

Sermon—February 26-27, 2000
Rich Nathan
The Life of a Disciple Series
2 Peter 1:3-11

The Disciplined Life

Last week Danny started a new series for us on The Life of a Disciple. I wanted to start it, but unfortunately, I was ill. What we are going to be doing in the course of this series is communicate to you a process that we hope will serve us here at Vineyard Columbus in bringing people into greater and greater degrees of spiritual maturity.

Now, I have one great passion in my life and that is to assist people to live distinctively Christian lives at this particular moment of history. I spend an enormous amount of my thinking and my energy observing and meditating upon the cultural changes that are occurring at an evermore rapid rate. What has happened in the Western world in the last 40 years is nothing short of a seismic shift, an enormous earthquake, at the very foundational levels of Western culture.

For 1650 years, from the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, to the 1960's the Western world was dominated by what one could call Christendom, a general Christian consensus regarding such fundamental cultural issues as marriage, sexuality, family life, authority, tradition, the appropriate place of the church. But what has happened, as I said, in an ever more accelerated rate in the last 40 years is that more than 1600 years of Christendom have crumbled. And right now we are living at one of those rare times of

major cultural shift. The tectonic plates underneath the culture are moving and we have entered almost certainly a post-Christian era.

Now, don't understand me to say that I believe that most people in the past were Christians. They were not. There was just a generalized consensus regarding a host of cultural issues that was informed by the Bible and the church. That consensus is no more.

I think this is an incredibly exciting time to live – at a moment that is unlike anything that has happened in the last 1700 years. It increases my intensity to understand what is happening and how we live distinctively Christian lives in the midst of the breakdowns and the erosions. That is why I have done series here like “Christ Confronts the Culture” and my most recent series from the book of Daniel on “Learning How to Thrive in the Midst of Babylon.” Anyone who has the least bit of spiritual sensitivity has not only got to be excited about living in the midst of such upheaval, but also concerned. Concerned about all of the wreckage that the earthquake of cultural shifting is leaving in its wake.

I don't know what you observe underneath the economic prosperity that we are currently enjoying here in the US, but what I observe and what lots and lots of people observe and experience is wreckage. The cultural shifts have produced tremendous wreckage – wrecked families, wrecked marriages, wrecked friendships. And the wreckage extends to the church where we see wrecked churches as the result of leadership failures and moral failures in the pastorate. I see people whose bodies have been wrecked by sexual

exploration, abuse and drug and alcohol abuse. Everywhere that we look in post-Christian America there is wreckage. And it seems that every other Christian that I meet is living some kind of a double life – playing the nice Christian game, but internally is wrecked by some addiction, some major erosion. The wreckage extends even to the way we express ourselves, to the very substance and communication of our words.

As an example of what I am talking about by the wreckage of language and thought, just consider for a moment the whole Clinton Impeachment. Whatever your politics – whether you thought that he should or should not have been impeached; or if he should have been impeached, should he have been convicted or not – whatever your politics, was it not an expression of cultural wreckage? On the one side, the Republican side, it seemed they could not find one person to serve as a prosecutor who had not done the very same things that Clinton was accused of and worse. Every one of the family values guys that was trotting out waving the flag was himself or herself similarly guilty of adultery and worse.

And in President Clinton, we had not only the wreckage of marital vows, but the wreckage of language that is becoming more and more a feature of post-Christian and postmodern culture. “Well, that depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is, doesn’t it?” And “What do we mean by sexual relations?” And what do we mean by the word “alone?” And what do we mean by the word “no” or “yes” or “promise” or “vow?” America was swept along into a discussion regarding the meaning of words and we saw the wreckage of the English language.

So, in the midst of all this wreckage and these shifting plates of culture, I am dominated by the thought, I am obsessed all the time with the thought, of how does one live a genuinely Christian life at this moment of history? How do you follow Jesus Christ in the 21st Century? What does it look like? What do you need to do to do it?

