

A Spiritual Action Plan

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Matthew 13:44-46

Sermons Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

*What is
important?
What gives
our lives
purpose and
meaning?
What do I
want to be
and do with
my life?*

Stephen Covey took time management to a whole new level 20 years ago with his best-selling book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. He identified two factors essential in our use of time: urgency and importance. He explained time management with a series of four quadrants. Quadrant I identifies urgent, important things. Deadline-driven projects and crises belong in this quadrant. Quadrant II represents things that are not urgent but important. Relationship building, personal development and future planning fall into this quadrant. Quadrant III, in many ways, is a phantom to Quadrant I, representing urgent but not important things. Many routine phone calls and meetings fall into this category. Quadrant IV specifies those things which are neither urgent nor important. Busy work and mindless TV fit here.

Covey cautions us to stay clear of Quadrants III and IV because, whether urgent or not, they aren't important. This leaves Quadrants I and II. It's tempting to think because something is urgent, it must, therefore, be important. But we

can become so caught up with doing pressing things that we don't always recognize the true importance of something.

"Quadrant II is where we want to invest our time," Covey writes. Quadrant II represents a principle-centered approach to time management. He asks three questions regarding our use of time. What is important? What gives our lives purpose and meaning? What do I want to be and do with my life? Our answers to these questions determine what we put into this second quadrant.

Deciding what's important is at the heart of the two parables read a few moments ago. In the first parable, Jesus tells his followers, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then, in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field" (Matthew 13:44).

This is the shortest parable on record—a total of one verse. This parable is like my hometown. Blink and you miss it.

There were no F.D.I.C.-insured banks in those days to store your valuables. The safest place to store your treasures was in a strongbox or jar buried

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in a field. You just had to remember where you buried it.

The farmhand in the parable uncovers the treasure while he tills the soil. We're not told who originally owned the treasure. Perhaps the previous owner forgot where he buried it or died before he could reveal its whereabouts to the next-of-kin. This farmhand immediately recognizes this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He invests everything he owns to buy the field.

Maybe you wonder about the ethics of this farmhand who keeps this treasure a secret until he buys the land. But that's asking more of the parable than it was designed to instruct. This little parable isn't intended to teach multiple lessons. Jesus doesn't tell this parable to tease out the ethics of the situation. He tells it to illustrate the incomparable value of the kingdom.

If you find a treasure at a yard sale for \$5 that you know is worth \$500, are you required to tell the owner what the item is really worth? Would you tell the seller, Do you know this picture you're selling for \$5 is actually worth \$500? No, of course not! The finder's keeper axiom applies to yard sale etiquette. You can slap down a 5-spot in good conscience and call it a deal.

The man in the parable is within his legal rights to buy the land. Rabbinic law

specified, "If a man finds scattered money, it belongs to the finder." Evidently, the finder's keeper axiom applies in this situation also.

The second parable, about the pearl of great price, is a close cousin to this hidden treasure parable. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46).

In Jesus' day, pearls held the place of distinction that diamonds do now. The emphasis, like the previous parable, is on the value of the discovery. The merchant sells all that he has to obtain this pearl of great price.

Both parables teach that the kingdom of God has value. God's kingdom has incomparable value, like a hidden treasure in a field or a pearl of great price. These parables call us to order our lives around what's important.

Ordering our lives around important things takes intentionality on our part. This should come as no surprise to you. It takes intentionality if you want to build a solid financial base or establish a retirement plan. It takes intentionality if you want to remodel a house, begin an exercise regimen or lose weight. These things don't happen by accident. Yet, when we come to spiritual growth,

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somehow we think we can be haphazard or casual about it. We think we can fall into the Christian life somehow by accident. I came across a George Barna poll recently that indicates 81percent of all Christians have no real plan for spiritual growth. I'm challenging us today to become intentional about a plan for spiritual growth.

The U.S. military isn't casual or nonchalant about training people to become soldiers. They are intentional about their training methods. Some of you know firsthand of what I speak.

This month and last, we've been reading a book written by Ruth Haley Barton entitled *Sacred Rhythms*. We've examined the "inward" spiritual practices of solitude, scripture, prayer, honoring the body, self-examination, discernment and Sabbath. This summer, we'll turn our focus to "outward" disciplines of spiritual friendship, celebration, worship, mentoring, justice, simplicity, hospitality, care of the earth, witness, mercy and service. We're inviting everybody to establish his or her own rule of life around these practices.

When we use the word "rule," we're not talking about restrictions like you would find at your community swimming pool: No running, no glass, no diving, no pushing. A rule of life provides framework and structure to your spiritual life.

A rule is not merely something we have to do. It's something we yearn to do. Ruth Haley Barton speaks of such rules as sacred rhythms. Dallas Willard calls them, in *The Divine Conspiracy*, a "Curriculum in Christlikeness."

Let me forewarn you. These disciplines don't accomplish anything on their own. We don't get brownie points with God for doing them. These practices are the means by which we enter into the abundant life God offers us.

Establishing a rule of life requires us to give consideration to our personal circumstances. If you are a parent with young kids, you're not going to have the luxury of much time for solitude and personal reflection as, say, a young single or retired person. Your rule of life should reflect your season of life.

Your rule of life should also fit with your specific personality type. If you are an extrovert, you will want to build into your rule of life opportunities for spiritual growth with other people. If you are an introvert, you will want to build in sufficient time for solitude and personal reflection.

This rule of life can be a positive catalyst for change for anyone caught in a pattern of self-destructive behavior. Perhaps you struggle with an addiction of some kind or a chronic anxiety. Your rule of

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life can help you break this cycle.

I urge you to set realistic, measurable goals. Those in the business world sometimes use the acronym SMART in goal setting. Strive to make your rule of life Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-Bound.

Let's say you are ready to establish your own rule of life. I would suggest you order your life in increments of daily, weekly, monthly and yearly priorities. In the daily category, your rule of life could include time for prayer and Scripture meditation. You might prefer your favorite easy chair, where you can close your eyes on the world as you center in prayer, or you may want to pray with eyes wide open as you walk, jog or drive to work.

We have assembled a daily devotional of readings for every day this summer. This booklet begins tomorrow with several weeks' worth of readings on marriage and family relationships. God intended us to practice these disciplines with others in family and church.

Some of these practices will come easy to you while others of them will stretch you. Maybe you resist prayer because you are reluctant to find what you might uncover in this practice, this self-examination process. These practices are intended to challenge as well as comfort us.

In the weekly category, I encourage you to incorporate into your life the practice of Sabbath worship and rest. The purpose of worship, as I said last Sunday, isn't to come to hear me preach or listen to the choir sing, but to center us in things that matter every week. If you are already in the habit of Sunday worship, you might want to incorporate a new attitude as you come to worship. Let me suggest one. Instead of coming with a mindset to critique how our worship leaders are doing, ask yourself, how am I doing in worship? Am I bringing my whole self to worship today?

I spoke last Sunday of the Sabbath practice of rest. You might also want to establish intentions about cultivating spiritual friendship or times when you intentionally unplug from encroaching technology.

On a monthly cycle, you might incorporate volunteering time at a soup kitchen or community organization. You might set goals in terms of hospitality and friendship. Annually, you might decide how you would like to spend vacation time or engaging in a yearly spiritual retreat.

What I'm lobbying for today is a principle-centered approach to our use of time. What is most important? What gives my life meaning and purpose? And what do I want to be and do with my life?

