

**The Gospel of Stewardship: Time  
Rhythms of Grace  
Matthew 22:15-22, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27  
October 22, 2017**

**Introduction to the Series**

How do you say, “I love you”? I know that sounds like the title to some sappy pop song, but I’m serious: How do you say “I love you” to your spouse... to your children... to your friends... to God? Gary Chapman has written a best-selling book he calls “The Five Love Languages” in which he suggests that we humans have five basic languages by which we communicate love.<sup>1</sup> I recommend this book to couples trying to strengthen their marriages and parents and children trying to live together at home... and I mention it today because there is a parallel between our most important love relationships on earth and our all-important love relationship with God through Jesus Christ. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... in Jesus Christ, God has said “I love you” to us. And the question we are exploring in this series of sermons is how you and I can say to God, “I love you, too.” Because that’s what stewardship is – it’s saying to God, “I love you.”

Now, since these sermons are coming during our church’s stewardship season, you will expect me to say that one of these ways is to devote a certain percentage of our financial resources to God’s work. About that you are absolutely correct. Yet, there are many other ways to measure where our heart is... other ways to quantify what we most value; and certainly one of those is how much time we devote to someone. In fact, these days our time may be our most precious gift... not only because we always seem to have so little of it, but because we only have a set amount of it. When we offer someone our time, we give them something we will never get back... and if you and I truly want to know what is important to us, perhaps we need to look first at how we use our time.<sup>2</sup>

**Bible Readings**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup>So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup>They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Chapman in *The Five Love Languages – How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, Northfield Publishing-1995.

<sup>2</sup> Rick Warren in *The Purpose Driven Life – What on Earth Am I Here For?*, Zondervan-2002, p. 127.

## 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

<sup>24</sup>Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. <sup>25</sup>Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. <sup>26</sup>So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; <sup>27</sup>but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

### Sermon

“May I have your attention please? May I have your attention? Let the monthly meeting of the “Committee to Choose the Color of the Sanctuary Carpet” be called to order. Doris Smith has our devotion this month... Doris, you now have the floor.”

“OK, OK, quiet down. It’s almost eleven and we’ve had a full day here at the North Carolina Camp for Young Presbyterians. I’m just going to do a quick devotion and then it’s light’s out!” “Devotion.” It’s the word we use when a particularly energetic committee chair decides to offer a little something “spiritual” before the work begins. “Devotion.” It’s the obligatory Bible reading and quick prayer which signals lights out at summer church camp. Devotion... what does it mean to you? Is it a word you ever use?

Call me old-fashioned, but I do. I like the word “devotion”... I like what’s implied by the verb “devote.” And I still use it quite often... because to me it says something that other words do not – it says that if something matters to you, you DEVOTE yourself to it.<sup>3</sup>

The Apostle Paul says essentially the same thing when he uses the image of athletes engaged in competition. The Christian life is like an athletic competition, he says. A great prize awaits those who run their race well, but the running requires significant exertion. Athletes exercise self-control in all things in order to win their contests... they make great sacrifices in order to win the prize; even though their prize is only a laurel wreath that will soon wither. Christians, Paul says, are called to run their race with just as much exertion and self-control... for they pursue a prize that is “imperishable”.

We know what Paul means, of course. We can follow our favorite team or our favorite player... without ever setting foot on a court or playing field... and certainly without ever breaking a sweat! But if we want to tone up ourselves... or sharpen a particular skill... or just get better at anything, we have to be ready to give it some effort... we have to be ready to exert ourselves.

Growing stronger in the Christian life is no different. Following Jesus is not a spectator sport. And if in response to God’s unconditional grace, we want to grow in faithful living... we’ll need to make some conscious decisions – we’ll need to set some priorities... that will guide the way we use our precious time. Perhaps another way to say this is we will need to learn the practice of saying yes and saying no – of saying NO to those things that crowd God out and YES to a life that makes room for God.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael L. Lindvall in *A Geography of God*, WJK-2007, p.59

<sup>4</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Saying Yes and Saying No* in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People*, Dorothy C. Bass, editor (Jossey-Bass, 1997), p.59-60

Again, the Apostle Paul offers us an image for this: “I do not run aimlessly,” he says... “nor do I box as though beating the air...”

