Discipline & Grace

Christopher Neethling 9 November 2021

This article is a plea to the church to do the basics well, such as the disciplines of the daily reading of the Bible, prayer, community life and fellowship. We once assumed that these disciplines were part of the everyday life of a Christian, but we can no longer assume this. In fact, we need to recover and renew these disciplines. But first, how did we get to this place?

Grace & Law

Christianity is a religion of grace, not law. For Christians, this means that your relationship with God is not measured on your performance or how you keep up with His commandments, but rather that you rest on grace. The Christian acknowledges their inability to keep God's law and instead put their trust in Jesus for a relationship with God the Father. It is only because of grace that we can have a relationship with God.

As an elder, I see the tendency to 'perform' for God every day. I see it in myself first, and then I see it in the lives of the people I get to pastor. In the last few decades, there has been a strong emphasis globally on the message that God loves us and that we don't have to win His approval. Worship sets resound with songs of God's love and favour over His people; best-selling Christian books over the last decade also prove this point.

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With God, truth always comes in tension. In other words, one aspect of truth can never stand alone. There is always a tension that helps us not to run away with one truth while neglecting another. For example, if every Sunday’s worship setlist is just about God’s love for us, we will reinforce only that one truth (or aspect) of God. This can result in us running away from God. God’s love doesn’t and cannot stand alone. God is also Holy, Righteous and Just and there are many things He dislikes very much. In this example, we have only been exposed to one of the core truths of God. And the truth has been brought in isolation. The result is a ‘baby church’; one that refuses to grow up, because it only wants to sit back and receive, without any responsibility.

The over-emphasis on God’s love, I believe, has been a reaction to something that has been happening in the West. Over the last few decades, the West has become increasingly anti-God, anti-church and especially anti-Christian. God has been perceived as an angry headmaster licking his lips in anticipation of punishing all of the disobedient. With this, the church realised it had to do something or face a mass exodus. They then turned to one of their core truths, the love of God, to stop this mass exodus and with the hope of attracting those on the outside to come in. The church started proclaiming that God is Love, with great success, but the problem is that the church emphasised this truth in isolation, instead of in tension with the full character and nature of God.

The Love of My Parents

I grew up knowing that my parents loved me and that they were there for me. They have always wanted my best, and I have never questioned their love. I even distinctly remember very unpleasant moments, where I was disobedient towards them or did something nasty. Yet, today, as I reflect on my childhood, I see those moments of discipline as tokens of love.

“And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” – Hebrews 12:5-11 (ESV)

As I grew up into a man, my parents loved me, but this love was not a love in isolation. There was also discipline and the responsibility that went with it. When I stepped outside of their boundaries, there were consequences and some form of punishment. Discipline and responsibility do not stand in opposition to love; they uphold it.

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Soldier, Athlete, Farmer

"Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything." – 2 Timothy 2:3-7 (ESV)

The Christian walk is compared to many things in the Bible. In this passage, it is compared to being a soldier, an athlete and a farmer. Ask anyone who has served in the army, and they'll tell you all about discipline – it is the intense training a soldier is required to go through to be ready for battle. And consider the life of any successful athlete. Recently I watched an excellent documentary about Michael Jordan (MJ) called The Last Dance. There is no doubt that MJ is one of the most gifted basketball players ever, but after watching this documentary, it was clear to see his intense self-discipline and commitment. Now, also go and join a farmer hard at work for a week, and you'll quickly see what discipline is.

To believe that being disciplined in committing one's life to the Lord in Bible reading, prayer and gathering with the saints is contrary to grace is a grave misunderstanding. I love what John Stott says;

"What many people call the daily 'quiet times', first thing in the morning and last thing at night, are an indispensable necessity for the Christian who wants to make progress. We are all busy nowadays, but we must somehow rearrange our priorities in order to make time for this. It will mean rigorous self-discipline, but granted this, together with a legible Bible and an alarm clock that works, we are well on the road to victory." – John Stott: Basic Christianity

Paul also writes about grace as something that empowered him to work harder and to do more.

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." – 1 Corinthians 15:10 (ESV)

This is where we need to keep the tension. We are not Christians because we are disciplined (that is called performance), but we are disciplined because we are Christians (that is called grace).

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