Ways of Faith 2- Gratitude

Unity Church July 20, 2025

Psalm 103 Matthew 11:28-30

Last week I started a little series I’m calling Ways of Faith, not a list of hard fast rules that must be followed, but a look at the “how” of practicing, walking out our relationship with God and Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

It has occurred to me that it doesn’t help much to tell someone they should pray or read scripture or meditate if you’ve not taken the time to look at each one of these in a way that a person can make these practices their own. It seems logical that before setting groceries on someone’s doorstep, we should make sure that they can cook and have the things needed to do so.

Although I’m no longer making sawdust, I find myself drawn back to wood working for examples. Fair warning, this series is going to have quite a few. Instead of diving right in to things like prayer, Bible study and meditation, I like to start at the very beginning, that is our state of mind.

In Woodworking there are two very different schools of thought, Western and Eastern. Although both of them revolve around a love of working with wood and the inherent beauty of well crafted pieces made of wood, their approach is quite different.

The Western School is dominated or influenced by the industrial age, where machinery is designed and built to gain the most production at the lowest cost and the woodworker, or artisan is almost secondary to the machinery. A friend of mine worked at a high end cabinet shop, he said that his days were spent setting up and feeding equipment.

The Eastern School is still populated with small artisan shops of skilled woodworkers building things using hand tools which are frequently handmade by artisans who specialize in iron working.

In their purest forms, one school produces inexpensive furniture, the other produces furniture as art. Over the years as furniture production has moved to the far east, the machinery moved with it. Also, the influences of Eastern, especially Japanese woodworking have made their way into the west. Almost all Artisanal Woodworkers have embraced Eastern practices to one degree or another. 1

The Japanese approach to woodworking borders on mystical, it revolves around an almost spiritual reverence for wood. George Nakashima said that if you can not improve the wood in front of you you should do nothing. But one of the things he and most of the other greats often talk about is one’s “approach” to what ever wood is being worked with. That is, what do you bring, your skill, your eye, your respect.

To those of us in the west, this seems extreme, if not crazy. The average Amishman will tell you they have a 1000 ft of lumber that needs planed and glued up so they can build what ever they’re building. Mr Nakashima might spend hours looking through his stacks of lumber to find the right piece to build a chair or a table from.

His idea of “approach,” is more than simply staring at planks leaning against the wall. It is his skill, his trained eye, his imagination meeting and assessing the beauty of various slabs of lumber to choose the one whose beauty will be complimented by the idea of what he intends to use it for. I know that about now your eyes are getting ready to roll, as you think this is craziness. I will grant you that it verges on obsessive, but it you ever get the chance to stand in front of one his tables, it doesn’t seem as crazy as it sounds.

But his idea of approach, strikes me as important. To look at this another way, Jane Bartholomew blesses us most Sundays with her talent at the piano. Outside of her skill and 60 plus years of experience, she brings her joy or sorrow to those keys. Like everyone, she has good days and bad, happy, sad, even angry days.

You may not be able to pick them out, I’m certain she can, I think more often than not, I can. There are Sundays where she plays well, there are Sundays where she literally dances on the keyboard, where the music just seems to soar. Her skill set, only improves with experience, the variable is in the approach. What she brings to the piano that day.

I’ve seen similar ideas in people who are great athletes, (no, I’m not talking about myself.) A friend who is a long distant runner says that he loves to run when he’s happy, he needs to run when he’s angry, and can’t wait to run when he’s sad.

What does this have to do with the Ways of Faith? What is our “approach” to walking out this relationship we have with God. This goes back to the conversation last week about lists of “Should, Ought, Must,” as opposed to the simple question, “Lord, what do you want me to do today?” 2

If our practice, our walking the way of Faith is something akin to cleaning up our room after our mother yelled at us for the 3rd or 4th time, it has become something we “Should” do, not something we want to do. It becomes an obligation, a requirement. One could argue that if this is our reality, we’ve lost the battle before we’ve even started. If we’re praying because we’re supposed to pray, it soon becomes simply saying words. Likewise with Bible reading, if we’re keeping daily devotions because I tell you that you ought to, you’re just looking at words on a page.

Which comes back to “approach.” Before getting into what our approach “should” be, (there’s that word again,) I’d like to look at what it shouldn’t be. Our prayer life is an opportunity for us to speak intimately with our Dad, through the Holy Spirit. Think of it as a conversation. If you have a troubled past with your earthly Dad, look at it as time spent with the closest friend you’ve every known. The one who you can tell your deepest, darkest thoughts and feelings to.