### **Worship Plus 2**

To give us something practical to consider, I want to mention once again the idea of Worship Plus 2. Our session and staff were introduced to Worship Plus 2 at our retreat this past spring and we found to be a simple, yet profound way to think about how we might not run aimlessly through life... about how we might avoid boxing the air. And in case you're hearing this for the first time here's the Reader's Digest version: regular worship is the heartbeat of our Christian life... and the Plus 2 encourages each of us to have one way we are “inhaling” God's love... and one way we are “exhaling” God's love. In a time when so many of us have more commitments than we can ever keep... when we are being pulled in so many directions... when our electronic devices are constantly buzzing and dinging, demanding our immediate attention... Worship Plus 2 seeks to help us strike a balance by asking: in order to grow stronger and stronger in faith and witness to Christ, what are the things we say YES to... and what are the things we say NO to so we can follow through with our YESES? What we're talking about is a way to think about the basic rhythm of the Christian life... a rhythm that responds to the unconditional grace of God and seeks to open us to new and ever deeper experiences of that grace.

So, always the first word for us is “Worship.” Worship lies at the heart of who we are as Christians. Worship can take many forms, of course – it can be corporate... it can be private... it can be in small groups. It can happen in churches... homes... out in nature. But worship SO ESSENTIAL that the Westminster Shorter Catechism speaks of it in its very first question. What is the chief end of human beings? And the answer: The chief end of human beings is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

There is an ongoing debate in the church about the PURPOSE of worship. We Christians in the West tend to think that for something to be a good use of time it has to have a utilitarian purpose... That's why... after a worship service, we ask “What did I get out of it? What did that hour do for me?” Yet, what if worship, at its most profound, is not really utilitarian? What if it has no goal or purpose other than to turn us away from ourselves and toward God? Worship is simply the deliberate and repeated activity of setting the order of creation aright by getting us to “look up” - to turn our eyes to the One who created us to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. So, in worship the creature owns his/her “creature-hood”. Honest confession is spoken and liberation comes from being forgiven and accepted by God and one another. Praise is offered. Gifts are given and we surrender any pretense that we are God... that we have to be in control of everything... so that we can adore the One who IS God.

Obviously this is no excuse for worship that is poorly planned or poorly led... but perhaps the question we should all be asking as we leave worship each week is not “What did I get out of that service?” but “What did I lose in that service? What did I lay down in that service?”<sup>5</sup>

Worship is the essential, non-negotiable job of the Christian. It is our core reason for being... our primary activity as followers of Jesus. And flowing out of our worship there is a rhythm to the Christian life which is much like the rhythm of “breathing” - of inhaling and exhaling. It’s what we do as human beings to live... and it’s what we do as Christians to grow stronger and thrive – we inhale God’s love and we exhale God’s love. Let’s talk first about inhaling. On our retreat this spring, Tom Tewell reminded us of the story that has come to be known as the “Miracle on the Hudson.”

In January 2009, Captain Sully Sullenberger’s U S Airways flight struck a flock of Canadian geese just after takeoff, disabling the plane’s engines. Twenty two seconds later he communicates distress to the tower... and after ninety very tense seconds he crash-lands the plane in the Hudson River saving all of the passengers and crew... not to mention all those people on the ground the plane passed just 900 feet above the George Washington Bridge). And in interview after interview following this event he was always asked: “How did you do it? And his answer was always the same – it was his lifetime of training and preparation that equipped him to do what he did. Or to use our word – it was the decades he spent “inhaling” information... analyzing his experience... and practicing his skill. It was all those hours in the classroom and flight simulator – making regular deposits in his knowledge and experience bank that equipped him to do what many consider a miracle.

