Some Disciplines of the Christian Life 3 / 4

The Disciplines of Fellowship

Introduction

- Reaching the potential of life on a team is impossible without a life of discipline in the Holy Spirit.
- Just as I am under personal discipline, there needs to be a certain amount of discipline in each other's lives. This seems threatening but is absolutely crucial.
- If we don't know the disciplines of fellowship, a great gap will appear in our lives. These disciplines are indispensable if we are to be ***"Pure and blameless for the day of Christ"***. (Phil. 1:10)

  [Blameless in Greek *'eilikrines'* has the root meaning of being tested by sunlight. If an earthenware vessel was cracked in the kiln, an unscrupulous potter would fill the crack with wax and then try and sell it. The wise purchaser would take the vessel out of the shop and test it by looking into the pot in clear sunlight. If we are to be "without wax" we need team!]
- We will sell ourselves short if we aren't prepared to engage in the disciplines of fellowship.

There are five areas I would like to cover:

1. Affirmation – learning to affirm others
2. Exhortation *('parakleo')* – the discipline of iron sharpening iron
3. Correction
4. Submission
5. Expulsion

The discipline of affirmation

We are to be in the business of affirming one another. This is very important. We know how true this is in bringing up children. Parents go to enormous lengths to affirm their child as he or she takes their first steps. The parents are delighted, beaming with smiles and clapping hands. Why? It is built into us that babies need affirmation. We tend to forget that adults also need affirmation as much as children. The whole of the Bible is God affirming the human race, demonstrating His love and His care and our value to Him. The Father affirmed the Lord Jesus at His baptism in Jordan. ***"This is My Beloved Son in who I am well pleased."***

One of the disciplines of fellowship is that we must learn to affirm one another. Most of us are not very good at this! We either ignore one another or we flatter one another. We need a genuine discipline of affirmation. When you have done well, you need to be told you have done well. This is the primary way we encourage one another. It is the way we give value and dignity to one another. It is one of the disciplines of fellowship.

The discipline of exhortation *('parakleo')*

This is the discipline of encouraging by coaching each other. It is ***"iron sharpening iron"***. (Prov. 27:17) A coach guides and encourages you. A coach motivates you to keep going and to keep improving. It is so important that we should be in relationships where we are coaching each other as disciples of the Lord Jesus. We should be exhorting one another. We are not so much correcting one another as egging one another on.

Emerson said, *"Every man is as lazy as he dares to be."* We all need those around us who are encouraging us on our way, coaching us and exhorting us.

In order for this to happen well, we have to be open about areas of our lives in which we are evidently not doing so well. We need to talk about areas where we are afraid or not doing so well or even failing. We need to avoid all areas of pretence in relationships with others on the

team. If you are coaching others, always walk in the light with them about your own struggles. Mutual accountability is of very great value. Exhort without harsh judgment or a critical spirit.

The discipline of correction – 1 Cor. 4:14-21

Correction or admonishment is less positive than affirmation and exhortation. But you can only correct each other if you have already affirmed and coached. This is seen most clearly in family life. You can only correct a child effectively if the child knows that you love them deeply. Correction doesn't go anywhere if it is out of the context of love. Make sure that if you have to correct a team member, you also increase the affirmation. If you are a person who is always positive, coaching, affirming and encouraging others, then you have a right to be a bit negative from time to time.

Notice Paul writing to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 4:14, ***"I don't write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children"***. We are never in the business of shaming a brother or sister. But we are to **warn** each other in the context of love. For the most part the Corinthians knew that Paul loved them and this gave him the right to warn them. So the context of admonishment is good relationships and in 1 Corinthians Paul went on to say a great deal about what was wrong with them – effective admonishment in the context of love.

"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we might present everyone mature in Christ." (Col. 1:28)

So if I'm not willing to be corrected, I will never reach maturity as a believer. If we don't come under the disciplines of fellowship, we won't know anything of loyalty and commitment to one another and our team/fellowship will never reach maturity and effectiveness. It is absolutely necessary for affirmation and exhortation to be in place for us to be able to correct each other. But still it is awfully hard to do! Sometimes cautiously and gently we try to correct a brother or sister and find it ferociously hard to do! Why? Because we are not used to these levels of loyalty and commitment to each other! Team members take offence so easily. Are you 'prickly'? Are you open to correction? If not, then you are only shadowboxing in your ministry.

In general, people don't take correction because their relationships are too fragile. But without the discipline of correction we will never be ***"complete in Christ"***. So it is really very important that love, loyalty, commitment and submission are worked out in our relationships. The New Testament is very practical – my love for the "head" (The Lord Jesus) is to be demonstrated by my love and concern for the "body". So we can't privatise our relationship with the Lord Jesus and be fair to His teaching. We are in the "body" together and we can't contract out **and** still be ***"mature in Christ"***.

