

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me.” (Esther 4:15-16, NIV)

SOMEWHERE SOMEONE IS PRACTICING HARDER THAN YOU. If you’re a casual golfer, this will not come as a surprise, nor will it concern you. Practice is what makes people better—you’re happy with what you’ve got.

But when coaches work with athletes, they often employ reminders like this to spark a dedication in their players. We don’t get better by accident. We work at it.

The same purpose arises in our walk with Jesus. The more we practice, the better we get at it.

Now you may fairly ask, “What do you mean *get better*? Isn’t even my righteousness as ‘filthy rags’ (Isaiah 64:6)? Are we not saved by grace and not by works?” Good questions! Indeed, we cannot earn the saving favor of God by the things we do, no matter how good or devout they may be. And yet God and his Scriptures often commended people for their humble heart and righteous acts.

There must then be a purpose to well-doing. It is this: to defer to the sovereign God.

When Mordecai famously challenged his cousin Esther the Jewish queen of her Persia to speak in defense of her people, by employing the words “And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?,” we often stop reading right there. We start considering God’s positioning and calling in our own life. That’s excellent. We never want to lock God up in the annals of history. We need to seek what he has for each of us in our own times and places.

Yet when we do keep reading, we find that Esther’s positive response came with a request for engagement. “Fast,” she told Mordecai. “Get the people to fast. I will fast. My maids will fast.” That is, they would turn their attentions to God.

The righteousness of believers in God is not done to gain favor but to gain ground. How do we draw closer to Jesus? By practice. We fast. We pray. We study. We take Sabbath rest. We meditate. We serve. And we unite with other brothers and sisters in these endeavors. Such deference, such honor to God, ignites his attentions, and he draws near to us (James 4:8). And there we find the impetus to practice still more, bettering our relationship with the God who comes close.

Opening questions How important is motive when someone reaches out to do something good? Should we go ahead and do good things even if we know we’re not really well-motivated in doing so?

READING Psalm 5, Matthew 6:1-8, 1 Corinthians 11:23-32

David’s spiritual practices

List some of the practices noted by David in Psalm 5. What response did he seek from God?

Humility in our practice

In Matthew 6, how did Jesus teach humility as the thread beneath our righteous acts? What does this teach us about the difference between what we might call “religious righteousness” and “authentic righteousness”?

Checking our hearts

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul wrote of examining one’s self (v. 28) before participating in the Lord’s Supper. What do you think this entails? Why is it so critical? What other spiritual practices should we apply this heart check to before engaging in the activity itself?

Written by Jeff Hopper ©2014 Links Players International.