

“Spiritual Habits for Ordinary People - guidance”

Scripture: Exodus 13:17-22; Acts 15:12-28; Matthew 18:19-20

Graphics: map and compass, road signs

Big Truth: The people of the Panama UMC are called to seek the Lord and then move in the direction He leads.

Focus Phrase: Individual and corporate spiritual guidance prepares the body of Christ to move and serve for the Kingdom.

1. Introduction

- A. In 2012, our family took an epic trip across the country - 7,700 miles, 28 days, 20 states, and a whole lot of memories that we cherish to this day. Maybe you remember that. The trip was an incredible success!
- B. But, it didn't start out that way. No, it did not! In fact, this trip that was planned to go WEST, all the way to California and back had a VERY rocky start.
- C. See, we were so excited to leave after worship on that Sunday that we all got in the car, prayed, pulled out of the drive way, went north on North Street, got to Route 86, and took the first right, onto the highway, off we went on our adventure out west!
- D. Now, you may be thinking, “What’s not good about that?” Well, if you go north from Panama and take the first right onto the highway, you aren’t going WEST at all. You’re going EAST!
- E. The first turn on our trip out west was a wrong turn. It wasn’t until we got a mile down the road that we all, together, said, “Why are we going east!?!?”
- F. So...get to the next exit, turn around, and head in the RIGHT direction. West.
- G. For the rest of the trip, we all agreed that we would navigate TOGETHER. That we would listen and agree where to go, where to stay, where to eat, what to see. Epic trip...for all the younger parents here, I recommend doing something like that when your kids are in high school.
- H. We have so many maps, and such advanced GPSs...we have compasses, and road signs...and YET, sometimes we go the wrong way or don’t listen to that little voice that says, “Turn here!” or “Go that way!”
- I. In order to get where we’re going, we need guidance. If it’s on the road, that’s our maps and GPS. **If it’s in our lives as followers of Jesus, guidance comes from the Holy Spirit, from God’s Word, and from the community of believers around us, also in-tune with the Holy Spirit.**
- J. And just like the fact that we need to know how to read a map and compass, or program an address into our GPS, we also need to learn how to use listen and

respond to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit - both individually and corporately.

- K. Our final spiritual habit for ordinary people is the **spiritual habit of guidance**. Allowing ourselves, as a church and as members of a church who follow Jesus, to be spiritually guided prepares the whole body to move and serve in the direction God is calling us. And when the church moves together in Kingdom work, people get saved and lives are transformed for God's glory.
- L. Building a habit of guidance also keeps us from going in the wrong directions, wasting time and resources, and having to backtrack.
- M. I'll give us a bigger recap of this spiritual habits series at the end, but we've been building a habit of prayer, a habit of study, a habit of simplicity, and a habit of service. I have been praying that each one of us has taken the opportunities that God has given to us these past few weeks, to build these habits...and to KEEP building them.
- N. Today, we're going to the Old Testament Book of Exodus to begin, and then we'll find out what Jesus has to say, along with an example from the early church on how guidance works.
- O. Let's **PRAY** first, though!
- P. Let's go to Exodus 13. At this point in history, the people of Israel had been rescued by God's hand out of slavery in Egypt. They were out in the desert wilderness and they began to wonder what was next. God's answer was pretty simple: "I will guide you."
- Q. Verse 17...

2. Scripture

A. **READ Exodus 13:17-22**

- B. And, from then on, and throughout the rest of the book of Exodus, God guided the people, showing them all He wanted...giving them the 10 Commandments, asking them to build the Tabernacle for worship and prayer.
- C. The people didn't have to worry about where to go next or what to do because they had faith that God was guiding them.
- D. They didn't always make the right decisions. They did complain and grumble and wonder what God was thinking. But, God was faithful to guide them. And when the people were listening and praying and worshiping, they heard from the Lord and responded.
- E. John Wesley wrote, "And they who make the glory of God their end, and the word of God their rule, the spirit of God the guide of their affections, and the providence of God the guide of their affairs, may be confident that the Lord goes before them, as truly as he went before Israel in the wilderness, though

not so sensibly. They had sensible effects of God's going before them in this pillar." (Notes 13:21)

