

**The Ascetic Style – Developing Discipline for God  
Hebrews 12:4-14**

Brothers and sisters – that’s a powerful verse of scripture we just finished reading. *“Without holiness... no one will see the Lord”* and it reminds me of an object lesson I came across recently.

Imagine yourself standing out in the foyer – after an amazing service – enjoying a cup of coffee, when you are suddenly jostled about by some kids who are running over to get the cookies – and as you try to regain your balance you inevitably end up spilling your coffee – all over the carpet.

So, let me ask you a question – why did you spill your coffee? Now most of us would say that its obvious we spilled it because someone bumped into us.

But what if I said no – that’s not why you spilled coffee... you spilled coffee because that is what you had filled your cup with. (Ahhhhh – the light comes on!)

Brothers and sisters whatever is in the cup is what is going to spill out – when it is bumped. In the same way – whatever is in us is going to spill out when we are bumped.

Which is why I was asking you to imagine yourself standing in the foyer after an amazing service – because even though you would be feeling really blessed and spiritual after the service, it only takes a little kid to bump you and get you to spill your coffee all over the place and your irritation and anger will quickly displace that blessed feeling – right?

And once we leave church and go about the rest of our day and move into the coming week there will be all sorts of things that happen which “bump” us and whatever is inside of us... whatever we have filled ourselves with – is going to spill out of us.

Now I have to say that when I read this little object lesson I was quite convicted because over the past year I haven’t been feeling very good about what I’ve seen spilling out of myself

when I've been bumped around – and more importantly I know Jesus certainly doesn't like it either.

Now you might say *“Really? I haven't noticed anything... I haven't seen you lose it on anyone and you kept your composure in front of me.”* But that's exactly the point.

We can get quite good at using our self-control and discipline to quickly recover when we get bumped and avoid any major spills – especially when others are around... because we don't want that irritation, anger, vindictiveness, or whatever is inside us to spill out and cause more problems for us or make us look bad or make us do something that will only add to the guilt that we are feeling for what is inside us.

So, we clamp down and avoid any major spills - but that doesn't change the fact that we are full of irritation or frustration or resentment or bitterness.

And we can try to justify it by saying *“do you know what I've had to deal with over the past year – its no wonder I'm feeling like this!”* And you are probably justified...

But that still doesn't change the simple fact that you are full of something that isn't pleasing to God and you are full of something that you don't want spilling out when you get bumped around.

And we might say – as I have - *“well if life would just stop bumping me – then there wouldn't be any danger of a spill!”*

But brothers and sisters, we all know that life happens – the bumps are inevitable and in fact... because of what we read in Hebrews 12:7 where it says *“endure hardship as discipline, God is treating you as His children”* we should expect that they are not only inevitable but they are purposeful.

It is through these bumps – these hardships – that the true contents in the depths of our hearts are stirred up and

revealed to us. We get the real picture about ourselves and it doesn't look much like what we post on our social media.

And this is how God disciplines us – how he trains us and shapes us - and lets us know that we need a refill on the inside brothers and sisters.

So, if you can relate to what I talking about - then I hope its made you eager to learn about another way you can grow spiritually this morning, because growing spiritually is the only way to fill yourself with the kinds of things you won't mind spilling out when you get bumped.

Now growing spiritually requires some discipline and self-control on our part – but don't let that deter you – because you're going to have to engage in discipline and self-control regardless, right?

You're either going to have to use your discipline and self-control to try to contain all the nasty inside you from coming out? Or you can put that discipline and self-control towards

learning your spiritual style and engaging in spiritual disciplines that can fill you up with holiness instead?

So, let's focus in and get ourselves ready to learn more about spiritual growth this morning as we explore the Ascetic style.

Now to test a bit of that self-control and discipline as it relates to learning about spiritual growth... I want to throw you a bit of a pop-quiz this morning.

So, if you have been following along in the sermon series so far, when you discover your natural spiritual style and you engage in activities that support it will be difficult or easy? Easy – right and we call that Level \_\_\_\_\_ (A) growth. Good.

And if you engage in activities that push you into your opposite style, will that be difficult or easy? Difficult – correct and we call that Level \_\_\_\_\_ (B) growth. Well done.

Now – if we do not engage with our opposite style from time to time what can happen? Our strength will become our \_\_\_\_\_ (weakness) exactly.

So, I'm glad to see that we're starting to pick up on these spiritual growth principles that we need to know about as we discover what our natural style is.

