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## **Ordinary Radical Practices**

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We're going to talk today about what we will be calling in this little series, "Ordinary Radical Practices." We will be looking at the early church, the historical church and scripture, studying practices that help us in our spiritual formation. Today we are going to be talking about the practice of fasting. Fasting is actually often misunderstood and can be confusing as we approach it.

Today I'm going to set the context for this study as we seek to encourage a life of self-discipline and self-obedience in our own living. In order to do that, we're going to start by considering a passage in the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah, beginning with the third verse. Listen for the Word of the Lord.

*Isaiah 58: 3-10*

*'Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,  
and oppress all your workers.  
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.  
Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?*

*Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;*

*your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

Now in the New Testament, we're looking at the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, looking at the sixteenth through the eighteenth verses. Now Matthew five, six, and seven are the Sermon on the Mount. A large crowd gathers at the Sea of Galilee and Jesus begins to teach them. In essence, these three chapters are Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God and how we are called to live into it, even now.

In the sixth chapter, Jesus approaches or attacks the understanding of righteousness. It's interesting how he does this. Righteousness, at the time of Jesus, had come to be understood as piety. There were basically three forms of piety for our Hebrew ancestors. The first was almsgiving (caring for the poor), particularly exhibited by worshipers, entering the temple, throwing coins to the poor gathered outside the temple gate. The second act of piety was prayer. Indeed, just a few verses above this we see Jesus giving us the Lord's Prayer, or the "Model Prayer," as some call it. And then the third was the practice of fasting. We'll talk about fasting in a moment, but these three forms of piety had become, in a sense, synonymous with righteousness. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is challenging that.

Listen again for the Word of our Lord.

*Matthew 6: 16-18*

*And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

That's the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I was away this week, Monday through Friday, at Atlanta. I was at a gathering, like a conference. There are about twenty of us who have been doing this a few weeks after Easter for ten years now. There are always a few that come that are new and a few who aren't able to make it. It is a wonderful time to get together. There are a number of clergy and a number of lay leaders, folks from around the world. It is always a great, great time for me.

I had an interesting thing happen to me this year around. I had been there for a couple of days and I led a morning workshop. After the workshop was over, a woman who had never been there before came up to me and said, "Do you have a second?"

I said, "Yeah."

And she said, "I need to make a confession."

I said, "Ok."

She looked at me and she said, "I have been watching you for the last two days and I had you pegged for... (now, I can't repeat the word

she had me pegged for but I'm always reminded that Paul says that there is some parts of the body that are worthy of more honor, that have more clothing and all – so that might be a clue for you. ) She had me pegged for something that wasn't particularly nice, but she said, "After you talked, I came to realize that you might be ok."

I came away with that. It was actually a really important experience for me because I have been working at this season in my life, reflecting on how I'm understood. It has taken me a long time, and I have learned that it is not what we say, it's what people hear us saying that really matters. It is not the way we think we come across, it is the way we actually come across that really matters. It is only our reflecting on ourselves and having people mirror that back to us that really helps us. So over the next couple of days, during the quiet time that I had between gatherings, I spent time in prayer trying to reflect on what her remarks really meant. I spoke to a couple of others about what that meant and they said, "Well, it's the swagger you have." - there again, not a compliment.

And I began to think about "the swagger." It goes way back. It goes back long in my life, at least to the first grade. I remember when I was in first grade in Miami, Florida I lived a couple of blocks from the school. Over the weekends all the kids in the neighborhood would go to the playground at the school. We would just play and hang out.

One Saturday morning, I went down to the playground and there was nobody there. It surprised me. It was beautiful weather; a great day. I heard some noise and I realized that it was coming from my first grade classroom. It was on an elongated wing of the school. I walked over to my classroom. Now, in Miami at the time we didn't air condition much and so all the windows could be cranked up and down. You can't see in when it's closed but you can when it's open. Well, the windows were open which was unusual for a Saturday. I realized that there was a birthday party going on in my classroom. As

quickly as I could I scanned the room. Most of my first grade class were at the party. The mom of the child having the birthday saw me, and she came over to the window and she turned and closed it. I still remember that feeling.

Here's my point. I walked away from that window with the intent of developing a swagger that was going to say, "Nobody and nothing is ever gonna get to me again."

Now, I want to be clear. I deserved not being at that party. I was not the kid you wanted at your child's birthday party. I deserved it, but at that moment I made a conscious decision to own that behavior, to put on the swagger and be the tough, rowdy - whatever I was. I owned it.