And here's another thing. In a couple of months we are going to move into our new auditorium, which is a very great thing, indeed, that you, the church, have done. You have given and continue to give sacrificially so that not only you, but other people in Central Ohio can be impacted and reached with the gospel message. We will be giving you updates regarding when, exactly, we are going to move. Our current hope is that we would be able to have our first service in our new auditorium on Easter weekend. But as these things go, you never know. I am not particularly sweating it one way or the other because I figure if we don't get in at Easter, we will just have to worship the Lord for the next century starting a little bit later in our new facility. It doesn't really matter. It is something you can pray about.

But the fact is we are going through a change as a church family. We are going to be moving into a much larger room. The church is going to feel bigger, even though it is not larger, just the room is larger. We are going to drop back from five services probably to one on Saturday night and, initially, one on Sunday morning that will quickly become two. But as the church has continued to grow, and I am thankful to God for that, as we are now passing 5000 attenders every weekend, the question that arises for me is what will be the character of our church as we grow to 6000, 7000, 8000 and 10,000 and more?

Can we continue to maintain our core values as a Vineyard church and can we continue to produce followers of Jesus Christ who live distinctively Christian lives?

Well, as I began to think through the process that we employ here at Vineyard to make disciples, I decided to give my friend, Richard Foster, a call last spring. Some of you may be familiar with Richard Foster from his very popular books on Christian spirituality, particularly his best selling, “Celebration of Discipline.” I had the opportunity to meet Richard years ago with John Wimber. He was a dear friend of John’s. Then at a few other conferences and then at a conference we did here at Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Columbus with Richard. And then again this past summer.

So I called Richard Foster and asked him: What church in America do you feel like is actually doing the job of making disciples in this post-Christian culture? Who do you look at, Richard, and say, “WOW, if we could clone this...here is a church that is really producing followers of Jesus.” I said, “Richard, who is doing something more than just moving people around a base path from one class to a second, third and fourth and saying the job of discipleship is done?”

He said, “Rich, in answer to your question, no one that I am aware of is doing the job and no one has a process that in my mind is anything other than really superficial.”

I said, “Well, wait a minute. Maybe you misunderstood my question. You go out to speak and have spoken in literally hundreds of churches around America and have

spoken to dozens of denominations, who are using your materials. Who is seriously engaging in the issue of discipleship and is actually making it happen in their local church?”

Richard’s answer was, “Again, Rich, I am not aware of any church that is doing more than just a really light touch job of moving people from crowd to crowd, and is, instead, doing an effective job of discipleship. If you do it, you will be the first.”

Now, I don’t know if Richard Foster’s observations of the state of the American church are accurate or not. I am not out there enough to know. But I do know that we are living at a time of enormous cultural change. I do know that all around the church we see wreckage. And I do know that as a church family, who is about to experience significant change ourselves, we have one huge question that must dominate our discussion for the next decade. Are we producing disciples of Jesus Christ? Is the fruit of Vineyard Columbus’ ministry the production of distinctive followers of the Lord Jesus Christ? That is what must dominate the conversation. Not is this or that activity happening. Not just numbers and quantity, however important those things are. But are we producing disciples of Jesus Christ?

Today we are going to talk about “The Disciplined Life” as we continue in this series on the Life of the Disciple. Let’s pray.

If you have a Bible, I would like you to open up to 2 Peter 1:3

“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to you faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Now in verses 8-11, Peter draws a sharp contrast between two kinds of Christian lives—the barren Christian life, vv. 8-9 and the blessed Christian life, vv. 10-11. It is very clear that we are talking about Christians, someone who is born again and who knows Jesus, even when we are talking about the barren Christian life. We see that in v. 8, “For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is possible to know Jesus, to have received him at a meeting, pray the sinner’s prayer, be initially really joyful, feel forgiven, feel like you have really trusted Christ to save you and there was a

moment when you felt like he did give you the gift of eternal life. It is possible to go through a conversion and yet in Peter's words live a Christian life that is ineffective and unproductive. Nothing distinctively Christian in the midst of the cultural wreckage.

