

So Far, So Good

Regulating Righteousness

September 15, 2024

Today we're pursuing the **practices that regulate our righteousness!** Cuz as Johnny Cash will tell you, it's *hard* to walk the line – and to set ourselves up for *success*, our *best bet* is *daily discipline*. Cuz whether it's a *reminder*, a *reward*, or a *reprimand*, something has to *motivate* our heart to regulate our actions! So the question is: **what's keeping you in line?**



Well, whether you're *Christian* or *secular*, it really comes down to *two* forces: love and fear. Cuz **we're motivated to both pursue what we love and avoid what we fear**. And we commonly call these forces the carrot and the *stick*. And *every day*, we *choose* the *actions* that we believe will best help us *reach* a *reward* or *outrun* a *threat*. Which is why *humans* have such a *hard time* handling our relationship with *God*; cuz He can feel like a *reward* and a *threat*. After all, we're *told*:



He *wounds*, but He also binds up; He *injures*, but His hands also *heal*.
[And apparently love and fear can go hand in hand:] – Job 5:18 NIV



[Cuz here's how David sees things:] Let those who fear the LORD say:
"His love endures forever." – Psalms 118:4 NIV



Well, *okay* – but *usually* it's *harder* to trust the love of someone you *fear*... kinda seems like it *compromises* our assessment. *Right John?*

[Well,] There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with *punishment*. The one who *fears* is not made perfect in *love*. – 1 John 4:18 NIV



Yeah! That's what I'm saying – *real love* means *total trust!* We *wouldn't fear* someone when we're *in love*; we'd feel *stronger* and *safer* when they're around! Cuz **loved ones don't hurt us they help us**. *Right John?*

[Sure!] For God did *not* send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. – John 3:17 NIV

Right! And He *saved* us cuz He *loves* us – so *what's* with all the stuff about love and fear?! Well,

Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD evil is avoided.
– Proverbs 16:6 NIV

Oh. The love of the Lord saves and the fear of the Lord keeps our love safe? Is *that* it Paul?

[Yup!] Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. – Romans 12:9 NIV

[Cuz that's the Lord's love; and] To fear the LORD is to hate evil; – Proverbs 8:13 NIV

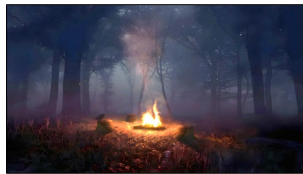
Okay – we’re *almost* there, so what *is* evil? Well, *evil is* whatever good *isn’t*, and

Every good and perfect gift is from *above*, coming down from the *Father* – James 1:17 NIV

So **if it ain’t from God, it ain’t good**. Which means **evil is merely the absence of good**. That’s what we *hate!* And it’s *not* a thing, it’s a *lack* of a thing. The same way *cold* isn’t a thing – it’s just a *lack* of *warmth*. And *darkness* is a lack of *light*; and *death* is a lack of *life*. And since God’s love *provides* the *light* and *life* that we *crave* – **hating evil means hating His absence**. And **fearing the Lord means keeping Him close at all times**. Which *is* a little *scary* in the traditional sense – cuz there’s a lot of stuff *down here* that tries to get *between* us to *loosen* our *grip* on all His *good*. So we need to remember *it’s up to us!*



Consider therefore the *kindness* and *sternness* of God: *sternness* to those who *fell* [away from the goodness of His *presence*,] but *kindness* to you, *provided* that you *continue* in His *kindness*. Otherwise, you *also* will be cut off. [But by *who?*] – Romans 11:22 NIV



By YOURSELF! Listen, as long as *you stay* by a fire, you *keep warm*; it’s when you *leave* that *it* can’t heat you anymore. When we *walk away*, we *cut ourselves* off. So **the sternness of God is just the freedom to leave Him!** Cuz from the beginning, all God has ever given is good – so



When tempted, no one should say, "*God* is tempting me." For *God cannot be* tempted by *evil*, nor does *He* tempt anyone; but *each person* is tempted when *they* are dragged away by *their own evil desire* [for anything *apart from* what *God gives*] – James 1:13-14 NIV



Got all that? The *loving* relationship with God that He’s been *trying* to *give* us since He *created* us – ***is the biggest reward imaginable!*** It’s like finding out the *richest*, *kindest*, and *coolest* person on earth wants to *adopt* you, take *care* of you, and *share* their *whole fortune* with you!

He’s Daddy Warbucks and we’re *Annie*; He’s Willy Wonka and we’re *Charlie*; He’s the Father and we’re *the prodigal son*. And the only way to *miss out* on our *incredible* reward is *choosing* to walk *away* from it. And as *crazy* as that sounds, *that’s* what we *did* back in the *Garden*, that’s what we *did* when *Jesus* came in person, and ***that’s what we do every day***. Cuz ***every choice that doesn’t take us closer to Him, drags us further away***.



Every day, when we *choose* any form of *greed* over *giving*, *cruelty* over *kindness*, or *lust* over *love* we’re the ones walking *away* from *His riches!* But when the fear of the Lord reminds us to *hate evil*, it automatically keeps us *close* to all the good *in* God’s love. And ***the closer we are, the better life is***. And like Bruce touched on last week, when we see how it all works, we *also* see how *prosperity doctrines* get it *all wrong!* ***Doing good doesn’t produce God’s blessing, it merely permits God’s blessing***. Good choices don’t *create* prosperity, they *replace* the bad ones that prevented it. Our ***sin blocks us from His blessing***. So ***stopping sin just lets good in***.



