
Commitment and Discipleship

DAVE BAST

There is a joke about the difference between involvement and commitment that goes like this: If you are having bacon and eggs, you know that the chicken was involved, but the pig was committed. Actually, commitment is no laughing matter; it is an essential spiritual discipline. We will see why that is and what it means today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are beginning a new series of programs. In a sense, it is a continuation or a Part 2 of an earlier series that we did on the spiritual disciplines. So, it is all about those practices or habits that we can inculcate in our lives that will help us to grow spiritually.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the Bible calls us to grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. So, growth is expected. Nobody, at the moment they become a Christian, or realize they are a Christian, or however we come to the awareness that we are a believer in Jesus and in the gospel...nobody at that moment is fully mature...nobody knows all there is to know...nobody is perfect in their living or their morality or their discipleship. We all have room to grow, from the Pope in Rome, all the way down to the newest believer who comes to Christ on a Sunday morning in a church service, we all have growing to do; and the disciplines...and again, we did do a prior series on this...and now we are going to do about, I think, six or seven in this series...the disciplines are...right, as you said, the habits that we inculcate into our lives so that we can live like Jesus, and by living like Jesus, grow into Christ, who is our head, as the Bible says.

DAVE BAST

Right; these are all time-tested ways of deepening our spiritual life, of deepening our relationship with God, of actually growing to know God better. In a sense, it is kind of like marriage after courtship. The best marriages are those in which the two partners come to know each other more and more, and grow in their love for one another, and sort of walk together; and that is supremely true of our relationship with God. What it is not...a couple of things that it is not that we should point out at the outset: these are not simply tips for self-improvement...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is not like your latest exercise regimen or something that you want to get in better shape. They go deeper than that; nor are they ways of sort of earning favor with God or becoming somehow saving yourself. It is not self-salvation. We know that is all about grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and this is sort of the tightrope that Christians always walk. On the one hand, we do *never* want to lose sight of the fact that we are saved by grace alone: one hundred percent...one hundred-ninety percent...Jesus' actions saved us; zero percent of our actions saved us. We never want to lose sight of that; and yet, obedience is also important, and discipleship, as we work out our salvation. In fact, here is from Paul's letter to the Philippians, in Chapter 2:

¹²Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. ¹³For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. So, God doesn't just save us and then walk away; God, by the Spirit, continues to work in us, Paul says, and that is going to issue in obedience, and it is going to issue in these various disciplines; which on this program we are thinking particularly about commitment, which is very similar to one of the fruit of Spirit...faithfulness...steadiness. So, this is a result of salvation not because of it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; even the language Paul uses there in Philippians 2 is important. He says: Work out your salvation, not work *for* it, and he bases it on the fact that God is working in us. Yes, we have the Holy Spirit of God. When anyone who believes in Christ, who puts their faith in Christ, is given the gift of the Spirit...of Christ's presence within their heart...within their life...because of that, it doesn't mean: Well, then I don't have to do anything, I just sit back. No; because he is working in me, I need to work as well. So today, as you just said, Scott, we are going to talk about the spiritual discipline of commitment, which sounds a little unusual perhaps. I don't know if you have ever thought of that as a spiritual discipline, but commitment is certainly something we need to work at, and we need to work out; and in fact, I think you could say that commitment is the ground for every other spiritual discipline.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; one of the core things we believe about the God of the Bible is that God keeps God's promises, and that is so very important. If you ever had a parent or a significant authority figure in your life who *didn't* keep their promises to you, you know how devastating that is. Children's psyches can really be damaged by parents who let them down. Commitment keeping... Lewis B. Smedes wrote a whole book on it, about the vital importance of keeping our commitments; and what commitments mean, Dave, is what Eugene Peterson once called a long obedience in the same direction...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We keep deciding every day...you know, we keep dying and rising with Christ, but we stick to it—we stick with Christ—we stick with trying to be more Christ-like; and for all of us, that core commitment is going to come out in different ways, right? I mean, maybe for one person what that commitment means is they really have to work on that temper of theirs...they are prone to anger. The other person doesn't have a temper at all, but they are rather prone to be prideful and a little snooty and a little taking on airs, so they have to work on that. Another...you know, we could just go on and on.

DAVE BAST

Right; you mentioned *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*; I love that title. It is one of Eugene Peterson's earliest books, and it is an exposition of the psalms of ascent. There are fifteen psalms, beginning at Psalm 120 through Psalm 134, that scholars believe were songs that the pilgrims sang as they were climbing up to Jerusalem in order to worship on the great festivals at the Temple there; and you just think of...it was literally an uphill climb...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Literally.

DAVE BAST

To get to the Temple, and they had to keep going when they were tired. That is what we are called to do as well.