When I see that word "ineffective," it speaks to me about methodology, about process. A person may have an end in mind. They say to themselves, "I know what a good Christian looks like, someone who seems to have a warm, genuine relationship with God. Someone who seems to know how to be content whatever the circumstances and shifts are in life. Someone who has overcome a major stronghold, a major bad habit in their life. Someone who hears God's voice and is assured of his continued love. I know what a good Christian looks like. I just don't know how to get there." By ineffective, we are talking about methodology, about process.

I think of the ineffective parent, the person who loves their children and really wants their kids to grow up healthy and well and, perhaps, to grow up loving God. But the methods this parent is using in child training and child raising are totally ineffective. You see the parent constantly whining at their kids. "Honey...please, mommy is going to get very upset if you do that." "Mommy is going to count to 3, you need to put that cookie down...1...2...2½...2¾...2⅞..." And the kid is thinking, "Mommy knows fractions. I wonder if Mommy knows how to do square roots?" And they shove the cookie in their mouth.

Ineffective. I watched a dad one time with a 4-year old standing on his porch threatening his 4-year old that there would be terrible consequences if the 4-year old ran out into the street. This little 4-year old looked back at dad and realized here was a good, but totally ineffective father. And he just took off into the street. Dad went running down the street after the 4-year old. There were no consequences. Just empty threats.

We watch ineffective marriages all the time. Couples who genuinely, both of them, would like to enjoy a happy, good marriage. They just don't know how to get there and so their methods of resolving conflict only lead to greater misunderstandings and greater hurts. And they end up sounding like two five year olds arguing. "No, you didn't" "Yes, I did." Did not. Did too. You always leave your shoes here. Well, what about what you did with the car? Oh, you are going to bring that up again? They pout. They yell. They withdraw. Yes, I have in mind what it is supposed to be like, I just don't know how to produce that.

Most Christian churches use ineffective methods for reaching their communities. In a church this size, if each person who attended here on a Sunday morning made 100 calls in the next month, 3 calls a day, we could call the entire Central Ohio community. Do you know what would happen? 99.9% of the Central Ohio community would hate the Columbus Vineyard because they would have been interrupted by a phone call from a stranger while they were watching a movie or preparing dinner or making love or having a fight.

Ineffective methods. That's one thing we want to challenge. Peter says that you cannot only be ineffective, but you can be unproductive even though you are a Christian. The word "unproductive" could also be translated "unfruitful." You may see a barrenness in terms of your evangelism. You know Jesus Christ, you may have a desire to see other people know Christ, but it may be years or never in the course of your life that you actually impact one person toward receiving Christ as their Savior. Not one. No children. No teens. No adults. No parents. No one.

You read in the Bible that the Christian life is to be a fruit bearing life, a life of multiplication, a life where God gets some return on the talents that he has given us, but your life is a barren life. Maybe it is barren in terms of your bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit. You look at your life and you say, "I don't see very much fruit. I am not very loving or joyful or patient. Maybe I see myself as someone who is easily irritated, often really upset like a person walking around with a very bad sunburn." Every thing irritates you. Everything bugs you. You are always in a funk. People have to walk on egg shells around you.

Perhaps you say, "I have little self-control over my moods or my speech. I find myself saying things I shouldn't or using words I shouldn't. Or breaking confidences. Or exaggerating. I have very little self-control over my speech...Or maybe your body, or sexuality, mind, or your eyes. Here is a person who lives in the grays, the shadows of life. They say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, I do, and I go to church, but my whole Christian life is fundamentally characterized by ineffectiveness and unfruitfulness. I know almost

nothing of the abundant life that Jesus Christ described when he said, ‘I came to give life and that more abundantly.’ I have nothing like the kind of full confidence that Paul speaks about in his relationship with Christ. It seems like other people around me enjoy that too.” Rather, you find yourself often shaken by doubts. You wonder if you are a true Christian sometimes, whether you really have made that connection. You doubt whether you are saved often, when you think about it. You doubt whether you really know God. You doubt whether the Bible really is God’s Word and if the promises in the Bible are really true. You have nothing like the growing knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ that ought to characterize the Christian life.