If your prayer life is or has become a drudgery, something you do with about as much enthusiasm as you used to say, “Now I lay me down to sleep…” There’s a problem. If you’re doing it out of obligation, stop doing it.

Likewise, your time alone in scripture is a place to learn more about the wonderful ways that our Dad has cared for blessed us, loved us over the centuries. There is something in that book for everyone. There’s parts of it that are like watching paint dry. Trust me on this. But by and large, there are ideas that have sprung from the greatest mind and the fullest heart, reaching out to you, who he loves, hopefully speaking to you.

If your time alone with scripture is or has become a drudgery, something that you do with about as much enthusiasm as your 8th grade Algebra homework. There’s a problem. If your doing it out of obligation, stop doing it.

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says,“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Yes, he’s talking about a yoke, but in the sense of learning his ways, not plowing the back 40. His yoke is learning the ways of faith, the ways of Jesus, which is what we’re talking about here.

 3

Which leads me to the “approach” to this whole idea. Any of you who know me, realize that I roll my eyes at cute, little, pithy, phrases about most anything, especially faith. Unfortunately for me, the older I get the more I realize that there are plenty of reasons for these catchy phrases, namely they’re easy to remember and often they’re true.

Our approach, not only to the ways or practices of faith, but as redeemed sinners, raised with Christ and filled with the Spirit, should be, (here it is:) an Attitude of Gratitude. Actually, this should be one of the touch stones of our entire life, physically, emotionally and spiritually. (I’m realizing that it’s hard to write a sermon without using the word “Should.”) Furthermore, it should be one of the defining factors of our relationship with God and others, especially if we are keeping the two greatest commandments.

I think that this attitude of gratitude comes out of the realization of what our Father God, our heavenly Dad has already done for us. The same way that we realize at an early age, that Grandma makes really good cookies. We appreciate how good they are and would like to have more.

I’m reminded of a time when my daughter Lena brought her sons, to visit. Normally this involved making homemade ice cream. Often times if we knew they were coming it involved Sherry making her special Chocolate Chip cookies, which go very well with home made ice cream.

Anyway, her younger son Finn is a quiet little skinny guy who sort of marches to his own drummer. I’m not calling my grandson weird, but he has his own view of how things should be. He walked up to Sherry and said, “Can I have one?” Now Sherry knew exactly what he was driving at, but coming from the old school where manners makes the man, she responded, “How do you ask?” He looked a little perplexed and said, “Can I have a Cookie?” Sherry replied, “How do you ask?”

Now none of the family are shrinking violets, and he gave her a look that I thought was priceless and she offered, “What about Please and Thank you?” He gave her more of a look and walked away. Guess what, he didn’t get his cookie. The next time he came, he asked Sherry if he could “Please have a Cookie?” I think he ended up eating 3 or 4. And not only said Thank you, but commented how good they were.

 4

The point is, we aren’t 8 year olds, and we’re talking about something that is more important than Chocolate Chip Cookies, although they are important. In the same way that Finn recalled on his next visit that Please and Thank you were the way to get them.

Our hunger, our approach is in recognizing what our loving Father has done and is doing for us. Which is why I chose Psalm 103 as the scripture today. According to this psalm, he: forgives our iniquity, heals our diseases, redeems our life, crowns us with love and mercy, satisfies us with good, works vindication and justice for all. On top of this list, he has shown us his ways and acts through Moses. He is merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He doesn’t deal with us according to our sin, in fact he removes them from us, as far as the east is from the west. The Psalm goes on. I would encourage you to spend time with it this week.

It seems to me that if we consider all of this, if we embrace this reality, we recognize that each of us experienced all or some of this in our own lives, we would chase after it, the same way that an 8 year old Finn remembers that Sherry makes good cookies, in spite of having to say Please and Thank you.

I don’t think that this is a forced approach, anymore than a kid needs forced to eat cookies. David, in Psalm 34:8 says, “O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.” All of us have tasted, all of us are hungry, all of us want more. I think that embracing this reality shapes our approach and changes this walk from a “Should, Ought, Must” thing to a hunger for more.

He awaits our approach.

 5

Matthew 11:28-30

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Psalm 103 Of David.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—

who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field;

for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children,

to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word.

Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers who do his will.

Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion.
Bless the Lord, O my soul.