But because we're so *easily enticed* **it takes daily discipline to just stay the course and reject sin.**

[Like Paul says] Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. ... Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 NIV

Did you *notice* that Paul's training to *win* the race was just keeping himself from being *disqualified*? I mean it sounds like **just staying in the race is the big secret to success!** And God doesn't *really* set the bar *that low, does He?* Does just *avoiding evil* make us righteous? Well, *kinda...*



[Remember, *hating* evil keeps love *sincere* and] Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. – Romans 13:10 NIV

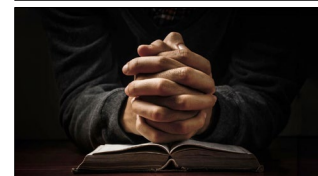
So in a *nutshell*, **we're saved by love, cuz love keeps us from being unloving.** That is, we can't *not love* – while we're *loving*. Just like we can't get *cold* while we're by a fire; and **we can't wander from God while we're walking with God.** We can't *lose the race* while we're *in the race*.



Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. – 1 John 3:7 NKJ



And if keeping *in step* with *God* keeps us *away* from evil, and *love* is what keeps us *on track*, **reinforcing our relationship is what regulates our righteousness.** But since it takes the *fear* of the Lord for a sincere love of the Lord; *how* do we keep ourselves from *falling away* in a *fallen world* full of *enticing evil*? Discipline. *Spiritual disciplines*. They're the **tools that strengthen our loving heart to weaken our wandering eyes.** And they're *simple* things like *Bible reading*, *selfless serving*, *worship*, *fellowship*, *confession*, *submission*, *giving*, and *praying*.



And they all serve the *same* purpose: **spiritual disciplines provide the practice that keeps us in the race.** And *they're* incredibly *important* because *it's* incredibly *easy* to get off track, *wander* from our *relationship*, and get *disqualified* from the *prize!* Which is what I discovered years ago when I was trying to understand how prayer *really* works and read a couple *confusing* Scriptures:

[Cuz,] if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him. [Cuz He's always been trying to give us everything!] – 1 John 5:15 NIV

[And] We know that God does not listen to sinners. [Cuz they wandered away and cut off the communication;] He listens to the godly person who does His will. – John 9:31 NIV

[So, yeah] The prayer of a righteous person is *powerful* and *effective*. – James 5:16 NIV

[Because] The LORD is far from the *wicked* [which makes them hard to hear], but He hears the prayer of the righteous. [Cuz they're always by His side!] – Proverbs 15:29 NIV

[But here's the problem:] "There is no one righteous, not even one; ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, – Romans 3:10, 23 NIV

Oh dear. I was hoping He wouldn't catch that... So why do we pray at *all*?! Why are we told to: "Pray without ceasing" [1 Thess 5:17] if none of us are righteous? Well,

Because of the LORD's great *love* we are not consumed, for His *compassions* never fail. They are new every morning; [And even when we wander away,] – Lamentations 3:22-23 NIV

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and *will forgive us* our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. – 1 John 1:9 NIV



So now, you better believe every morning, when I wake up, I use the spiritual disciplines of prayer and *confession* to ask God to forgive me and then ***I pray as fast as I can while I'm still righteous!*** Cuz it's usually a matter of *minutes* before my mind *wanders*, I become *unrighteous*, and I cut myself off from God! At which point, *it's time to confess again!* And that's when *"Pray without ceasing"* started making sense.



It's like the "this many days without an accident" signs that get reset with every mistake – only ours say "this many *minutes* without a *sin*"! And here's the encouraging part: God counts our *righteousness* the way we count *sobriety* – ***it's how long you succeed, not how recently you failed.*** So *every* time you *relapse* and *restart*, you *begin* 100% righteous and *stay* that way unless you fall away.



And ***for every evil that entices us away from God's love there's a spiritual discipline to bring us back.*** Which is what we talked about last week when Bruce explained how ***giving overcomes our greed.*** It's a loving *practice* that brings us *closer* to God by *replacing* a *problem* that was pulling us *away*; we *can't* be greedy *while* we're giving to the *needy!*



And like he said, ***"We're not buying a blessing, we're offering tokens of trust."*** Cuz every discipline like *tithing*, *praying*, *worshipping*, and *reading* is meant to merely reinforce the *relationship* that is our reward by making us *understand* ***only God has the authority and ability to give what's good.***

Which means that *fearing* and *loving* the Lord are two sides of the *same* coin – ***we're motivated to pursue the good of His presence and to avoid the evil of His absence.*** And that's just *two* ways to say the *same* thing: ***we need the Lord's love to live the good life!*** And when we come to *understand* that His love is *openly offered* to *renew* our *righteousness* each and every minute, life becomes all about *letting Him* love us! Because ***we don't earn from God, we learn from God.***

We learn how ***sincere love sustains the righteous relationship that keeps us close to everything good*** – and *away* from everything *evil*. And as we *practice* that sincere love, we learn ***we have to restrain our will to retain God's will*** Because it takes daily *disciplines* to overcome the daily *distractions* that get between us and God's love. So if you want to see what life is like when you finally *stop blocking* God's *blessings*, find where *you* wander and regulate *your* righteousness with the *practice* that brings you *back*. Maybe you need to *out-give* your *greed*, *out-serve* your *selfishness*, or *out-worship* your *worry*; I don't know. But I'm pretty sure ***we all need to out-pray our sin*** if we want God to help us stay *in line*, *in love*, and *in the race!* So *let's pray!*

Father God, thank You for loving me in spite of my sin; forgive me and cleanse me by the sacrifice of Your Son, my Savior; and free me and lead me by Your Spirit and Word, as I seek to trust and follow Jesus Christ, as the Lord of my life. Amen.