

## The Ups & Downs of Spiritual Life

1. Warm-up Question: Last week the CDC announced that masks are no longer required for those who are fully vaccinated, even indoors. Marion County still has a legally binding mask mandate, but that may change soon. Meanwhile, our church Board has decided to stop requiring reservations to come to church on Sunday mornings. Masks and social distancing are still required, but not advance reservations. As things gradually start returning to normal, how are you feeling about all this – happy, worried, cautious, too soon, too slow? Have you been back to the church building yet? How did that feel?
  
2. On Sunday we focused on chapter 17 of James Martin’s book “Learning to Pray.” There, Father Jim talks about the things that distract us from a life of prayer. The challenges he identifies can be divided into two categories: micro distractions and macros distractions. Micro distractions are all those random scattered thoughts that shoot through our brain when we’re trying to pray. Jeff offered five practical suggestions for taming micro distractions:
  - Find a quiet place to pray.
  - If necessary, use headphones or play white noise on your phone or laptop.
  - Unless you’re using it for white noise, turn off your phone.
  - Talk out loud when you pray.
  - Talk to God about what’s distracting you. Instead of fighting it, incorporate it into your prayer.
  - a. How much of a challenge are micro distractions for you in prayer?
  - b. Which of the five suggestions might be most helpful to you – and why?
  - c. Are there any of these suggestions you’ve tried before, but not found helpful?
  - d. Do you have additional ideas for how we can tame distractive thoughts during prayer?
  
3. Macro distractions are harder to address. Examples of macro distractions include things like: a major change in life circumstances that disrupts your spiritual patterns and rhythm, or the ebb and flow of spiritual enthusiasm as you move through the seasons of life. Jesus taught us to expect these kinds of things to happen in his famous parable about seeds that fall on different types of soil. There he identifies four seasons of spiritual life that many of us move in and out of. Read Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, as printed on p. 3.
  - a. The four seasons of spiritual life mentioned by Jesus can be summed up as:
    - Times when we ignore God’s voice in our life. Verse 4.
    - But then something happens and we make a new beginning with God and experience the euphoria of a spiritual honeymoon. Verse 5.

- But then life happens – all kinds of disruptions, distractions, and disappointments – and our spiritual life gets interrupted. Verse 7.
  - Some people manage to push through all the distractions and break through to a long, stable, fruitful spiritual life. Verse 8.
- b. What word would you choose to describe your current season of spiritual life? Explain why you chose that word.
  - c. Which of the four seasons of spiritual life mentioned by Jesus most closely corresponds to where you find yourself right now?
  - d. Are there any of the four seasons Jesus mentions that you've never experienced?
4. Jesus' parable causes us to wonder what separates those who get distracted and drift from those who manage to break through to a long, stable, fruitful spiritual life. Jeff suggested the answer is found in the Hebrew word *cheched* (pronounced "hesed"). *Cheched* means tenacious love and is often translated into English as "steadfast love." Ruth's determined devotion to Naomi is an example of *cheched* in action. The Bible repeatedly uses *cheched* to describe how God relates to us and calls us to apply *cheched* to our relationships with God and others. In short, *cheched* is one of the Bible's most important words for anyone who wants to experience long-term thriving relationships. Read Ruth 1:15-19, as printed on p. 3.
- a. Tell us about someone you have loved with *cheched* love or someone who has loved you with *cheched* love. Why would you describe that love as *cheched*?
  - b. Jeff told about a couple who had a wonderful long-term relationship despite the fact that four-years into their relationship one of them had an affair. What thoughts, feelings, or questions did that story evoke in you?
  - c. Give an example of a time recently when you've applied *cheched* to one of your relationships in ways large or small.
  - d. Why is *cheched* so critical to building long-term, stable, thriving relationships?
  - e. Is *cheched* worth it? Why or why not?
  - f. Jeff said, "Loving God is ultimately not about a feeling, but about a decision. I have decided to follow Jesus. That means I'm a person of faith when I feel like it and when I don't. It means I go to church when I feel like it and when I don't. It means I serve when I feel like it and when I don't. It means I pray when I feel like it and when I don't – because this is who I am." In whatever season of spiritual life you find yourself in, what is *cheched* calling you to push through, adjust, or do differently in your relationship with God?

***Remember, reservations are no longer required to attend church on Sundays!  
Worship at 9:15 and 11:00 am. Children's programming at 11:00 am.***

## **Mathew 13:1-9, 18-23**

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. <sup>2</sup>Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup>And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup>Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup>Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup>Let anyone with ears listen!"

18 [Later he explained the parable to his disciples, saying] <sup>19</sup>"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. <sup>20</sup>As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup>yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. <sup>22</sup>As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>23</sup>But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

## **Ruth 1:15-19**

15 So Naomi said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord [curse me] and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" <sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"