I have a friend who told the story of when he ran a marathon a number of years ago. He had a fever just before the race. He had trained, he was a good runner. He was all set for it and then this fever hit him, and it broke the morning of the race. He was weak as a kitten. He shouldn't have run, he said, but he decided he was going to, and he said it was just agony...2000 steps to the mile, 26 miles...he said that was 52,000 decisions to quit that he faced, and yet he kept going one step after another; and I think that is what our life is like. I think, to some degree as Christians, each day is a decision not to quit, to keep on going.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You mentioned the analogy of marriage a little while ago, Dave, and that is a good one. You and I have both conducted weddings where we have said to the couple all in love and starry eyed and happy it is relatively easy to say I do today, but you have to say I do again tomorrow, and the next day and the next day...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You have to keep this commitment over the long haul, including on those days when you really going to want to quit, because it is not quite as much fun as you thought it might be...your life deals you a bad hand...but that is what commitment is. That is what God does. That is what Jesus did. So, we want to think about that more...about what is commitment? What can make it difficult? What can we do to keep commitment in our lives? We will turn to that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, thinking about commitment on this program, the first in a new series of programs here on *Groundwork*, looking at various spiritual disciplines; and because we did a prior series on this, Dave, where we did some of the more obvious disciplines, this one will be a little less obvious...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are talking about commitment on this program. On the next program, we are going to talk about Sabbath keeping, which people probably don't think is a discipline, and yet we will see that it is...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But we want to stick with commitment. You were saying earlier, Dave, about the songs of ascent in the book of Psalms...of the songs the pilgrims sang as they made their way to Jerusalem for Passover perhaps, or one of the other festivals. They had to just kind of keep deciding to keep going; and the songs of ascent kept them going because they were so eager to meet with God at God's Temple in that holy place.

DAVE BAST

Right; Jesus also, I think, talks about commitment. We want to read one of his very familiar parables but try to listen to it in terms of commitment, thinking about it in the context of commitment, and what might interfere with our commitment to following him. So, it's told in several places in the gospels. We will read from Matthew 13:

^{3b} “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed some fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Then Jesus goes on and tells the disciples: ¹⁸“Listen to what this parable of the sower means: ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the Word and at once receives it with joy, but since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, they quickly fall away. ²²The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the Word, making it unfruitful. ²³But, the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the Word and understands it, and this is the one who produces a crop yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.”

DAVE BAST

So, Scott, as we know...and we have done programs on parables before...usually a parable has one primary point, and that is what you are supposed to latch onto and not try to make something out of all the details, and imagine different meanings; but here, Jesus says, this is actually a little bit more of an allegory, where the details do have meaning, as he himself explains it, and he really talks about four different kinds of hearers or four different receptions to the gospel...to God's Word; three of which are not good because they are not fruitful...only one of which *is* good; and you think about the meaning of those details...of the hard, shallow ground...the hard-packed ground...the shallow soil...and the weed-choked soil.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and there is obviously something there that in order to produce that bumper crop...a hundred, sixty, thirty times what was sown...obviously the good soil does that by, well, what we said earlier...sticking with it. Letting the seed do its germinating...

DAVE BAST

It keeps growing...keep growing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; take root. That takes time. You cannot hurry it up. It is sort of like, you know, a little kid who sees a daisy growing in a garden and wants to help it grow, so she pulls on it. Well, guess what? You just uprooted the daisy. You cannot pull on crops...you cannot speed them up or hit fast forward. It takes time. The other thing that strikes me, though, Dave, about this parable of the sower...and maybe this flips it a little bit from how we usually end up sort of wondering what kind of soil are you, which is okay; but I also think that when we talk about commitment—stick-to-itiveness—the farmer, who is God...who is Jesus in this...shows great commitment. Back in the ancient world, they didn't necessarily have dedicated fields like farmers have today. Fields were located here, there, and everywhere. It kind of reminds me of how sometimes when you fly into Amsterdam in the Netherlands, you see that they sometimes use the grass between the runways for crops or tulips or something. So, you planted wherever you could, but that meant

you would get these mixed conditions. A road might run through your field, there might be a rocky patch that you cannot get cleared, but the sower sticks with it and is lavishly generous in throwing out this seed...just ridiculously prodigality. He knows not all of it is going to take root, but he sticks with it...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because some of it will, and it will be great when it does.

DAVE BAST

But then you turn it around and think of yourself as the seeds...you know, not just four different hearers...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is one possible way to read it, but I think it is more helpful for me to read it as four different experiences in my own life. I can be each of those seeds at different times. Sometimes I hear a word that might be from God, telling me to do something, and I just don't want to listen to it, not unlike that hard path. Other times, you know, we might start something with enthusiasm, but when it gets hard...when the sun comes out and it scorches the plants because they didn't have root, we just quit; we quit when it is tough...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And other times, we sort of get distracted. Other things in our lives...so many different items and commitments and interests and hobbies and pastimes; they just choke out that good seed of a good discipline. So, I can be all those things, and I want to be the good ground that produces fruit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is a good point, Dave, that we cycle...all of us...we cycle through these soils at different parts of our lives and at different seasons in our lives; but we need that constant through line of commitment...that spiritual discipline of commitment if we are going to have any chance of more often than not being the good soil. It is work. We talked about weddings in the previous segment. Maybe on the day of your wedding, you cannot imagine it will take work to stay married to this person with whom you are so in love...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the day will come when guess what? It is going to take a little bit of work to stick with your marriage vow because things are going to get tough, or you are going to find out something about this other person you didn't quite know the day you got married. It is hard, but that is why you continue with your commitment, renewing it day by day.

