

Service Teaching 01:

Love

Intro:

- What thermometer do you use to measure your spiritual temperature?
- How do you know when you're maturing, and how do you know when you're regressing?
 - What makes you feel close to God, and what makes you feel distant?
 - Spiritually strong, and spiritually weak?
 - When I'm hot, cold, or lukewarm, how do I tell?
- Maybe, for you, it's your moral decisions ...
 - Having one too many at Friday's happy hour?
 - This week's internet history?
 - The anger or patience with which you spoke to your co-workers, spouse, or kids?
- For others, it's likely the quality of your spiritual practice ...
 - How many times you cracked the Bible this week
 - Prayer habits
 - Follow-through on your commitments to silence, rest, or generosity
- What thermometer do you use to measure your spiritual temperature?
- You ever think about that? We ask because you definitely have one.
- And whatever it is affects you mentally and emotionally.
- But if it's the wrong instrument it can't give you the right information.
 - Is your instrument telling you the truth?
 - Is it giving you an accurate reading?
- Most importantly of all: Is it the same instrument Jesus prescribes for checking spiritual health?

Frame: This Practice was created to help you apprentice under Jesus.

- We define apprenticeship (or discipleship) to Jesus as a life organized around three driving goals:
 1. To be with Jesus
 2. To become like Jesus
 3. And to do as he did
- And Jesus said this about his identity and mission: "... The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve ..." (Mark 10v45) So if it's Jesus we are going to apprentice under, if it's from him we learn how to live in the Kingdom of God, we too must serve.
- The spiritual practice of **service** is: **the expression of Christlike love through meeting the practical needs of another, especially those most in need of help.**

Service is:

1. **Being with Jesus** among the needs of others where he promises his presence.
2. **Becoming like Jesus** as I'm shaped increasingly into his image by imitating his self-giving love.
3. **Doing as he did** as I make his mission my own.

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 7, I'll pick up in v16 ...

- Jesus, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, explains how to recognize spiritual health, a thermometer for taking spiritual temperature.
- *By their fruit you will recognize them.* Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. (Matthew 7v16-20)
- Jesus, never one to miss a chance for a well-placed agricultural metaphor says: *fruit*. That's how you know. It's how you measure. It's how you take your spiritual temperature.
- For the first time in my life, I'm trying my hand at gardening at the moment — attempting to grow a few veggies.
- And these little sprouts require daily tending ...

- Pulling up little weeds.
- Gentle watering.
- And so forth.
- And there's tons of mystery ...
 - I'm learning that not all soil is created equal.
 - There are conditions, under the earth, that determine the quality of growth.
 - Agriculture is more an art than an exact science.
- But there *is* a definite way to solve the mystery, to know how those little sprouts are doing come harvest time: *fruit*.
- Your spiritual life is like the sprouts in my mulch bed ...
 - Bursting with potential.
 - Requiring daily care.
 - And more an art than a science ... requiring trial and error, slow cultivation year over year ... involving seasons of full, green leaves in the sunshine and seasons of long, cold, dark days — both of which are necessary for growth.
- However, there is a thermometer, a way to get a clear and accurate reading on how you're doing: *fruit*.
 - Healthy plants with strong roots draw life from the soil where they're planted, producing fruit in season.
 - And a plant that's not drawing life, well, no fruit.
- That's how you know. It's the instrument Jesus uses for checking spiritual temperature.
- Let's try to pull that from the abstract of ancient metaphor into the reality of modern life by exploring three soul-conditions, three ways Jesus uses this word fruit ...
 - Fruitless
 - Fruitful
 - Firstfruits

Fruitless:

- First, fruitless. A few pages later, in Matthew's Gospel, we read ...
- "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit." (Matthew 12v33)
- Now, this is interesting: Jesus says almost the same thing here, in Matthew 12, that he said back there in Matthew 7.
 - He's making the same point, but the context is different, which adds a little color — a little reality to the metaphor.
 - Back in chapter 7, Jesus was teaching the gathered crowds who were eager to learn, eating up every word.
 - Here in chapter 12, though, his comment is an arrow meant to pierce. It's sharp. And it's aimed at a certain somebody.
- Jump up to the top of the chapter — "At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them." (Matthew 12v1)
 1. Jesus is strolling through a grain field on the Sabbath day — a sacred day set aside for rest and celebration — and his disciples are helping themselves to some of the *fruit*, snacking on heads of grain
 2. As the story progresses, the Pharisees (a strict sect of priests) take issue because, "... not to a stickler here, rabbi, but that's technically harvesting ... it's work ... and the Law forbids work on the Sabbath."
 3. And Jesus schools them by comparing himself to David, even insinuating he's the fulfillment of King David — an ancient Jewish way of *claiming* he's God walking among us as King.
- That's Jesus for: "You guys are missing the forest for the trees."
- When the *how* of spiritual formation (like keeping the rules perfectly on the Sabbath) ...
- Outruns the *why* of spiritual formation (the rest and celebration those laws are meant to free you and others to enjoy) ...
- Your spiritual practice is drained of power to form you, or worse, it *deforms* you (instead of being people resting and delighting in a God who keeps his promises and provides for his children ...

