



Sermon Series Notes

“Struggling Toward Spiritual Maturity” (Selected Scriptures)

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Intro: Dr. Ed Hindson was scheduled to speak this weekend, and I was so looking forward to him being here, for a couple of reasons. My wife and I both graduated from Liberty University, and he was one of our favorite professors. Secondly, I was planning to do some extra reading during the time I would normally spend preparing a message. Extra reading was exactly what I was doing when Dr. Hindson called me to tell me that due to a bad case of bronchitis he would not be able to make it. The book I was reading is called *The Circle Maker (Praying Circles Around Your Biggest Dreams & Greatest Fears)*, by Mark Batterson. I believe the Bible is the #1 book we should be reading. With that said, there is no doubt that other books written that are not a part of holy writ can be inspired by God. I believe *The Circle Maker* to be one of those books. I found out about it a little over a week ago while talking on the phone with Pastor Peter Lord. He was reading it at the time, and he said it was fantastic. I mentioned it to my wife, and she said she had a copy. We received it at a fund raising event a few months ago for one of our missionaries, Asif Shaikh, who works with Athletes in Action. My wife reminded me that Mark Batterson was supposed to be at that event but couldn't make it. She also reminded me that Mark Batterson was Asif's roommate in college. At the event we were all given a copy of Mark's book, *The Circle Maker*. My wife brought it home, and I forgot about it. So when I mentioned that Peter Lord was reading it, she found our copy, and I quickly confiscated it! It is one of the few times that I get to read a book before my wife! I am not a natural reader (my wife is), so a book has to really grab me right away to keep my attention (story of reading JAWS?). *The Circle Maker* did. After recently going through Daniel Henderson's book *Transforming Prayer*, this one was very timely. Another book that I read recently has been very encouraging as well. Daniel Henderson sent this one to me a few weeks ago. It's called *Leading on Empty (Refilling Your Tank & Renewing Your Passion)*, by Wayne Cordeiro. Wayne was a pastor for years, and he found himself suddenly struggling with personal depletion, and even depression. It hit him out of nowhere, and almost ruined his life and ministry.

That's where I want to begin this message. My personal struggles in life and ministry. Sexual temptation has been my greatest foe since well before I became a Christian, and certainly has been a nemesis since committing my life to Christ. Thank God by His grace I have been able to develop self-control in this area, and I want to make sure I maintain walls of defense in this area. A second major struggle I dealt with for years was my marriage. Thank the Lord I won that battle. *Learning to Love by Faith* tells the story of that victory. A third struggle in my life has been the ministry. I have often battled depression, especially in recent years. I have at times wanted to quit the ministry, and at some points, life altogether. This is why the book, *Leading On Empty*, was so encouraging to me. Wayne Cordeiro has walked in my shoes. Reed back of book in red.

Let me share with you just a few statements from the book: "...deliberating about a new vision no longer stirred my soul...what began as a joy that filled me now became a load that drained me...Decisions, even small ones, seemed to paralyze me...As the years go by, always being on call can wear you down. A crisis is always just one phone call away, and when I was younger, it made me feel needed and valuable. But now it made me feel imprisoned...Congregants expect pastors to preach the finest sermons in town, and when one week's message is completed, it's time to start work on the next one. One pastor told me it's like giving birth on Sunday, then on Monday you find out you're pregnant again!...The constant expectation to come up with yet another inspiring message wears you out...Symptoms of touchiness, a bad temper...indications that a person is yearning for rest, renewal, and a season to heal...not knowing if that is available, the depressed person will feel trapped and therefore angry at those around them..." I have shared openly with you about my anger issues over the past few years. I'll never forget my wife's comment to one of my accountability partners after one of my outbursts. She said, "For fifteen years of our marriage, I never saw that side of Danny." I mentioned later that it was because for the first fifteen years of our marriage, there had never been that side of me. In my entire Christian life there had not been that side of me. It was directly connected to my struggles in the ministry. Let me pause to say something to every Christian here, whether you are in full time ministry or not.

- Struggle in the Christian life is normal.
- Isaiah said he came to a point where he was "undone." Jeremiah said it would have been better if he had never been born. Moses asked God to take his life. Listen to what the apostle Paul says (I Cor.4:7-9; II Cor.1:8). Charles Haddon Spurgeon struggled with depression his entire Christian life. Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane said he was in "great despair."
- Restoration is God's business (I Peter 5:8-11; II Cor.1:9).