And I should mention that I have made arrangements for all of you to take the Spiritual Style test online – so it is really easy for you to find out what your natural style is and begin to put that self-control and discipline towards some practical steps for spiritual growth.

Just look for an email in your inbox – or check your junkbox – and follow the link to take the test.

So this morning we're going to be looking at the Ascetic style – which is why I wanted to start with that object lesson about whatever is inside us spilling out when we get bumped – because the Ascetic style, more than any of the other styles, is

concerned with our inner life and the discipline that is required to create and maintain holiness in our hearts.

Now, we would all agree that our relationship with God is a matter of the heart, as scripture says in 1 Samuel 16:7 *“People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”*

We all know that you can “act” like a Christian on the outside and not experience the faith and belief and the trust or the peace or other fruits of the Spirit on the inside. We all know you can put on the show to look good in front of others but its not authentically who you are in your heart.

And we would also agree that our inner relationship with God is supposed to take a certain precedence over our external conditions and this allows us to endure, and even thrive, in times of suffering and persecution. As Paul says in 2 Cor 4:16 *“we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”*

Now all Christians know this... but if you are wired for the Ascetic style you really get this. It is much easier for you to move past the outward distractions and engage that inner reality of your relationship with God and experience God in that.

So people who have the Ascetic style have a very high regard for a virtuous life, and if they have nurtured this natural style - when they get bumped nothing really toxic spills out of them, and its quite evident that its not because they are simply clamping down to prevent a spill with their discipline and self-control.

And that's the other thing about the Ascetic style, any sort of expression of that discipline or self-control as it relates to removing distractions or detriments to one's internal holiness is a big part of how they experience God – and as they grow in that ability of discipline and self-control they grow in their experience of God.

Are you starting to get an understanding of how the Ascetic style works – and if you are an Ascetic, I hope I am describing it in a way that resonates with how you experience God – because the Ascetic style is probably the most misunderstood style as well.

First of all, we often get ascetic confused with aesthetic, though to be fair if you are wired as an Ascetic you will find that this modest, unadorned, and plain spiritual style has its own aesthetic, its own beauty in its simplicity, that you find very attractive.

Secondly, because the ascetic style is focused on the inner reality of our relationship with God and it considers external expressions to be distracting – it is often equated with the monastic life, vows of poverty and or silence. And while many ascetics will find the monastic life appealing and there certainly are monks who are ascetics – not all ascetics are going to be monks.

However – at the risk of making the two synonymous – perhaps the easiest way to get a grasp on the ascetic style is comparing it with the plain and simple monastic life and the way they discipline and regulate their daily routine to cultivate an inner life of holiness. You could think of the ascetic style as being an “ordinary everyday monk” who doesn’t live in the monastery.

And the third way that Ascetics are misunderstood has to do with how they live out their discipline and self-control to keep the externals to a minimum and stay focused on their inner life.

They might abstain from alcohol, eat very little – fast quite often, spend very frugally, have very few material possessions, and take a low view of engaging with arts and culture and politics.

Ascetics are able to keep a “rule of life” and regulate and limit what they do very easily – and as such they appear to have a greater appreciation – even an affection for the prohibitions

and warnings and limits set out for us in scripture because of how this encourages their discipline and self-control – and this is often misunderstood as being legalistic.

But brothers and sisters - legalism has to do with attempting to **earn/deserve** God’s grace through our obedience – but the Ascetic style is expressing their gratitude for receiving God’s grace by growing in obedience, and there is a big difference in that.

However, the strengths of the Ascetic style can turn into weakness and truly become legalistic and miserly if Ascetics do not engage with their opposite style, the Sensory style and learn to appreciate the goodness and richness and lavishness and wide variety of God’s good creation and discover how they can experience God in the externals as well.

Now because Asceticism is easily misunderstood, it is not always appreciated in the body of Christ. But as we are learning – spiritual growth in our spiritual styles is a group exercise because God Himself is Trinity – three in one and one

in three. So growing spiritual is not something you do all by yourself.

And we need Ascetics to help the rest of us engage in our Level B growth in that style by reminding us of the importance of our inner life and the condition of our hearts before God, because while we know that is important – we often neglect it and are inattentive to it.

We may not realize brothers and sisters, that the number one obstacle for our spiritual growth here at Valleyview is our busy lifestyles and crowded schedules and how we have allowed our inner life to become cluttered with all sorts of cares and concerns which become distractions from pursuing a deeper life with God – and doing that together on a regular basis. (Just like how the weeds grow up and choke out the seed in the parable of the sower)

The Ascetic style challenges us to evaluate if indeed all these good things have become god things and it helps us to exercise the discipline and self-control needed to let them go

for a while so that they are put back in their rightful place – and Christ is put back in the center of our hearts.