The Christian life begins with the knowledge of Christ. We read that in v. 3, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him.” The Christian life begins with the knowledge of Christ, but there is a clear difference in degrees of knowing Jesus. There is an immature knowledge of Christ that the Bible speaks about and a mature knowledge of Christ. There are different degrees of intimacy with God. And the Bible does speak about different degrees of faith. Certainly, we see that in a good long-term marriage.

This summer my wife and I will be married 25 years and by God’s grace it has been a good marriage. It has been a happy marriage, by the grace of God. And when I married Marlene, I knew her. We had spent the previous two years together almost daily attending college together, seeing one another each evening. We had meals together in the cafeteria. We attended a number of the same classes together. We prayed with each

other. When we got married, I knew her. But my knowledge of Marlene at age 19 when we married is nothing like my knowledge of her now nearly 25 years later. I know what Marlene is thinking just by watching the way she walks into a room. I know what her sighs mean. I know what her looks mean. I know her.

And our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ is to go so far beyond an initial acceptance of him toward the kind of intimacy and connectedness that we know his gentle persuasion. We know his still, small voice. We know his press in our spirits. We know his smile and his touch.

Well, this barren Christian is not only ineffective and unfruitful, but Peter says “They are also nearsighted and blind.” Now there is an interesting phrase. One would think that blind would cover the field. What does the word “nearsighted” – short-sighted, literally, add to the word blind?

Well, perhaps Peter was thinking that the word nearsighted had to do with time and blindness with truth. To be nearsighted or shortsighted means that you can’t see what is far off. He is describing the Christian who lives only in the present moment and doesn’t keep the end in mind. No thought about tomorrow. No idea that one day they are going to stand before God and give an account for their life. They don’t think about that regularly. They are short-sighted.

And almost all of America is incredibly short-sighted. We consume everything now without a thought for tomorrow. Every single marketing scheme says buy now. Do you know that it used to be considered immoral to sell someone a depreciating asset on credit? JCPenney, the great retailer, refused through his whole life, well into the late 1950's, to allow people to charge anything at Penney's because as a Christian, he thought it was immoral to have people buy things that they could not afford to pay for in cash. But we live in such a nearsighted country, where the vast majority of people are running up their credit card bills, and they have no ability to think ahead.

Maybe I will date someone who is not a Christian. Maybe I will marry someone who is not a Christian. Shortsighted. I am happy now, but what will I feel like later? Maybe I will quit school now and get a job and make money now. What about tomorrow and in 5-10 years. What will you do then?

Shortsightedness has to do with the inability of the person to project themselves forward into the future or delay immediate gratification. And blindness? Blindness has to do with truth. Throughout the Bible, a person is considered blind when they just don't get it regarding spiritual truth. They are clueless. A person who is spiritually blind has no insight regarding the Devil's schemes in their lives. They are blind to what the enemy is doing in the life of their kids or in their marriages. They are the people who always say, "I couldn't believe that she picked up and divorced me." The handwriting has been on the wall for 10 years, but the person has willfully shut their eyes to all the signs of erosion in their marriage. They refuse to see their mate's affairs.

Maybe they are blind to all the major shifts in the culture. They say, “Things haven’t changed all that much. America in the year 2000 is pretty much the same as it was in 1960.

Ineffective. Unfruitful. Nearsighted. Blind. “And forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.” Peter is likely here describing spiritual amnesia that is from forgetting one’s baptism. We are going to have a baptism today. When he talks about the person who has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins, he is probably thinking about what baptism is designed to communicate. A person who has forgotten that their baptism was designed to communicate a decisive break with their old way of life. That in baptism, someone is supposed to be saying, “I am tired of that dead-end way of living, that dead-end life that got me nowhere, that made me empty. I am tired of all of that and I am going to make a decisive break that baptism communicates. I am burying my old way of life under the water of baptism. And when I come out I am coming out as a new person.” Here is a person who has had their sins forgiven by Jesus but lives as if that doesn’t make any difference at all.

