

Spiritual Practices for Thriving Life

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Pursuing Greatness

Is there a thing you do that is now core to who you are?

When did you know that thing you did had somehow changed who you are?

If Jesus gave you a free pass to behave any way you wanted for a day without consequence, what would you do?

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 – ⁹Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, ¹¹to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹²so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

i) Who Are You?

Many of us describe ourselves by the work we do. *I am a mechanic... I am an accountant... I am a salesperson.* We do not think much about this, but it captures a mysterious process. Were you born as that being? Probably not. When and how did you become that? Many of us did not intentionally choose our vocation. We were not forced into it either. It just happened. God's will for our lives is that we consciously investigate that process and intentionally apply it to our relationship with Jesus.

◆ **Let me show you:** When you entered your field of work, were you fully prepared for it? More likely, you got into it and found there was a lot to learn. If you were fortunate, you had a mentor and “you became imitators (1 Thes 1:6)” of this person. At a point, things changed. There was still much to learn, but the work itself that was to be the teacher. It became time to do rather than time to watch. In our lives

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following Jesus, this is the point at which we “do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another (4:9).” The work of Jesus, the fundamental expression of His being, is to love God and reflect His love onto others. As we move past imitation, the Holy Spirit who guides the work leads us into our own version of His Image. Metamorphosis in progress.

♦**You are ready:** It is a great acknowledgement when our mentors release us to the work itself. No longer showing us, watching or coaching us. We have become one who can do the work, even if imperfectly. Once we wanted to be a worker, then we were a student of the work, now we are a worker. “And indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia (v10).” Having achieved what we wanted, we retain our potential for change. Just as we were able to become a worker, we can become something else. And we will if we do not remain committed to our vocation.

II) Never Stop Learning...

Something unexpected happens to some people in our fields of work. After many years, they find themselves no longer fit for the work. Whether we notice it or not, most fields of work are dynamic, shifting around constantly in small, barely noticeable ways. If we do not attend to our craft diligently, we lose touch until we are no longer what we were. Who and what we are is shaped and reshaped throughout our lives, with or without our wanting it.

♦**Continuing education:** Many professions require continual learning to remain licensed to practice. Law, medicine, real estate, ministry... One will be declared unfit to continue if they stagnate and do not show proof of an ongoing formation into that professional way of life. It is with this urgency that God urges “you, beloved, to do so more and more (v10).” There is no static form of life. When we become content in having lived like Jesus, we stop living like Him. Have you noticed when you stop growing more like Him, you lose enthusiasm to continue doing the ways you have already learned? Rather than being a Jesus follower, we are doing what we think He wants out of routine. Long enough, and we are certain to change into another form of being.

♦**True craftsmanship:** The true mystery of becoming what we aspire is that it starts with the work. One aspiring to become a craftsperson starts by learning to perform the craft. Yet, regularly performing a craft is not the same as having become a craftsperson. We all know the difference in the quality of the work. Moreso in the qualities of the

person. Some people work in a profession, others are professionals. Jesus urges us “to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands (v11).” As we continue the path following Jesus, He gives us work to do that shapes our inner being if we allow. Be wary how you interpret this. These are not the rules, the routine, that define what it is to be Christian. This is the work that, if we engage with our entire being, will reshape us into His Image. On the other hand, if we perform the work only so we fit the requirements, we will not permanently become the person we want to be.

III) In the Blood...

By contrast, there are those who never stop engaging in their profession. Yes, they might retire, but in job only. These stay informed, counsel those still working, join boards. We might say the profession remains in their blood. This is the complete metamorphosis God wants to lead us through in our relationship with Jesus. That we do not act like Him but become like Him.

♦**What or how?** The role of liberal arts colleges is often debated. Some argue they do little to prepare a person for life. A degree in history is not practical training for a sustainable career – except teaching history. Others respond that the skills learned through the practice of liberal arts teaches one how to think, a skill that can be gainfully applied to any worthy task. Jesus “directed you (v11)” to these behaviors not because they are the direct and specific recipe for success in life. He guides us to a quiet, orderly, productive life because it prepares us “that you may behave properly toward outsiders (v12).” We watch and listen when not making the noise that suggests life is all about us. We are slow to judge when our attention is on our affairs, sympathetic with the effort order requires and the impossibility of perfecting it. Working with our hands grounds us and provides resources we can share with others. These practices, and others like them, tune our heart and expand our capacity to love others.

♦**The pied piper:** Most of us know someone who attracts a consistent following from company to company. It is as though those who follow cannot practice their profession effectively without their leader. Jesus wants us to follow Him. His way allows us to “be dependent on no one (v12).” Jesus does not want to temporarily give us a job. He once created and now recreates free willed humans. Freedom. His ways are not a set of restrictive rules from which we eventually will wear out. They are the path to freedom to be our true self always and evermore.