And Ascetics remind us that we need to grow in our appreciation of the beauty of Holiness.

The beauty of holiness is that a life that is set-apart for God alone, unspoiled by the attachments or obligations to our sinful nature or anything else... is lovely, and winsome, and attractive and desirable – its beautiful.

So how can we grow in the Ascetic style? And more importantly how can we engage the Ascetic style so that we are focusing on our inner life to fill it with holiness? Being set apart for God.

Well, Hebrews 12:12-14 gives us some direction on this and vs. 12 - 13 says *“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”*

Now our rule in interpreting scripture is whenever you see a “therefore” ask what its there for.

And in this case the previous verses which we read, and the preceding chapter are speaking about how our faith is tested by those who oppose us, who bump us and cause us hardship, and its also appropriate to include how life circumstances test our faith in this hardship as well.

And these verses remind us that this hardship is actually part of how God disciplines us for the purpose of making us holy and producing a harvest of righteousness in us. Its for our good and His end goal of transforming us. So we ought not to see hardship as a sign of God having abandoned us but as a confirmation that we belong to Him as his children – for what parent does not train their children. That’s vs. 4 – 11 in a nutshell.

Therefore... because of all this... our response should be what? Sit back and relax and say *“great – God’s got my discipline program under control I’ll just go along with*

*whatever happens in life and leave it up to Him.”* No! There is a response of action that is required of us.

We are to *“strengthen weak arms and knees” and “make level or straight paths for our feet.”*

Now in the scriptures our hands are used to represent how we serve God and do his will, our knees represent our ability to stand firm and resist opposition, and our feet represent our ability to walk in obedience to God.

So, we ought to understand this verse as instructing us to use our self-control and discipline to serve God, stand firm in our faith in Christ and live obediently to Him – which essentially means that even though our internal sinful nature might not want to serve God, and it wants to give in to temptation or give up on faith and does not want to do what God says, and even more so when we are going through hardship - we do it anyways. That is discipline.



Our sinful nature wants to go its own way – but with our self-control and discipline we override that and serve, stand firm and obey God anyways. And the more we do this – the easier it becomes regardless of what sort of hardship or challenges we are facing externally, internally we are stronger and more resilient and the externals do not affect us as much.

And as we overrule our sinful nature and set ourselves apart from its desires – we become holy, set-apart for God instead and that begins to fill us up with holiness in our hearts and clears space, sets apart space, for the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in us.

Do you see how this works? Now there are all sorts of ways you can begin to do this if you start to work on it but let me offer just three examples to you this morning as a starting point.

First how can we be disciplined in serving God? What can we do for God? Brothers and sisters I don't know if you've ever realized this... but participating in worship is serving God – it

serves His needs, it honors Him, He is the focus, that is why we call it a worship “service.”

Now our sinful nature is not going to want to serve God, it will find all sorts of excuses as to why you don't need to attend worship on a weekly basis, and when you are here you will be tempted to evaluate the “service” on how well it served you.

But with our discipline we can override that sinful nature, resist that temptation and serve God by worshipping Christ together with His Church every Sunday not allowing other things to prevent us from this. It's a simple start and if you discipline yourself to do this, very soon you'll begin to be aware of many other ways you can serve God during the week.

And the third example, when it comes to our obedience to God brothers and sisters, and making level or straight paths in that regard, let me say this; when God says do something – do it, and do it right away.

And if you are wondering what God asks us to do in obedience to Him, well there's another opportunity to use your self-control and discipline to sit down and read the scriptures – and discern what He is speaking to you about and asking you to obey Him in.

Then take the most direct and straight path to obeying what God has asked you to do. Use your self control and discipline and do not allow yourself to procrastinate, deviate, violate what God has asked of you – be obedient.

In this way we will experience ourselves growing stronger, and better able to resist our sinful nature so that as Hebrews 12:14 says *“the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”*

And in exercising our discipline and self-control in these ways we set ourselves apart from those external things that distract us from our relationship with God and we create space.. we set apart space in our hearts for the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in us – and we are filled with His Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Gentleness, and... self-control.

Remember brothers and sisters - whatever we have filled our cup with is what will spill out when we are bumped. So without Holiness – no one will see the Lord.

Let us consider this brothers and sisters - Amen.