You got the picture? Ineffective. Unfruitful. Nearsighted. Blind. Spiritual Amnesia? A barren life – a life that sadly characterizes most Christians and most churches today.

What kind of life does God want us to live? Peter goes on to say in v. 10, here is a very different kind of Christian life. “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make

your calling and election sure. For if you do these things you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

We are God’s, by way of God’s call and sovereign election. When you see that word “election” in the Bible, don’t let it throw you. Let the word “election” comfort you and assure you that God, when he went into the voting booth, voted in your favor. He put a check next to your name. But Peter exhorts Christians to make that calling and election sure. Our election comes from God alone, but our behavior, our lives, prove or disprove God’s choice. How do you evidence to your own heart that God in a secret election in heaven voted in your favor? Your heart is filled with doubt. Am I really saved? Do I really know God? How do I know what went on in the voting booth in heaven – whether God voted for me or against me?

Peter says, “Make your calling and election sure.” Produce evidence to the jury of your heart that God did, indeed, has voted for you. And what kind of evidence does your heart need to see? What would be the proof that you really do belong to the Lord?

Here’s the proof that your heart wants to see. Your heart longs to see you say “yes” to the Lord in all areas of your life. So long as you say “no” to God somewhere, so long as you are saying “no” to God somewhere, your heart will always doubt God’s elective choice. Your heart longs for, it waits for you to say “yes” to the Lord. Yes, to your will in my life, O God. Yes, regarding this relationship that you are putting your finger on. Yes, to your direction. Yes, to the ministry you are calling me to. Yes, to the sacrifice

you are calling me to. Yes, to the endurance you are calling me to in a very difficult situation. Yes, to the perseverance. What your heart wants to hear you say is “Yes, Lord.” And when you say “Yes, Lord” the jury of your heart will vote and say, “Ah, that gives us confidence regarding God’s secret choice.”

And you will never fall, Peter says. You will not fall on the path to eternal life as you keep saying “yes” to the Lord. You will have the sure-footedness of a trained hiker who knows how to pick his or her way along a treacherous path. But even better, as you keep saying “yes” to the Lord, you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What a contrast to the barren life is this blessed life – a life that ends in a rich welcome. I love that word “rich.” You can circle that in your Bible. Rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The ineffective Christian life, the barren Christian life, is like the life of a shipwrecked sailor who makes it to shore barely by hanging onto a piece of driftwood. The person is barely alive. They drag themselves to shore, choking and gasping for air, they are spouting water out of their nose and mouth like some whale. Or the person who makes it out of a burning house alive, having lost all of their possessions. Everything they counted precious has been burned up. They come out and their eyebrows and hair is singed. They have no eyelashes and the smell of smoke is on their clothes. They are coughing and choking. That is one way to get into the kingdom of God – like a drowned sailor or a man escaping from a burning fire.

Another way is a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As I said before I love this word “rich”. It is the word that is used throughout the scripture to describe extravagance – the lavish, extravagance of God’s grace, the riches poured out upon us. Instead of us coming into heaven and having this “Oh, it’s you” – my picture is of a marathon runner entering the stadium and the crowd is on its feet and someone yells, “I see her coming...she is entering the stadium...here she is...” She runs into the stadium and the crowd goes crazy. That is the rich welcome.

Whenever I think about rich welcome, I think about the scenes from the Gulf War and the returning veterans lined up on the deck of their ships as they pull into port. On the docks are the wives and the babies and little children and grandma and grandpa, dad and mother. They are all straining to catch a glimpse of each other. Watching the veterans heading down the gangplank and grabbing their children, their wives, girlfriends and in some cases their husbands. In the background there is this patriotic, proud-to-be-an-American music playing. I remember the scenes of the welcomes for those veterans and I just cried and cried. There is something so wonderful about a welcome, isn’t there? We are glad you are here.