Let me now share with you how the Lord has recently restored my passion for ministry, and my personal passion to grow more spiritually.

- Solitude is a chosen separation for refining your soul. Isolation is what you crave when you neglect the first.
- Your soul is like a battery that discharges each time you give life away, and it needs to be recharged regularly. Read p.69 of *Leading On Empty*.
- Took a month off this past summer, but quite honestly a few days in Colorado this past January was where God really refreshed my soul for the ministry He has called me to (CCSP).

I have fresh vision to move forward in ministry, and I have a renewed zeal to move forward spiritually, especially in two areas of the Christian life. Pastor Viv Laird has said to me many times that he believes prayer and faith are the two most important things in the Christian life. I think he's right, and both of them are inseparably linked. We're on a path as a church family to

place a greater emphasis on prayer, and I am on a personal path to grow in this area as well. I want to share with you some specific ways I want to grow in this area.

- Powerful (Mark 11:12-14, 20-24)
 - “If your prayers aren’t impossible to you, they are insulting to God. Why? Because they don’t require divine intervention.”
- Pointed (Matthew 20:30-33)
 - Story of Wayne and Diane/Timothy and Jessica, *The Circle Maker*, pp.23-24.
- Persistent (Luke 18:1-8; Jericho; I Kings 18:41-45)
 - In standardized math tests, Japanese children consistently score higher than American counterparts. Researchers have discovered it may have more to do with effort than natural ability. In one study involving first graders, students were given a difficult puzzle to solve. The researchers weren’t interested in whether or not the children could solve the puzzle; they simply wanted to see how long they would try before giving up. The American children lasted, on average, 9.47 minutes. The Japanese children lasted 13.93 minutes. The conclusion was the math scores may have less to do with intelligence quotient and more to do with persistence quotient.
 - A few years ago, a study was done with violinists. They divided them into three groups: world-class soloists, good violinists, and those who were unlikely to play professionally. All of them started to play at roughly the same age and practiced about the same amount of time until the age of eight. By the age of twenty, the average players had logged about four thousand hours of practice time; the good violinists totaled about eight thousand hours; the elite performers set the standard with ten thousand hours. Innate ability does dictate some of our potential, but our ultimate potential is taped only through persistent effort.
- A Heavenly Perspective (Matt.14:13-21)
 - Heaven’s math is different than earthly math; $5+2 = 5,000$ R12; God is not subject to the natural laws he instituted. He is a supernatural God.
- Pure (John 6:26-27, 14-15; James 4:3)
 - A man asked God, “How long is a million years to you?” God said, “A million years is like a second.” The man then asked, “How much is a million dollars to you?” God said, “A

million dollars is like a penny.” The man smiled and said, “Could you spare a penny?” God smiled back and said, “Sure, just wait a second.”

- Progressive (Joshua 14:6-12)
 - “One litmus test of spiritual maturity is whether your dreams are getting bigger or smaller. The older you get, the more faith you should have because you’ve experienced more of God’s faithfulness. And it is God’s faithfulness that increases our faith and enlarges our dreams” (*The Circle Maker*, p.42).
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- Pervasive (Phil.4:6; I Thess.5:17)
 - 100% of the prayers I don’t pray won’t get answered (James 4:2b; I John 5:14-15).
- Without a “Period’ (John 11:21-22)
 - Mark Batterson suggests there are two degrees of faith in Martha’s statement. The first is preventative faith (asking God to keep bad things from happening because he is “with us.”). The second is resurrection faith, and this kind of faith refuses to put periods at the end of disappointments. We don’t just live in the shadow of the cross; we live in the light of resurrection, even in our darkest days.
- Pray the Promises of God
 - I’m going to practice prayer as I read the Bible (notes from 3-8-13 devotions).
 - “Reading is the way you get through the Bible; prayer is the way you get the Bible through you.” (*The Circle Maker*, p.95)

CONCLUSION

- Struggle in the Christian life is normal, but thank God that despite the struggle we can be victorious!
- What do you need to do to move forward spiritually? Some of us need to do what Jesus told the church of Ephesus in Rev.2:4-5. Some of us need get out of cruise mode as an older saint and look for a mountain to claim, and some giants to challenge (Caleb). And none of us should ever be satisfied with where we are spiritually. Between here and heaven there’s always room to grow, and one of the most important areas to grow in is prayer. As my prayer life deepens, my faith naturally increases.
- Luke 5:16