Have you ever owned something that ultimately ended up owning you? The truth is we all have. I suspect, for most of you, it hasn't lasted as long as it has in my life, but we all have. We all know what it is like, in some way, to end up putting on a face, to cover ourselves, to protect or guard ourselves, to keep ourselves invisible, undetectable – whatever it might be. We own certain things, certain ways, certain faces, that ultimately end up owning us.

So at the time of Jesus, the face that began to own the people was the face of religiosity; the face of being pious, the face of being holier than thou. It became a way not to orient ourselves toward God but to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the sinners of the world. So when Jesus is speaking about this understanding of righteousness in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, he is looking at the three practices of piety that were originally intended to be focused on a relationship with God. It was intended to be something that strengthened us to be better than who we were and how we lived together. By Jesus' time, though, it had become this way of distinguishing ourselves from others. We thought that by throwing to the beggars coins more valuable than others' coins, we could show

that we were more pious than they because of our generosity. We began to pray in ways that were great, glorified, memorized, fantastical prayers. Not only that, but we always seemed to pray our prayers in front of other people so that they could think, “Oh, look at how she prays!”

I’m not sure these practices have been totally vacated in our world today.

And then, the practice of fasting; the only time we are required to fast in the Old Testament is the Day of Atonement, as a people. But in the Old Testament there is also the understanding that there were times when we needed to seek repentance before God. We needed to feel a presence of God and we needed to come before him. We did so in ways like sackcloth and ashes. We would come before God with our bodies covered in ashes and wear sackcloth that was intended to humble, to lower ourselves. We did this so that when we came to God, he could speak to us. He could give us a vision of hope and a promise. By the time of Jesus, pious people would walk around with all this sackcloth and ashes all over them so everyone could see and judge.

“Look at how pious he is.”

“Look at how religious she is.”

Jesus says that this is just missing the point. Your religiosity has moved you away from God. You are just seeking to impress others. All the while, this religiosity – this misunderstanding of fasting – has become so bizarre that it has actually made us more self-centered. It has withdrawn us. The energy that fasting brings to us has gone away from our relationship with God into simple self-promoting.

“Look at me. Look at how holy I am. Look at how spiritual I am.”

Someone taught me an amazing thing when I was away this week. I wanted to share it with everyone this morning. It was really an interesting thing for me; the idea that there are different types of emotions. I don't like the word "emotion." It's not a great word for me for a lot of reasons, but I'm not going there today. I am just going to say that there are different types of emotions. There are emotions that add and emotions that subtract. There are emotions that we have in our life that actually cause us to lose energy. They drain us. They overwhelm us over time.

Sadness, anger, fear, depression, guilt

Guilt is the next to the most draining emotion that we can have. The most depleting is shame. Guilt and shame are closely connected. You feel guilty for what you have done; you feel ashamed for who you are. Shame is the most wearing, denigrating, painful emotion that one can have.

Now, there are positive emotions. They are emotions that feed us. We gain something from them. They empower and encourage us. What would be the most filling of all of the emotions that we could have?

Love

Love is the second most fulfilling emotion that one can experience. There is an emotion, actually, that the studies say is even more fulfilling than love itself. That is the emotion of joy. These emotions are positive emotions. They give us energy. They fill us. Other emotions, guilt and shame, they drain us. There's one emotion that is neutral. I'll explain why it's neutral. It's the emotion, that some could call an act, of courage. Courage is the neutral emotion. That doesn't mean that it is literally neutral. Rather, courage is the place where we

take the negative and we allow something positive to happen that builds us into being fed.

Now this is interesting to me because the real challenge then is to consider where is it in my life that I have things that are draining me and where is it in my life that I have things that are filling me? How is it that I might have the courage to be able to claim something positive?

Now, here is where courage is so challenging. How many of us are in relationships right now, and we know that the relationship has something that is less than complete in it? Perhaps the relationship is even broken, or on the verge of being broken. Maybe it's with someone with whom we work or live. Where are those relationships that we know are just not real, that have a fake component to them? What keeps us from trying to make that relationship real?

Fear

I do this in my life constantly. It is one of the real challenges in my life . For me, sometimes, it's easier to keep a fake relationship than it is to seek a real one. You see, if I want a real relationship, that may mean that I will have to have a real confrontation, or that I may have to have a sense of openness and honesty that I'm not sure I'm ready for. So I just let it go. I let it ride. I know that there is something less than totally real in it, and I think that, over time, it will just go away. I've never had a single relationship where that ever happened, where the flaw in the relationship just disappeared. The fear stays there, and sometimes it feels like it grows.