A couple of weeks ago my wife, Marlene, went to visit my mother in Florida for a week. Marlene is a good and a brave woman. No...it wasn’t that bad. But it was a generous thing for a daughter-in-law to do and I missed her terribly during the week she was gone. I raced over to the airport immediately after the Saturday night service to pick her up. I

ran down to the baggage claim and we just fell on each other. We were like two teenagers. We really missed each other.

When I think of a rich welcome, I think of John Wesley, the great founder of the Methodist church, on his deathbed, looking up and seeing a vision of Jesus. As a man really advanced in years, well up into his 80's, his dying words were, "Best of all, God is with us." Is that not the way you would like to die? Saying that? Best of all, God is with us. I am not alone. I am not afraid. I am not racked by doubts and fears. I am not clutching a piece of driftwood, sputtering and spouting my way into the kingdom. I'm looking forward to a rich welcome.

How do you get that – a life characterized by assurance? A life that is bearing fruit and having impact in the lives of those around you and you are bearing spiritual fruit. You are seeing growing self control over your tongue, over your body, over your emotions. You are seeing growing peacefulness, growing contentment. You find yourself able to bear hurt and to turn the other cheek. You are becoming kinder. You see a lowering of your defensiveness, a greater and greater honesty, a greater transparency, a more abundant kindness, a gentler spirit. And in the end a rich welcome into God's eternal kingdom. How do you get that kind of Christian life?

First of all, we need to see that God has provided for a great Christian life. Verses 3-4, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." Without God's power,

we have no hope of living an effective Christian life; no hope of knowing Jesus; no hope of responding to Christ. The Bible describes us before we are converted as “dead in our sins and trespasses.” Incapable of responding. Not just weak, dead. The notion that you could live an effective Christian life without the power of God is like trying to run a program on your computer when it is not plugged in. You can have the right software, all the right principles, but without power, without it being plugged in, forget it. And unless you are plugged into the source, you can forget about bearing fruit in your life.

We have God’s power. We have God’s promises. “Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises.” A promise to be with us. A promise of healing. A promise of forgiveness. A promise of heaven. “So that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

God’s provision includes his power, his promise, and our participation in the divine nature. We need to be careful here. Some people have gotten off with this into some kind of Eastern pantheism. Peter is not talking about believers sharing God’s essence. That we become little God’s on earth. That the essential nature of God oozes into us. These words have a long history and all he means is that by virtue of our spiritual link to Christ, we gain eternal life and incorruptibility.

God intends this great life. He elects us. He calls us. He provides for us power and promise and a spiritual link to him that preserves our human nature, but causes us to share in the gift of eternal life that comes from him and ends in a rich welcome into

God's eternal kingdom. So why are so many Christians living such ineffective, unfruitful, short-sighted, blind, amnesiac, swept along with the spirit of the age kind of Christian lives today? Why so many casualties? Why so much wreckage in the church?

I believe the essential problem in the church today is the absence of this little phrase in v. 5, "make every effort." "For this very reason, [and underline this little phrase] make every effort..." Some versions put it "with all diligence." The predominant view of the Christian life is what I call the magical, or automatic view of growth. It is the view that says, "So long as I have accepted Jesus, sometime ago I raised my hand and made some decision, then all the rest will automatically follow – effectiveness and fruitfulness, vision and the rich welcome into God's kingdom. Just accept Jesus and all the rest will follow automatically, magically. God has done everything, I just need to accept it and believe it. I am just going to wake up Thursday morning and am going to be changed. That is the way most people live the Christian life. They have this magical perspective. Growth just happens to you. Fruitfulness just happens. You are living this low-level mediocre life in the shadows and then you wake up one day and there is this breakthrough and you have this abundant life – fruitful, effective, a great marriage, great family.