- ... these guys are morally policing everybody else, they're uptight on the Sabbath day — the opposite of restful, easy, peaceful company).
- You're taking your spiritual temperature by the wrong instrument: So it's reading healthy because you're keeping the rules, but the way you're keeping the rules is making you rotten, fruitless ... not *fruitful*.
- See what Jesus is getting at?
- He offers an accurate reading of their spiritual health — based on his *true* instrument, not their faulty one — verse 33: “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.” (Matthew 12v33)
- Jesus is talking to the most devout sect of priests in Israel.
 - These are the people keeping the very practices Jesus says will form us into his apprentices — the very same ancient practices we celebrate and commend you to here at Practicing The Way — *but they've lost the plot*.
 - They've confused the *why* and the *how*.
 - They've slowly, over time, likely backed by very good intentions, become people who keep the practices but have lost track of *why* they started the practices in the first place and *who* they're aiming to become.
 - And when the HOW of spiritual formation outruns the WHY of spiritual formation, it leaves me *fruitless*.
- And that takes us from *fruitless* to ...

Fruitful:

- Jesus, when asked what the most important command in Scripture was, gave a common, predictable answer: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”
- What was less predictable though, and set Jesus apart from the other rabbis of his day, was what followed: “And a second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”
- Jesus inseparably joined together love for God and people.
- *The way I love others is directly connected, even revealing, of the true state of my heart toward God.*
 - If I read the Bible every morning before the sun comes up for years and years but I'm not becoming kinder to my co-workers, I'm better off sleeping in.

- If I volunteer at the soup kitchen or homeless shelter as a means of appeasing my conscience, I might as well stay home.
 - If I pray morning, midday, and evening, but it's not making me a more empathetic friend or patient parent, I'm missing the forest for the trees.
 - If *practicing the way of Jesus* isn't filling me to overflowing with *the love of Jesus*, I'm nothing more than *noisy* — religiously busy but out of tune with God's redemption in me and the world around me.
 - But if *practicing the way of Jesus* is deepening my own experience of God's irrevocable love to the degree that I increasingly serve others with the same kind of love then my life is harmonizing with the renewal of the world.
- Jesus would go on to say: "... As I have loved you, so you should love one another." (John 13v34)
 - We love God not by exclusively giving love *back to God* but also by giving love actively to others.
 - All spiritual practice ...
 - Contemplative silence and worship in community
 - Midweek fasting and Sabbath feasting
 - ... is meant to free us to become people of *love*.
 - To borrow a phrase from Dr. Robert Mulholland: *spiritual formation is for the sake of others*.
 - The aim and destination of the spiritual journey is not work/life balance, personal peace, or even character formation (as an end in itself) but to *become love* — that my inner journey of formation would pour out of me actively in service to others.
 - Love, in the Christian imagination, is different than in our modern, Western sense.
 - It's not just nice, warm feelings of goodwill toward "humanity" generally.
 - *But incarnate, embodied, practical actions of self-sacrificial service, as we see in Jesus.*

That's service: to willfully enter into the life of another, at cost to myself, that they might have more life.

- Spiritual formation does benefit me certainly — it offers a sense of peace, self-discovery, freedom, and joy — life and life to the full!

- The evidence though, that it's Jesus' image I'm being formed into — the gauge of my spiritual formation — is: *Am I becoming a person of love to the people who know me best and interact with me most frequently?*

How do I take my spiritual temperature?

- The gentle or harsh tone I use with my roommates or spouse
- The interruptibility (or lack thereof) I embody toward my neighbors
- The patience I carry, or don't, toward my kids
- The compassion I offer my coworkers, or judgment I chip away at them with
- The thermometer that takes our spiritual temperature is: Love, expressed practically as service.
- Service isn't just another practice but one that makes *all of our spiritual practice* filled to the brim with formative power.
- And that's what it means to become ...

Firstfruits:

- We began with Matthew 7, when Jesus claims that loving fruitfulness is the evidence of spiritual health.
 - What we're yet to address, though, is the apocalyptic direction he takes this idea.
 - Look back with me at Matthew 7, verse 19 — "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 7v19)
 - In John 15, when Jesus uses the "vine and branches" metaphor to paint a nearly identical picture — "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit ..." (John 15v5)
 - Aaaaaaaahhhhhhh. If he stopped there, it's like spa theology. Relax in the eucalyptus air with Jesus.
 - But he doesn't stop there. He rolls right into ...
 - "If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." (John 15v6)
 - And that lands a touch different, doesn't it?