So, this understanding of courage is that place where we are really called to live, to be able to trust enough that there is something real. In scripture it's called, "to take heart." If we had the ability to take heart in our lives, we would be able to live and say, "There might be

something real in this.” We would be courageous enough to address it, to go in repentance, to go and challenge, to seek, to correct someone, and to do that in an understanding of Christ’s love.

But this is the real mystery for me; there have been occasional times in my life when I’ve been courageous. I’ve had the swagger of courage in my life for a long time. When I have been courageous, it has been incredible the way God has blessed that. It has been amazing how God has redeemed and restored and built a new relationship that is so much more real and powerful than it ever was. It is incredible, but I can never keep that courage to go to another place because fear keeps coming back in. It’s not something that is easily learned. So how do we do it? How do we get to this understanding of a life of joy?

I had a guy help me with this last night. We’ve been involved in planting an urban congregation. We had our worship service last night in First Hall. We haven’t told you much about this yet because we wanted to get established with urbanites before we start coming as well, and last night was amazing worship. It was incredible. There was a group of young musicians, nineteen and twenty year olds that Alicia Keys found. They are actually on her last album. They are a strong Christian group of six kids. They could be finalists on *American Idol*! It is amazing.

One guy that came in is a rap artist who has a pretty good reputation. He started out in the secular route and is now twenty seven. His rap name is Legin. Now he’s doing Christian rap and he’s amazing. He came up and rapped about the redemptive power of God, and in between raps he says, “Many people ask me about my name, Legin, and they want to know what it means. I just need to let you know it doesn’t mean anything. It’s my real name spelled backwards.”

His real name is Nigel. Nigel is a dear friend of Sheryl's and mine. He's just a wonderful guy. Nigel works at the crisis pregnancy center, and he is just a dynamic young man. He says, "Let me tell you why I picked that name. It doesn't mean anything, but this is what it means to me. I had a point in my life where I was totally overwhelmed by the sin of my life. I was on the wrong track. I was doing the wrong thing. I was doing all the wrong stuff. I was not living in a way that was honorable. I was living in a way that was destroying me, and I'll never forget in a moment of despair, in my grandmother's basement I called out and God came and said, 'There could be something new for you.' "

God came and, the way Nigel worded it, "God came and reversed everything, and so I decided that if I was going to go out and be a Christian, live as a Christian musician and share the gospel, then I was going to live with my name spelled backwards, reversed. God reversed everything."

If you think about a life in my time that presents a great reversal it's the life of Chuck Colson. Chuck Colson died at the age of eighty yesterday. He was in prison because of Watergate. This was my generation. I remember watching the Watergate hearings as a kid. Rightfully, he went to prison and while he was there one of the most unusual people in his political life came and visited him. He shared the gospel of Jesus Christ, and there in prison Chuck Colson took on a new life in Christ- a great reversal, not just a little help from my friend Jesus, but a new life – and Chuck Colson came out of prison, and everything was reoriented for the rest of his life. The things that he wrote, the things that he did, the Christian fellowship that he created have brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to thousands upon thousands of people, resulting in their encounter with Christ in prison. It was a life of great reversal.

You see that idea of having a God who reverses everything goes back to the very foundation of who Christ is. Christ tells us that you cannot have a God that just helps you out a little bit. You have a God that can reverse it all. You have a God who can give you a new life. You can be a new creation. That's what Legin understood. That's what Nigel knew. That's what Chuck Colson knew: that great reversal that comes for us when we get outside ourselves, when it's not about me but it's when I live for another.

It's the thing that I found in my life. I had walked away from that window, that shuttered window, intending to put on a swagger that would keep me invincible from that feeling again. But the longer I swaggered the more alone I became, to the point of actual shame. Shame became the identifying emotion in my life. But there came a day when Jesus Christ spoke into my life and said, "Jim, there can be something bigger than just you." Jesus Christ, basically, told me that there are a lot more people on that playground of loneliness than first appears. If there is anything I've learned in my life, it is that every person that I've ever gotten to know sits next to his or her own pool of tears. Every single one of us knows what it is to have that window just close in front of our face, and we know what is left.

