s what God does in us. And so, growing spiritually is not so much about “doing” the right things as it is about clearing things out so that God is free to work within us.

Let me show you why I say that. When New Testament writers describe the process of becoming like Jesus, they do so using passive verbs. In other words, the process is done *to us*; it’s not something we do ourselves. And so, in Romans 8:29, Paul says that we are *“conformed”* to *“the likeness of God’s Son.”* Notice, he doesn’t say, “we conform ourselves.” Rather, we are conformed by God; God does the conforming.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says that we *“all reflect the Lord’s glory, [and] are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”* Paul says, we don’t transform ourselves. Rather, we are transformed by God.

Our job is to let go of everything in our life that stands in the way of God doing what he wants to do with us. It’s like this – suppose you get a call from a furniture company, and they

say, “We’d like to come over and do a home make-over. We’d like to replace everything in your house with something new – new sofa, new beds, new appliances. Your job is simply to get rid of all your old stuff so that when we show up, we’ve got room to put the new stuff in.”

Suppose, though, that you don’t bother to get rid of any of your old stuff. “I can’t do that; I may need this stuff someday!” And so the furniture company shows up, they see that your rooms are already filled with junk, and so they turn around and head home. They are willing to give you a complete home makeover, but you’ve got to be willing to let go of the old stuff.

And I think it’s the same way with God. God is willing to give our lives a makeover. He provides all the new stuff. But sometimes we’re not willing to let go of the old stuff. And again, as Augustine said, “God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.”

We need to learn to let go. And if we will only hit the pause button in our lives long enough to see how things are, we will realize that we’ve become attached to some things that just aren’t very helpful to us, and not helpful to others either. And if we plan to grow spiritually, we need to let go of some stuff.

Christianity is a religion of paradoxes. The first shall be last. The least shall be the greatest. The poor will be rich. The weak will be strong. And you could add to that list, “the more you’re willing to let go of, the more you’ll have.”

I remember hearing a story about Robert LeTourneau who was a Christian businessman in the early 1900’s who made a conscious decision to put God first in his life. In fact, he and his wife decided that they would take all of the profits from his business, and they would give 90% to the Lord and keep 10% for themselves. But the more they gave away, the richer they became. And when he was asked to explain this, LeTourneau said, “I shovel money out, but God shovels it back...and God has the bigger shovel!”

Now, I’m not suggesting this morning that you need to give 90% of your income to the Lord, though I’m certainly not opposed to it if you want to! But what I am suggesting is that for each of us, our lives are filled with so much stuff. Our homes are full, our time is full, our lives are full, and so I wonder, “What is it that you need to let go of?”

Because God is ready and willing to transform your life into the image of Jesus Christ, but he can’t do that until you have cleared things out of your life and made room for him.

So, what is it for you? The first step is to identify what it is that you need to let go of. The second step is to actually let go of it.