- F. I'm sort of jealous of the people of Israel...especially right now? They had a very tangible 'effect' (as Wesley says) in that they knew where to go.
- G. The pillar stood still? So did they. The pillar moved? So did they.
- H. Unfortunately, the people of Israel gradually stopped looking for God's guidance directly. By the time we get to 1 and 2 Kings, we see a nation - a people - that wanted to be guided, not by God himself, but by rulers who they trusted were listening to and being guided by God.
- I. In reality, some were and some weren't. Some did what seemed right in their OWN eyes...what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.
- J. Then, for 400 years, God was silent, even though there remained a remnant of Jewish people who were faithful to the One True God.
- K. Then, at the right time, Jesus came - born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified died and was buried, descended to the dead, rose on the third day, ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
- L. And Jesus had **two main missions for the world**:
 - i. one was for **salvation** - that you and I and all who believe in him and the aspects of the creed I just recited would have everlasting life. Death and sin is defeated! The King is alive! And so shall we be!
 - ii. But, the other mission is to give His followers **vocation**. Not VACATION, but vocation - the gift of a task. What to DO to honor Jesus for His salvation and give glory to God for His love. Salvation requires a response.
- M. One of the challenges of the Christian life is to know, confidently - as confidently as the Israelites in the wilderness being guided by cloud and fire - to know confidently what God is calling us to do - as a church, and as individuals.
- N. Jesus gave us a clue in Matthew 18:19-20 when he said, "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."
- O. Look, if Jesus is sitting with any group of two or more while asking for guidance for some decision or ministry or problem, Jesus assures us that He is in on the process. No crystal balls. No tea leaves. Jesus! Jesus is praying for us. Jesus is giving us the wisdom. Jesus is ready to show us the pillar of fire and cloud.
- P. Once we've prayed, and we get a sense of discernment, then, let's do THAT!

- Q. How? Well, after Jesus went back to being seated at the right hand of the Father, He sent the Holy Spirit to guide us.
- i. Jesus promised in John 16:13, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”
 - ii. Or, in John 14:26, Jesus said, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”
 - iii. **Our pillar of fire and cloud is the Holy Spirit.** As surely as the pillars guided the people of Israel in the wilderness, the Holy Spirit guides us as we seek spiritual, moral, and ministry direction.
- R. The early church put this into practice. First, in Acts 13, the church was doing its thing, teaching and worshiping. Acts 13:2-3 tells us, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”
- S. Guidance came when they prayed and worshiped and fasted TOGETHER.
- T. Then, later in Acts 15, when a disagreement arose in the church about circumcision. Some claimed (Acts 15:1), “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”
- i. Well, that started a huge discussion and debate.
 - ii. So Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss this and discern what the right decision was.
 - iii. In Jerusalem, ““After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’ The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.”
 - iv. They sought the Lord together, came to a grace-filled decision, and then moved together into that new reality.

3. Application

- A. I've been a pastor long enough to have seen the process of decision-making in the church be everything from an all-human effort with no invitation for divine guidance...to a full-on God-inspired, can-only-be-the-work-of-the-Holy-Spirit-transforming-us work. There's a stark difference.
- B. I count our CenterPoint project in the latter category. Sometimes, when the vision and dream are too big for human effort, that's when God shakes us to the core of our faith and we MUST trust him. We prayed and prayed, and even when we weren't sure we were headed in the right direction, God would throw up a pillar of fire or cloud and we would keep moving. We keep moving, even now, as we work to pay off the mortgage and increase the use of this new ministry space for the community.
- C. Our Growth and Vision Team continuously seeks to hear from God the vision for the next move. After the CenterPoint project was underway, we began asking, "What's the next wildly important goal?" "What do you want now, God?" That's a scary and unsettling question to ask...but it's a question that every church, every ministry team, and every person IN the church MUST ask.
- D. Our intentional discipleship process was the answer to that request for guidance. And we're committed to building church that's increasing in a life of worship, a life of community, a life of openness, a life of obeying, a life of serving, and a life of sharing.
- E. Richard Foster writes this in his chapter on the spiritual habit of guidance, "In our day, heaven and earth are on tiptoe waiting for the emergence of a Spirit-led, Spirit-intoxicated, Spirit-empowered people. All of creation watches expectantly for the springing up of a disciplined, freely gathered, martyr people who know in this life the life and power of the kingdom of God. It has happened before. It can happen again." (p175)
- F. We're praying for a new awakening in the Christian Church. We're praying for God to throw up a pillar of fire and cloud - for God to guide us more and more so that we'll lovingly give people the opportunity to believe in and follow Jesus. To be those Spirit-led, Spirit-intoxicated, Spirit-empowered people who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.
- G. But how do we, as a team, build a spiritual habit of guidance?
- H. First, we must understand that there are different forms of spiritual guidance... or different **sources** of guidance.
 - i. It starts with prayer for discernment - we begin to build a habit of spiritual guidance from the Holy Spirit when we start all our decisions and ministries with prayer for the Holy Spirit's indwelled presence. And this goes for every ministry and every decision. So often, we dive into the solutions and half-way someone will ask, "Hey, did we pray about this?"

