

Doing What's Hard

Introduction. We do not come across the word "hard" too often when discussing heroes or success. Everything we long for is easy and instant. Without a shortcut to the end we often conclude that the journey is not worth the time and effort. We want everything neatly packaged and ready for immediate consumption -- our food, our friends, even our faith.

Christians do not take the easy path. We take the hard path, the path Jesus took (Matthew 7:13-14; 20:22). As we evaluate how we walk in Christ today, we need to do so with a resolve to do what is hard, what can propel us to growth and on to heaven.

I want to particularly mention that this material is also for our young people. The modern understanding of adolescence allows, encourages, and even trains young people to remain childish for much longer than necessary (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:11; 14:20; 1 Timothy 4:12). One education expert put it: "Our current ceiling for students is really much closer to where the floor ought to be." You need to rebel against low expectations. The teen years are not a vacation from responsibility. You can accomplish so much more than our culture gives you credit for.

I. ***Do What Is Outside Your Comfort Zone***

- A. We start here because this is the gateway to everything else. This scary first step is necessary if you are ever going to attempt anything else we will talk about later. We fear taking risks to grow because we fear failure, rejection, and ridicule.
 - 1. Step outside the comfort of your own perceived abilities. God called Moses to one of the greatest missions of all time but he thought he would fail (Exodus 3:11; 4:10).
 - 2. Step outside the comfort of your upbringing. God called Gideon to lead Israel out of oppression but he did not think he had the right pedigree (Judges 6:14-16).
 - 3. Step outside the comfort of what you have always known. Peter's background bound him, not just to old traditions, but from growing (Acts 10:9-16).
- B. God calls us higher! Out of comfort and into discomfort; from easy to hard. If you only do what is easy, you will never grow.
 - 1. It means working on weaknesses and taking strengths to new levels. Letting fear control your actions is a statement of distrust in the goodness of God (Psalm 27:1-3).
 - a) Are you uncomfortable talking to people about the Bible? Do it anyway!
 - b) Are you uncomfortable inviting people to worship? Do it anyway!
 - c) Are you uncomfortable having brethren over? Do it anyway!

- d) Are you uncomfortable holding yourself accountable? Do it anyway!
- 2. All effort -- even failed effort -- produces growth. In the end, you will always come to the conclusion that it was nowhere near as hard as you imagined.

II. ***Do What Is Beyond Expected Or Required***

- A. At best, the world is satisfied with mediocrity.
 - 1. The world's expectations are mostly so low that it praises anything just above mediocre as excellent.
 - 2. Even for those fortunate ones who have great natural ability, sometimes they become satisfied with what comes naturally.
 - 3. Without a doubt, pushing yourself to do more than is asked, expected, or required is almost always a lonely choice.
- B. God calls us higher! Do not be satisfied with the minimum requirements.
 - 1. Too many ask:
 - a) How many services do I have to attend?
 - b) What is the least I must give?
 - c) What is the least I must do?
 - 2. It does not work that way.
 - a) Ask not, "What must I do?" Ask, "What more can I do?"
 - b) In this way, we can abound and push forward (2 Corinthians 8:22; Philemon 21; 1 Thessalonians 4:1).
- C. Develop a "second mile" attitude (Matthew 5:38-42). It is not just doing more, it is doing more when it is hard to do more. It is doing more when the "more" is not a strong point for you (i.e., teaching class, leading singing, leading prayer, etc.).
- D. It is easy to just show up. Do more!
 - 1. Are you a song leader? Sometimes we are happy just to fill the slot! But is God? How much preparation time do you put in? How much do you work to improve?
 - 2. Are you a Bible class teacher? How well do you know what you teach? How much do you work to improve?
 - 3. Your life as a Christian is more than avoiding "bad stuff." How about doing "good stuff" for God (Psalm 1:1-2)? Pursue righteousness in a way that others will want to imitate (1 Timothy 4:12).
- E. We need to go beyond what passes for "service." That means we will have to work when others rest. We push when others give up. We persevere when others oppose. We bear the name of Christ and our work reflects on Him. Over time, refusing to reach higher, try harder, and risk more robs us of the glorious purpose and future God has

created for us. Only you know how much better you could be if you really tried!

III. ***Do What Is Too Big To Accomplish Alone***

- A. In a very real sense, we can accomplish nothing on our own. We need the Lord (John 15:4-5). But alongside our need to work with God is our need to work with one another (Ephesians 4:15-16). Perhaps it is why God grouped us into local congregations.
 - 1. We need to grow -- spiritually and numerically. Evangelizing Lufkin means all of us doing what is hard: (1) People talking; (2) people inviting; (3) people studying with others; (4) people interested in every level of spiritual growth; and, (5) people depending upon others and being depended upon.
 - 2. It is too big for one or two or four to do all by themselves, but working together creates far more power than we possess alone. It produces an effect greater than the sum of individual efforts.
 - a) When Barnabas got to Antioch he realized the work was too big for him so he brought Saul (Acts 11:19-26).
 - b) Our work of teaching, visiting, edifying the weak, etc., is big! If you feel you cannot accomplish it alone, take someone with you.
- B. God calls us higher! The world has a "Leave me alone, I'll do it myself" attitude.
 - 1. Think of Jesus, the one Man who had intrinsic power to do everything on His own. He chose disciples to work together (Matthew 4:19-22; Mark 1:16-17; Luke 5:10-11).
 - 2. God wants us to rely on His strength but we must rely also on one another's strengths (Proverbs 18:1; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 2 Timothy 2:22; Hebrews 10:24-25). Teamwork is effective, but it requires perseverance.