You will have no spiritual authority unless you come under authority. As you learn to appreciate the disciplines of fellowship, you will grow in spiritual authority. Sadly, the discipline of correction has frequently been abused in the history of the church. But just because the enemy has polluted it, warped it and distorted it – usually for power and money – this gives us no excuse to neglect it! We will never survive effectively without it. I need you and you need me! Teaching, seminars and reading are all very good, but they are not sufficient! There has to be correction.

To make it easy for others to correct you, you need to go to the others and say, *"I am struggling in this area of my life and I give you for permission to correct me if you notice any ways I am falling short"*. This sort of statement is very helpful, because then they know that **they** can watch over your life in the area you have specified and help you improve.

The discipline of submission

This is the discipline on the 'other side' of correction. We should correct others, but we ourselves need to be submissive.

A great model of the discipline of submission is given to us in the life of Jacob – particularly Genesis 32. Look at Genesis 32:22-24: Jacob is wrestling with someone he thought was a man for half the night. Then finally he realises that he is wrestling with God! And this is so often our problem. We **think** we are wrestling with people – officials and even friends. But in the end we

find we are wrestling with God. Jacob spent his early life thinking that he was wrestling with man – Esau, Laban and so on – but actually he was wrestling with God. What are you wrestling with – a different culture, company policy, your leader? So often our perception is that it is someone else's fault, but behind it all is the issue of our submission to God.

In verse 25 it says, ***"When the angel saw that he did not prevail against Jacob"***. [Notice it doesn't say 'could not prevail'.] Jacob was tough, strong, clever and unsubmissive. We read, ***"He touched his hip joint and Jacob's hip was put out of joint ..."***. The source of Jacob's strength was symbolised by the hip joint – the joint that is the strongest in the human body. If you keep on fighting God, it may be that God will have to touch the source of your strength – whatever it is – before you will submit to Him.

In v. 26-28 Jacob is submissive and subdued, **but he is not passive**. "***I will not let you go unless you bless me."*** Submission is not passivity. That is a lie from Satan. Jacob gets a new name. Humanly speaking he had not prevailed at all. Laban cheated him (remember the story of Leah and Rachel). Esau was threatening him. An Angel had crippled him. He had been a loser of all the way. **But God says he prevailed** (v. 28). The place of submission is the place of prevailing. When you finally say, *"I can't cope! I can't cope with this language, this people, this project, this company etc."* God says, *"Finally now you will start to prevail!"* At the point that you say, *"I have lost, Lord"* , God says, *"No! Now you can begin to win!"*

The place of submission is the place of victory.

Then, as the sun rose (v. 29-32) and a new day began, Jacob had a new name. No longer was he a cheater, a supplanter and a manipulator! He had a new vision. He had seen the face of God and now he was a prince! Now he walked in a new way in submission to his Lord!

Submission is a crucial area in church and team life, but it is a difficult area to get right. Godly submission is a beautiful thing that brings the fragrance of Christ into our relationships. For this reason, throughout church history, the enemy has repeatedly distorted it. Submission has a great capacity to help us grow spiritually. It is an imperishable jewel in God's sight and very precious. (1 Pet. 3:4) If we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit, it is as indispensable as worship and thanksgiving. (Eph. 5:18-21) It is vital for true spirituality and a lack of it exposes our shallowness and unreality.

Four reasons why submission is vital

1. **The place of submission is the place of protection**.

   We are spiritually vulnerable unless we are inwardly submissive. ***"Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft."*** (1 Sam. 15:23) simply because rebellion places us outside the umbrella of God's protection in the same way as practising the occult does. Rebellion is the foundation of Satan's kingdom. So unless I am in submission to brothers and sisters who love me and care for me, I will be alone and cut off in enemy territory!

2. **The place of submission is the place of liberation**.

   Romans 7:1-6 speaks about spiritual emancipation. When I submit, I die to **my** ideas, to **my** way of doing things, to **my** stubbornness, but my spirit is gloriously released! Death of this sort is usually very painful. To refuse to endlessly justify and defend myself is to die. But in losing our lives, we find them.

3. **The place of submission is the place of authority**. (Mt. 8:9)

   Only those who are in submission and under authority can effectively exercise authority. My spiritual authority is in proportion to my yieldedness to the headship of Jesus in my life. The reality of my submission to the headship of Jesus in my life will be evidenced by my submission to the 'body' – i.e. to each other. It is a very visible thing.

   We must have this spiritual authority. The Lord Jesus calls us to be those who lay hold of the Kingdom forcefully. (Mt. 11:12) But aggression without submission is always destructive. On the other hand, aggression flowing out of mutual submission defeats the satanic powers and advances the Kingdom of God.