When it doesn't happen that way when people receive Christ, they don't automatically get a fruitful, effective, abundant, rich life, then they say, "I tried Christianity and it just doesn't work for me. I wasn't anymore peaceful. I really didn't see myself overcoming my bad habits. I didn't see my marriage change. I tried it for a while, but it really didn't work." And so they walk away.

Or another group of people determines that it probably isn't even possible to have an abundant life, a real genuine, deep, growing knowledge of Christ. It is probably not possible, so I guess I will just fake it. I will just play the church game, if that is the game we are playing and I will live this totally double life, racked with guilt continually. There is a huge cleavage in my soul where I keep doing what I know God doesn't want me to do. I will just fake it.

The magical automatic view of the Christian life only produces failures, fakes and facades because we miss this phrase "make every effort." God has done everything from his side to provide us with what we need to live as Christians. But we must respond.

Now there is in Christianity a great confusion regarding the issue of grace and the demand for response. Some people believe that any call for response, for leaning in, for making an effort, is mixing works with grace. I love Richard Foster's helpful distinctions here between effort and works. Foster says, "Effort is not the opposite of grace. Works are." Works deal with merit or earning. Our effort regarding spiritual disciplines merely places us before God so that he can build kingdom righteousness in us.

How do we become more effective? How do we grow? How do we live as genuine disciples when the foundation has been eroded? Make every effort. I am not talking about trying harder. We are talking about training. We need of program not of trying, but of training. If there was a marathon in six months, it wouldn't matter how much you

tried to run it, if you didn't train, you would fail. We need some kind of a program, some kind of a process that trains us here in the Columbus Vineyard to live effective, fruitful Christian lives.

We need an effective method of producing disciples. This is something I've been working on with a team this whole year.

Let me show you what our process is going to be here in the Vineyard.

We see at the center of our Christian lives, Jesus Christ. We need Christ's divine power, his promises, our participation and relationship to his life. We are not going to get anywhere unless Christ is in the center of our being. Nothing that we do will affect any change in us unless Christ dwells in us by his Spirit.

Now, to live effectively, we need more than our own wisdom or some self-help books, or three steps to instant maturity. We need a deep knowledge of the scriptures. And so here in the Vineyard, we want to multiply the opportunities for you to know the Bible. And that is why we are site-licensed to teach Walk Thru the Bible. We are offering it quarterly – the Old Testament and the New Testament. And in the next year, small group leaders, I want you to make a commitment to take your small group to a Walk Thru the Bible Old Testament segment and a Walk Thru the Bible New Testament segment. Every person in this church needs to know the storyline of the Bible. In addition, we are multiplying Bible studies here.

We are not going to be able to live an effective Christian life alone. We can't live in a wrecked culture and succeed alone. We need deep, meaningful, accountable relationships with each other.

Last week Danny showed you a picture of this wheel. And the six segments of the wheel are borrowed from Richard Foster's book *Streams of Living Water* and a number of his other writings. We have altered some of the titles. But there are six ways, or traditions, in the history of the church regarding how people have sought to follow Christ. We believe that spiritual maturity involves all six of these dimensions. It involves having a compassionate life, a life in which you reach out to people in ministry, especially the poor. It involves being spiritually empowered, experiencing God's spirit and moving in spiritual gifts – prophecy, tongues, words of knowledge, healing, deliverance. It involves integrating your Christian life with your work life, your family life, your relationships with your extended family, your dating, your money management.

You cannot maturely follow Christ unless you are involved in Christ's mission in the world – to seek and to save that which is lost. So it involves the evangelistic life, sharing your faith locally and participating in global missions. The life of the disciple also involves growing in holiness, in bearing the fruit of the Spirit, overcoming sin patterns in your life. And finally, it involves the disciplined life. What I am talking about today.

In each area we are going to be offering classes to assist you by way of introduction to that particular area. We have core curriculum offered the 2nd Saturday of each month. But we are going to go beyond classes. We want to give you some hands on, life on life, experiences to move you toward maturity in each of the six ways that Christians have traditionally sought to follow Jesus. We want to take away the ceiling from Christian growth so that you don't feel like at age 40, "Well, I have arrived," but that there is a deeper knowledge of Christ and a greater imitation that you can have.