Surely we can say the same about our lives of faith. When we make regular spiritual deposits to our bank of faith... so that when something happens and we need spiritual resources, we have something there to draw on. And if I can just offer a word of urgency (and I hope encouragement)... please don’t wait until you face a crisis to begin making deposits in your spiritual bank... please don’t put off until you are tested saying YES to those things that will strengthen your relationship with God. Friends, there are small and large group Bible studies both here in our church and in our community. Find a Sunday school class which expands your understanding. Develop a regular devotional practice in which you read Scripture... in which you talk to God and listen to God in prayer... (maybe find a prayer partner). There are so many ways to inhale God’s love... but we need to be intentional about it... we need to be intentional about making regular deposits in our spiritual banks.

So, in the rhythm of following Jesus day by day we use time to inhale God’s love... and in that same rhythm we use time to exhale God’s love. I remember as a kid spending entire summer afternoons with friends at the pool competing to see who could go underwater and hold their breath the longest. We got pretty good at it, but eventually we all came up... eventually we all needed to exhale. So it is with how God created each us – we are created not only to breathe IN God’s love, to breathe that love OUT again in service to others.

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<sup>5</sup> Lindvall, p.65.

Consider this beautiful cross that occupies such a prominent place in our sanctuary. We often tell our church children the obvious – that a cross is made up of two lines – one reaching up and down – the other reaching out sideways. And we tell children that each of those lines reminds us of something important in our faith. The upright one is like God’s love come down to us – that is, if we imagine that God is up and we are down. This up-and-down line expresses God’s love come down to us – that the Word became flesh, came down, and lived among us. And the crossbar, we then tell them, reminds us of the love we extend to others – even out into the whole world – as we expand beyond ourselves reaching out to others. Then finally, we remind children that a cross is not a cross if it has only one line... that the Christian faith is BOTH vertical and horizontal – “Jesus loves me” is only half the gospel without “Love your neighbor.”

The options for exhaling God’s love are pretty much unlimited as well. There are so many meaningful ways to respond to God’s unconditional grace to you by reaching out and touching others. How about you deciding that you... personally... are going to welcome every visitor to worship? Or that you... personally... will guarantee that no one sits alone at Wednesday night supper? Decide that you’re going to stay in touch with some of our members who can’t get to church any longer (you can’t imagine how much this means to them)... cook and deliver meals to folks who’ve just lost a loved one or spent some time in the hospital... join the Good Samaritan team or volunteer on Monday nights in our “warming center” this winter... go down to the Rec. or Y and sign up to coach a children’s sports team... be a lunch buddy or tutor... check out the medical mission trip to Chiapas this coming February just find some way to exhale God’s love... a way that fits for you and your gifts and stage in life... and then be intentional about it... make it a priority... exhaling God’s love out into the world.

Friends, I feel I need to apologize for using so many athletic images today... I’m well aware that they do not resonate with some of you. But I need to use one more and then I’ll stop.

The Christian life... is not a sprint... it is not even a mid-distance race... it is a marathon! This is what the preacher in Hebrews was talking about when he encouraged us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. A sprint is hard, no doubt! But it doesn’t require perseverance – (if you’re Usain Bolt it’s over in less than 10 seconds). But following Jesus is not a sprint – it’s a much longer race... and having run much longer races as a MUCH younger man, I do know you have to persevere.

That’s why an idea like Worship Plus 2 is so helpful. It’s simple... but it’s profound... because it helps keep us balanced and growing in faith... it helps us keep the main thing the main thing over the long haul... over the many changing seasons of our lives.

And to do this... at least to do this effectively... I know that some of us will have to learn how to say a “Holy No!” I heard that recently (“Holy No”) and really like it – sometimes we need to say a “Holy No” (even when it is the church that is asking... even when I ask!) A holy NO... so that we can say a “Holy yes” to worship... a “Holy yes” to inhaling God’s love into our hearts... and a “holy yes” to exhaling that love into all the world!