4. **The place of submission is the place of reality**.

The glory of the New Covenant is that we can all hear the Lord for ourselves. No special priests need to enquire for us! But hearing the Lord ourselves doesn't negate the necessity of submitting our personal guidance to the wisdom of the corporate body. Not to do so is pride, independence and spiritual arrogance. We need to be submissive enough to hear God's voice through other people.

The old monastic vows still have something to say to us - the vow of poverty, the vow of chastity and the vow of **obedience**. We do want to live simply even though we don't want to take vows of poverty. We do want to be pure even if we don't want to be celibate. We do want to be submissive even though we may not take a vow of obedience to a person.

For too long we have privatised our faith in the Lord Jesus. We are committed to a relationship of submission to one another. We will be stronger and more resilient if we learn more about the security of mutual submission.

Some dangers and excesses in submission

- **Heavy handedness by leaders**

  It is common to see an overreaction to ***"everyone doing what is right in his own eyes"***. (Judges 21:25) In trying to redress the balance, some leaders have become authoritarian and overbearing. The balance is not easy to achieve. Any parent knows how hard it is to get the balance right between exercising too little discipline and exercising too much. One produces insecurity and the other immaturity. It is equally or more difficult with adults – especially in cross-cultural situations. So leaders need to be strong enough to enable the team to feel secure, but not to be overbearing. Submission imposed produces people that are cowed and spiritually deformed.

- **Passivity is not submission**

  It isn't one-sided, but mutual. Sarah is an example of submission, but there is nothing at all servile about this woman who, together with her husband, was a pioneer and the progenitor of a new people. (1 Pet. 3:6) In Gen. 21:12, Abraham is told by God to obey Sarah. Moses was commended for his meekness and submission to God, but there wasn't a gram of passivity in him and his anger could still burn.

  Passivity is a dreadful disease that produces spiritual paralysis. Sonship degenerates into slavery. We lose our courage and our ability to initiate new things. We are to submit to God, but resist the devil! So our submission is militant! We have laid down our weapons and surrendered to the Lord Jesus. Now we take them up again to fight the evil one.

- **Submission is not blind**

  The Scriptures have often been misused. – One example is Paul's teaching that we should be ***"subject to the governing authorities".*** (Rom. 13:1) This has been distorted so we no longer have a prophetic voice to governments. In another case, women – under the cloak of submission – have been relegated to second-class citizens in the church.

  The Kingdom of God has come! It is good news for the poor. It is freedom to the captives and it is elevation of the powerless.

  In Eph. 5:2 Paul gives us the reason for submission, ***"Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ"***. What does this mean? Jesus walked in submission to the Father and so it is a principle for us, as followers of the Lord Jesus, to live in submission to one another. Joyfully we submit to:

  - ✓ Jesus as Lord
  - ✓ The authority of Scripture
  - ✓ Mutual accountability to one another

Testing our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus

These are six common areas:

1. Do I submit when my way of doing a project is questioned by others? Or do I have to get my own way at all costs? Submission means that you lay down the terrible burden of always getting your own way!

2. Do I submit graciously when an unexpected demand is placed upon my time? Am I living in "rest"? Or does every interruption frustrate me? We need good time management, but it is easy to inflate our estimation of the value of our own time. God will often test your submission to His will with interruptions you would gladly do without!

3. Do you joyfully submit to the legitimate demands of your family – submission to the responsibilities of being a spouse, a parent and a grandparent? This is crucial to spiritual development. Too many workers never advance in spiritual maturity and effectiveness because they neglect these responsibilities. In their proper place, bedtime stories and football games are the gateway to spiritual growth.

4. Do you joyfully submit when someone else gets credit for what you have done or when you get the blame for what others have done? There are times when we know that to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit is to keep quiet. The need to justify ourselves and explain everything is overwhelming and it is of the flesh.

5. Do you submit without resentment when someone else is chosen for a task that you had hoped to do? As we refuse to covet the gifts of others and as we rejoice in their successes, we put ourselves in the place of spiritual rest and this facilitates the release of our own unique gifting.

6. Do you submit your possessions and finances joyfully to the Lord? Do you regularly give 'stuff' away? If you find it difficult, you have revealed an area of your life that needs to come under the Lordship of Jesus. Financial liberality often gives spiritual liberation. Sometimes we find submission in the area of **receiving** harder than submission in the area of giving!

Once we were all oppressed by the evil one. Now we are joint heirs of the Kingdom and we can experience the emancipating freedom of mutual submission that is the hallmark of an effective ministry.

The discipline of expulsion

When a person refuses correction and refuses to submit to any of the disciplines of fellowship and because they are in overt sin, then they have to be asked to leave. We have policies in our company regarding this situation and they are wise and fair and need to be adhered to.