So, today I am talking about the disciplined life – this business of making every effort. You know in CS Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis describes a senior devil who is teaching his junior trainee devil about tempting people and defeating them. Screwtape, at one point, advises this junior devil Wormwood that one of the most effective ways of discrediting something good is to ruin the word, to introduce associations with the word that alter our feelings and our perceptions so that the word no longer works the way it was intended. You can ruin something really good by associating it with something really bad. Words have been ruined, along with everything else in our culture as I said before. Words have been wrecked – words like "Madonna." Who, when they hear the word "Madonna," immediately thinks about the Virgin Mary? Who thinks about purity, virginity, submission, yielding to God, servanthood? None of those things come to mind when you hear "Madonna."

There are so many good words that have been ruined. Words like "lover." It almost always means something sexual. So, mostly, does "love." The words "spiritual" and

“spirituality” more and more mean some kind of Eastern mysticism. The word “justify” is something that you do to the right margin of your paper. And the word “discipline” speaks to people about drudgery, about works, about trying harder.

Spiritual disciplines are the way that we place ourselves before God so that he can work in us the life of the kingdom. Spiritual disciplines are the effort we put in to place ourselves before God so that we can receive his transforming grace. Spiritual disciplines are the way we train for the marathon. It’s not by trying that we get God. It’s by training. We can have more or less of God. We can have more or less good character. We can have a better or worse marriage. We can have better or worse children. We can have more or less faith. We can move forward or backward. Disciplines are the way that you open your life up to a more fruitful life, a more effective, productive, alive form of Christianity.

Now, listen. The entire Christian church has a singular testimony through the ages regarding how people can get in touch with God. You can hack your way through the forest of life on your own and say to the entire history of the church, “You don’t know what you are talking about. I am going to find God on my own.” Or we can say, “You know the great saints like John Wesley, who had that rich welcome into God’s eternal kingdom, he knew something about the way to get in touch with God. And I am going to follow in those well-worn paths.” The way the church has laid it out. If you want to read more, go to the bookstore and pick up Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*.

Like how? Like prayer. If you are neglecting prayer, if you are not taking time to be with God or as I have been trying to encourage many of you to do, to get a little notebook and start writing out your prayers, or take a walk in the morning and pray – if you are neglecting prayer, you will not be effective or grow as a Christian.

You must immerse yourself in God's Word and get God inside of you. If you currently do not have a Bible reading plan and you are not regularly daily reading chunks of scriptures, a couple of chapters, and putting them into your life and heart – you will not grow. You will not live a distinctively different Christian life. It is an impossibility. That is why we have put out these Bible study guides for you.

Finally, one more discipline I want to mention is the discipline of solitude. In the crazy, hectic, driven environment that we live in, if you are not taking time alone in quiet – both daily and weekly – for an hour or two of quiet, just to read scripture or to meditate before God, you can't be effective. Practice the discipline of shutting off your radio in your car on your way to and from work. Don't demand more noise – more music, more news, more activity. You need quiet. Practice the discipline of not turning on your TV set when you are home alone or when you are with others. You need quiet. Practice the discipline of not popping in a CD.

Prayer, study, solitude. I am going to ask Small Group leaders to come forward. Any of you who are leading a ministry or group come forward. I am going to ask you to make two commitments:

1. A commitment to your own spiritual disciplines. You cannot lead in this church any longer if you will not maintain your own spiritual vitality. You must say, if you want to continue to lead, “I will give myself to the daily reading of God’s Word, to prayer, to solitude. I am not going to personally lead a fake and fraudulent Christian life and try to extol to others the beauty and benefits of Christianity.
2. That you will lead your group into the process that we are laying out here by committing yourself quarterly to as a group taking your group to one of the things offered each quarter. In two years you will go through our classes and then you can move on toward retreats, and some of the other offerings.