- ii. Spirit-led Preaching is another source of individual and corporate guidance - when the Word of God is clearly and unapologetically read and expounded, then the guiding presence of God can steer us and empower us.
 - iii. Small groups and ministry teams are vehicles through which we can receive guidance. The more we meet together for the purpose of listening and responding, the more we get in the habit of being guided.
 - iv. Bible study and scripture reading outside the context of corporate worship gives us the opportunity to hear God's direction.
- I. Those are some of the sources of guidance. What are some thing to try, as teams, groups, and a church, to build a habit of guidance?
- i. First, **come together** as often as possible for guidance. No matter what it is that brings you together with others, or what is the task at hand, be present together in mind, body, and spirit. I know that's been the most challenging part of this COVID pandemic. Yet, we've continued to come together online, in-person, on the phone, and other ways. Coming together isn't always being present physically, but IS ALWAYS being together, spiritually.
 - ii. Then, when you come together, **seek the Lord**. Always start by inviting the Holy Spirit to be present together with those gathered. Maybe it's 2-3 people. Maybe a congregation. Start with the expectant prayer of invitation. Truly seek the Lord and the guidance will come.
 - iii. And, as a Team, **know the mission**. In order to know what to pray, we need to know our mission. For us, we are to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. All we do - all we seek to be guided in - must be about making disciples for Christ...to transform the world into God's kingdom realities. Agree together every time you come together that the mission is central...and it was given to us by Jesus himself.
 - iv. Finally, **wait until you hear from the Lord, then move**. Be patient. Be watchful. Be ready to decide and move. And once we've moved, be ready to adjust to the next course correction as the pillar moves and shifts.
- J. There are key decisions that have been made over the past 6 months about closing down and restarting ministries. There will be critical decisions in the next 2 years in the United Methodist Church on which we will need guidance. There are new opportunities to love others in our communities, new people to reach, and new decisions to take to the Lord.
- K. Corporate guidance doesn't take the place of the need for solid leadership. But it does require leaders who are ready to bring people together before the Lord to pray, seek Him, know the mission, and wait on His timing.
- L. Spiritual guidance prepares the body of Christ to move and serve for the Kingdom coming.

4. Conclusion

- A. We started this series by offering this definition: A habit is an acquired mode of behavior that has become nearly or completely involuntary.
- B. I asked you to name 4-5 habits that you do every day, to which I got a few blank stares. I pray that now, or soon, you won't think of prayer, study, simplicity, service, or guidance as things you have to concentrate on doing because they've become part of your habits, every day.
 - i. Keep praying, to change our hearts to be like God's
 - ii. Keep studying, to change our lives to look like Jesus.
 - iii. Simplify, and find that Jesus is all we need.
 - iv. Keep serving, to humble ourselves and find joy and peace.
 - v. Seek guidance, to move forward knowing that God goes before us.
- C. And, if God is FOR us, who can be against us, Paul says in Romans 8:31.
- D. Dallas Willard stated, "The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included in that community as prime minister and most glorious inhabitant."
- E. Richard Foster wrote, "Such a community lives under the immediate and total rulership of the Holy Spirit. They are a people blinded to all other loyalties by the splendor of God, a compassionate community embodying the law of love as seen in Jesus Christ. They are an obedient army of the Lamb of God living under the Spiritual Disciplines, a community in the process of total transformation from the inside out, a people determined to live out the demands of the gospel in a secular world. They are tenderly aggressive, meekly powerful, suffering, and overcoming. Such a community, cast in a rare and apostolic mold, constitutes a new gathering of the people of God. May almighty God continue to gather such people in our day." (p189)
- F. Imagine such a church...may it start right here. Pray. Study. Simplify. Serve. Seek Guidance.
- G. Let's pray...