IV. ***Do What Does Not Have An Immediate Payoff***

- A. We get excited when we talk about something big because we can picture the end result.
 - 1. But what is hard is working on the small parts that get us there. What if we miss out here or there; is it really a big deal? If I skip a meal, or even a whole day's worth, it probably will not hurt me. But what if I skipped a week or two? That might kill me.
 - 2. It is the same with spiritual matters. Our spiritual habits are lifelines that are easy to neglect and miss. We either develop good habits or we do not. Each item we miss, even legitimately, makes it easier to miss the next one. But a little done regularly can go a long way.

- B. Think about how small habits, such as Bible study (Acts 17:11), prayer (Luke 22:39-46), and worship (Hebrews 10:24-25), can produce amazing results. But, these small habits are rarely new or even exciting; they are often repetitive, even tedious and unglamorous.
- C. God not only calls us to do what is big, He calls us to do the small parts over and over that eventually pays big dividends.
 - 1. We get the payoff by remaining faithful, putting one foot in front of the other everyday. This is integrity and self-discipline (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:23).
 - 2. If we shoot for what is big without doing the little parts, we will never succeed. They are the building blocks. Huge gifts are often hiding in those small packages.
 - 3. Remember that every action, no matter how small, is defining your future harvest. Small seeds can make big weeds, but they can also produce beautiful flowers.

V. ***Do What Goes Against The Crowd***

- A. Simply put, it is easy to do what everyone else is doing. "Mob mentality" rules!
 - 1. Across the religious landscape, every religious group moves closer and closer to the world so they will not be viewed as "judgmental" or "narrow".
 - 2. These groups accept homosexuality, fornication, abortion. Joel Osteen, fearing being seen as too narrow or judgmental, suggested it is possible to be saved outside of Christ on national television!
- B. This final hard part is a culmination of all the others.
 - 1. If we do the others, we will by default be going against the crowd, against the grain of cultural norm.
 - 2. A principle at the heart of Christian character is that you have to care more about pleasing God than you care about pleasing man (Acts 5:29; Galatians 1:10).
- C. We have to be different (Matthew 5:13-16; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1)!
 - 1. The world will not understand why you choose worship over sleeping late on Sunday; why you refuse alcohol, fornication, raunchy entertainment, or "ecumenical" religion.
 - 2. They will laugh at you, scorn you, and maybe even cause you harm. But the world must see the difference. If you are not following Him when it hurts, you really are not following Him at all.
 - 3. Remember that when you watch a certain movie, laugh at a certain joke, or wear a certain piece of clothing, it tells you and others something about the state of your heart. True faith permeates your life and causes your behavior to change along with it.

- D. We are Christians and like Christ, God has not called us to take the path of least resistance.
1. The higher road is the harder road -- maybe (1 Peter 2:11-12).
 - a) The harder road is the less-traveled road, but it is the one that leads to eternal life!
 - b) Ask your friends in 10 years which decision was harder -- staying home from parties or compromising situations and abstaining from sin, or dealing with the consequences of alcohol and drug addiction, broken relationships, and unwanted pregnancies. Your friends will say you made the "easier" choice, and they will be right (Proverbs 13:20).
 - c) But you will not be able to stand against the public evil in your time unless you learn how to stand against the evil in your own heart (Matthew 15:19).
 2. You and I can do it! More importantly, we can do it together (Philippians 1:27-29). Sometimes all someone who is on the fence of doing what is right and what is hard, is someone standing beside them saying, "I am right there with you!"

Conclusion. At some point it has become acceptable to avoid everything hard because it is hard. Success has become all of us desperately wanting to find an easier way than just grinding it out. We cut corners and call it "optimizing." And in doing so, we are missing out on a fundamental truth of adulthood -- doing what is hard molds us into people of strength and character.

The hard way may be mocked as old-fashioned, but it produces integrity and strength far more meaningful and concrete than any gold star along the way. This method of living produces people who remain faithful, decade after decade. People who finish a marathon rather than simply starting a million sprints. The Christian life is a life of action, and our actions are intended to result in God being glorified. You need to look at what is -- and what could be. Now is the time to write your story.

For our young people, will you waste some of the best years of your life and never reach your God-given potential? Your teen years are not some mystical period disconnected from the rest of your life. You have been conditioned to stop when it gets hard, but you are far more capable than you think. Being taught to avoid growing up does not help you launch into adulthood. Young people like Joseph, Samuel, David, Josiah, Jeremiah, Esther, and Mary were chosen by God for the time in which they lived -- and they changed the course of nations.

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