The well-known writer and theologian, G. K. Chesterton, had a great line once. He said: Christianity hasn't been tried and found wanting, it has been found hard and hasn't been tried.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; isn't that the truth? And I love your point, Scott, that the real person with commitment in Jesus' story is the sower...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

The one who keep sowing; and actually, the Apostle Paul turns that image around and compares *us* to sowers in Galatians 6*, where he says: (verse 7b paraphrased) If you sow to the Spirit, from the Spirit you will reap a harvest of life; (and then he goes on to add:) ⁹Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

So, what we are committed to is sowing a life of good works, and helping others, and serving others.

Ultimately, that is a tremendous spiritual discipline that will lead to blessing, not only for ourselves, but for the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But as we close this program, we will get a little more practical, even, and talk a little bit about what it means to be committed across the long haul...that long obedience in the same direction that Eugene Peterson talked about. So, stay tuned for that.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the spiritual discipline of commitment; a discipline certainly that Jesus showed in his life. You think of the description of him in the gospels setting his face to go to Jerusalem. He walked the walk, he didn't just talk the talk; and he became obedient even to the death of a slave on a cross, Paul says in Philippians 2. So, we want to try to develop that same kind of discipline of stick-to-itiveness...of setting out in the life of discipleship and hanging in there, continuing to obey. The question is how do we do that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think one of the things we need to do first is count the cost. There is a very difficult passage in Luke 14, where Jesus essentially is talking about commitment and counting the cost and figuring out what you are going to need to follow through, and it goes like this; Luke 14 at verse 25:

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said, ²⁶“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. ²⁷And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? ²⁹For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, ³⁰saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.’ ³¹Or suppose a king is about to go to war with another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have, cannot be my disciple.”

DAVE BAST

Well, there it is; what Dietrich Bonhoeffer very famously called the cost of discipleship in a book that he wrote about the Sermon on the Mount, actually, which has a number of other very difficult commands in it; but I think we should note at the outset what Jesus *isn't* saying here, because almost everything he said has been twisted by somebody. So, when he says unless you hate your parents, you cannot follow me...unless you give up literally everything you cannot follow me. He is not saying we need to hate our parents, or somehow we need to live the life of a hermit, each one of us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Jesus cannot go against God's own Law: Honor your father and your mother, right? Jesus is not dumping that commandment from the list of the Ten Commandments. In the Bible, hate usually refers to loving less, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated. God did not really hate Esau at all. Jacob was loved more; and so, Jesus is saying: You have to love me...you have to love your Creator and Redeemer God more than even the people around you in this life, and you certainly have to love and honor God more than your possessions or your car or your house or your 401k. If you love those things and rely *more* on those things than you do on the grace of God, that is a problem.

DAVE BAST

So, he is using exaggerated language—hyperbole—but he is making a real point because what it means to sit down and count the cost of being his disciple, of following him, is to ask ourselves, really searchingly, the hard question: Does Jesus have first place in my life? Am I willing to put him above everyone and everything, no matter what; no conditions; no questions asked? Because if I am not willing to do that, I haven't properly counted the cost, and I am not really ready to commit to him. He is not going to play second fiddle to anybody or anything. It is him first or not at all. The point is not, well, sit down and count the cost and decide *no*, I don't want to do that; I don't want to put him first; are you kidding? That is too difficult. I am not going to follow him at all. No; the point is, he is worth it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is a good self-check to ask whether you can really, really rely fully on Jesus; even if the bottom drops out in other areas of your life, are you still committed? It reminds me, there was a denomination of churches in Canada that had a major lawsuit brought against them and it went badly...it went against them...they lost their churches, they lost their property, they lost all of the outward signs of the church; and somebody asked one of the pastors or maybe one of the bishops in this denomination: What are you going to do now? And he said: Well, you know, if we just have a little bread, a little wine, a little water and a table, we can continue on with our ministry of Word and sacrament. That is keeping your eyes on Jesus, which reminds us, Dave, of a passage from Hebrews. How do we stay committed? Well, we fix our eyes on Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; this wonderful reminder from Hebrews 12, the first few verses: Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. That is the thing we need to do, Dave, in the discipline and commitment. Every day you get up and say: I can believe again. I am going to continue to follow Jesus *today*.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We do that every day. As C. S. Lewis once said: How many people do you know who actually got argued out of their faith? No; most of us just drift away...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is also from early in Hebrews 2. Don't drift away. Stay committed, and by the grace of God's Holy Spirit, we are able to do exactly that.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening to *Groundwork* today. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee along with Dave Bast. Join us again next time as we study scripture to better understand the spiritual discipline of sabbath rest. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

*Correction: In the audio of this episode, host Dave Bast misspeaks and says "at the end of Galatians 6," when the verses he references (Galatians 6:7-10) are actually in the middle of the chapter.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/commitment-and-discipleship>

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