- It's more cold plunge than steam room.
- What's up with the apocalyptic flavor?
 - Jesus connects the imagery of fruitfulness to the end of the age, to his return to reign as King — when he will wipe away every tear, heal every wound, correct every injustice, and restore the *loving*, good order of Eden.
 - He's claiming that you and I are living in concert with one of two Kingdoms *right now* with each and every choice we make — the world that's passing away or the age to come.
 - And that the invisible Kingdom we are rooted in is revealed not in the creeds we recite or the community we're a part of — *or even the practices we order our days by* — but by our: *fruit*.
- The Apostle Paul picks up this train of thought:
 - “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15v20)
 - When Jesus burst forth from that tomb on Sunday, the first seed of eternal life to take root and break corrupted soil, he was “firstfruits.”
 - What does that mean?
- I'm a sucker for Fall. Always have been.
 - I daydream of summer on dreary winter days.
 - I like the colors of spring.
 - But for me, I've never been able to resist crisp air, crackling fires, and pumpkin bread.
- I'm a sucker for Fall.
 - In the American Pacific Northwest, where I live, if you visited an apple orchard in late August, there'd be a couple apples on the trees.
 - You'd be sweating.
 - Hot, mulled cider would be a huge mistake.
 - You'd be waaaaaaay too early for baking pumpkin flavored anything, even for me.
 - But you *would* see a few apples on the trees.

- Those August apples, they're called "firstfruits."
- They're out of season; It still feels like summer in every way. They arrived early, long before the days got shorter and the air felt crisp.
- But they're *promisingly* out of season: Meaning those firstfruits apples are *early signs of a full-blown atmospheric change*.
 - And it's coming whether you like it or not
 - Coming whether you're ready or not
 - It's coming and it's good news
- Those apples are signs of a total change of season, an atmospheric shift that will sweep over the whole world, transforming all of creation.
- That's what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is: Firstfruits. An early promise of a sweeping atmospheric change for all of creation — the re-unification of heaven and earth.
 - James 1 says, " He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." (James 1v18)
- You and I are firstfruits in a corrupted creation: An early promise of a sweeping atmospheric change — the re-unification of heaven and earth.
 - Our lives of *service* are like August apples.
 - We are "*promisingly out of season*."
 - An early sign of a sweeping atmospheric change that will envelop all of creation.
 - An age when the labor is coming to an end and the promised feast is drawing near.
 - Jesus didn't burst forth from the tomb *just* to proclaim forgiveness of individual sins but to promise a new social order ... one where the way to *life* is freely giving mine away in loving *service* to others.

Close:

- How do we do it?
- How do we become firstfruits?
- How does our spiritual formation make us people of whose lives are early promises of a

renewed world?

- At the risk of underwhelming you with simplicity, you: *start where you are and start today.*
- Samuel and Pearl Oliner extensively researched Holocaust rescuers.
 - They interviewed over 700 individuals in an effort to discover what caused some non-Jewish Europeans to risk their lives sheltering oppressed Jews during European Nazi occupation.
 - And the conclusion of their research was that the distinguishing characteristic of rescuers vs. non-rescuers was: The individual's practice of loving service to others in their ordinary relationships and everyday environments *prior to the war.*
- In the researchers' own words: "Respective wartime behaviors grew out of their general patterns of relating to others." (Samuel and Pearl Oliner)
- Those most likely to serve in extraordinary ways when the pressure is on were those who practice service in ordinary ways when the pressure is off.
- Start where you are (not where you aren't):
 - Don't start by volunteering at a new agency in your city ... or joining a team at your church you aren't already invested in.
 - That will certainly be a part of your practice as we mature in service, but it's not the start.
- Imagine the ordinary people and everyday environments of your life at present.
- How might you, simply and humbly, get your shoulder under someone else's burden and share the weight?

Start today (not tomorrow):

- This week's exercise is one act of service.
- The smaller and simpler — the better.
 - Meal prep for your spouse at the beginning of this week
 - Sit down and help your daughter with her homework
 - Pick up a coffee for a co-worker when you're stepping out anyway
 - Go and personally drop off the tool or luggage or power adapter your neighbor needs to borrow

- One act of service, not for the sake of what it will produce in someone else, but what it will produce *in me* — fruit on the branches of my life abiding in the vine.
- Service is one practice expressed 4 key ways:
 1. Love
 2. Hiddenness
 3. Availability
 4. Kinship
- That's where we're going in the coming sessions, but it all starts with *love*: Loving others by meeting practical needs.
- How do I become the firstfruits of the greatest promise?
- How do I become a sure sign of heaven on earth?
- Not by inspiration. Not by grand action.
- But by *starting where we are* (not where we want to be) and *starting today* (not tomorrow).