I'm coming to realize that there are really more people out on the playground than there are inside, and I think the people on the playground are a lot more fun. You see, the great reversal for us is to live for something that is bigger than ourselves. That sort of giving takes on power. There is nothing better than the feeling of generosity in our lives; that's when fasting becomes about sharing. You see what Isaiah is trying to say and what Jesus is very clear in saying is that fasting has become just another way to distinguish ourselves, and to make us seem important and religious when, instead, fasting is supposed to lead us into sharing. I discipline myself. I take away some of the good things in my life, even the things that Christ says are appropriate for my life. I limit for myself so that I might be able to

share with someone else. I might be able to live in something that is bigger and so when we get to Isaiah, I don't think it gets any better than this. He says, "Look at how crazy you guys are going about this." And then he says, "Is not this the fast that I choose?"

This is God speaking, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

What is it in our lives that we have the privilege of fasting so that we might share? It's not just about giving up chocolate during Lent. It's about, "What am I going to do with those pieces of God's goodness that I give up. With whom am I going to share them? How am I going to live into that?"

So if you want joy, prepare yourself for the great reversal. If you look at the list of negative emotions, they all relate to loneliness. The ultimate loneliness or sense of being alone is centered on being ashamed of yourself, and every emotion that is positive is about relationship. You can't love without having someone to love. You can't experience joy without having someone with whom to share it. Even more critically, it's not about sharing joy, it's about truly being able to celebrate and have joy for someone else. Are there people in your life that you can honestly, without any sense of competition, be happy for them? That's what joy is. That's the kingdom of God.

I saw the great reversal last night. Sheryl and I were sitting at this urban worship. I looked over and down the row from me there are three of the most beautiful faces, outside of my own wife's face, that I've ever seen. Three generations sitting next to each other: a newborn baby girl with a grandmother holding her with a huge smile, and a

mom sitting right next to them; the three of them just sitting next to each other. I quickly realized that they were not a biological family. Skin tone gave that away very quickly, and I came to recognize what was going on. At the center of this beautiful three generations of family, filled with joy, was a young woman who got herself in a way that she hadn't wanted. The word, "choice" was not a part of her vocabulary, because she lived in a world and life, in her urban setting, where there are very few choices. Then there is the grandmother type who came along beside her and helped her birth this new creation. To see the three of them sitting there with this sense of joy, is one of the most beautiful things I have ever experienced. It's the kingdom of God. The windows become unshuttered and the doors open.

So the question for you today is, what relationship in your life or conversation with a family member or friend, have you been avoiding, perhaps for years, because it's just been easier to fake it rather than get it real? What thing is it that God has placed in your heart that you know you should do? Is it sharing the love with someone else and for some reason it just hasn't seemed right. What vulnerability is there in your life? The only way we know that someone sits beside their own pool of tears is for us to become vulnerable enough to share ours. That is when we realize that we all share this in common. So what vulnerability is it in your life? What pain is it in your life that, perhaps, you need not only to release, but to use for the glory of God and the welfare of someone else. What is it in your life where you are called today to show courage? Fear maybe has been in control for too long and today you realize that you need to have the courage and take heart, you need to live into something new. Whatever it is today, I pray that you would do it. I pray that you would do it for not only yourself but that for someone else the windows and the doors would be opened, so that the sense of joy might enter into this world. It's not going to be easy. It's not something that we just do. It's something where courage is required.

We can have the swagger of courage, which is false, or we can have the real courage that requires discipline and order. Real courage requires that I give up something in my life, even though God might say it is something I can have. I give it up so that I might have the strength and discipline to be able to push through the fear and move from my own sense of being ashamed into the overwhelming sense of the kingdom of God, filled with joy and love.

That's what I pray for you today. Let's pray.

Father,

I do thank you and praise you. I thank you that you come to us and you've reminded us that it is not about our religiosity, but it is about how we live and seek to understand you and the glory of your kingdom. Lord, I pray that you would move us from being ashamed of anything in our life, Lord, and that you would fill us with the sense of joy. I pray that you would allow courage to enter into our life like we've never seen it before, so that we might have that conversation, make that move, have that phone call, enter into that new ministry, go to someone and open our own lives to be able to share. To share with someone by saying, "this is my life." and allowing them to be able to say, "Oh, I never knew...I always thought, for so long, That I was the only one on the outside. I always thought that I was the only one on the playground alone." Lord, when we get there, give us the joy of seeing you at work. In the powerful name of Jesus we pray. Amen.