

FROM DABBLING TO DISCIPLESHIP

Shift Series (Part 1)

Text: Matthew 7:24-29; 13:44-46; Luke 14:25-33

I

One of my heroes in this congregation is a man named, Bill -- a former trustee of our church and one of the most committed disciples of Jesus I know. Some years back, Bill asked me if he could step down from our Board after many years of service. *"I've just turned 55,"* he said, *"and I want to SHIFT my energies and pursue a dream of playing on the Senior Amateur golf circuit. I think the Lord can use me there."*

Now, I'll confess that this conversation left me a little unsure what to think. From what I'd heard, Bill was already a pretty *good* golfer – certainly one of the better "country club players" around. It was hard for me to imagine that Bill could get a whole lot more proficient than he already was or why he'd even bother to try. But it's bad manners to pour cold water on somebody's dream. If Bill wanted a little more free time to refine his game, who was I to object? I figured he'd play a few tournaments, settle for having given it "a try," and be back to attending church board meetings in no time.

What I didn't understand in that moment is what Bill had in mind when he said he planned to make a SHIFT. I was surprised when I learned that he had built a golf practice area in his basement. I was impressed when I learned that he arose at 4:00 each morning to do devotions and physical exercises to improve his core strength. I was amazed when he gave up alcohol to improve his focus and steadiness. I was inspired when this guy who others seek for advice on *their* play humbly welcomed coaching for *his*. But, most of all, I was stunned at what happened with Bill's game.

Less than a year later, Bill Shean Jr. won the United States Senior Amateur golfing title. The following year, he took home the British Senior Amateur crown. And the year after that, he returned and walked away with the U.S. Senior Amateur championship for a second time. For three years straight, Bill was THE #1 senior amateur golfer on planet Earth. Take that in. And then, Bill calmly retired from competitive golf and made another SHIFT – to become THE best family member, businessman, friend, and church leader he could. On the latter front, Bill and his wife, Lyn, co-led the Take Root Campaign that is still transforming the life and mission of this remarkable Church.

II

I tell you Bill's story because it illustrates something very important about life and – as we'll see when we look at the Bible today – something at the very heart of what Jesus wants for us. In almost every significant area of life, becoming even more successful

than we are involves making a purposeful **SHIFT**. You learn to SHIFT your weight from one foot to the other and your athletic performance improves dramatically. You SHIFT your focus from being known by others to knowing *them* and your relationships improve remarkably. You SHIFT your investments from this asset class to that one and your net worth grows significantly. You SHIFT your time and energy from trivial pursuits to transforming ones and – as Bill’s story suggests -- your life and influence rises to a new level. If you want a different and better result in any important zone of your life then you don’t just take a STAB at it. You make a SHIFT. You get this, right?

Well, because God made us, he does too, only more so. God understands the essential shifts human beings need to make in order to live into our full potential. Over the next few weeks, we’re going to look at FOUR LIFE-CHANGING SHIFTS Jesus calls you and me to make. We know these are the shifts God wants us to make because when Jesus really wants to mess with us, when he wants to get behind our defenses and do his transforming work in us, he usually employs a parable. He tells a vivid story designed to make us see things in a fresh way – and this month we’re going to look at a bunch of those parables. I’m really excited about that!

The FIRST of the crucial shifts Christ calls us to make – the one that the other three shifts build off of -- involves moving "**from dabbling to discipleship.**" I’m guessing that most of us are pretty decent dabblers. We do a little of this and a bit of that, but none of it *too* deeply or *too* devotedly. We express enough enthusiasm for the things we’re “into” that others may not notice that we are not into them all that much. I, for example, am a dabbler at golf. This summer, I took a few lessons. I got to the practice range a few times. I played a few rounds. I bought some new clubs and a couple of fine golf shirts. But I didn’t get closer to playing the game like my friend Bill.

The problem with dabbling is that it tends to lead to more dabbling. Because we are investing relatively little when compared to the people who are masters of some discipline, we see little fruit from our efforts and, therefore, WHY invest MORE? So, we just move on to the next pursuit. Because I hadn’t become an overnight sensation at golf, I decided to take a tennis lesson! This is the pattern for a lot of us. We grow accustomed to a life of fairly limited engagements and fairly limited results. It’s not just hobbies like golf. Many of us don’t get really good at forgiveness, or intimacy with our spouse, or mentoring of younger people, or generosity with our resources, or understanding the Bible, or influence with our faith, because we just dabble at it.

But Jesus says: Make a SHIFT. **“I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10)**, says Jesus. Don’t let things stay the way they are today. Move from dithering to devoting yourself, from dabbling to discipleship, and you will find your greater potential.

III

Do you know what a “disciple” is? Whether it’s in golf, marriage, basket-weaving, or spiritual character, a disciple is someone committed to getting better by aligning themselves to the pattern of some master. Dallas Willard, one of the most amazing Christians of the past century, says that a disciple is someone who catches a VISION of something better, develops an INTENTION to pursue that vision, and exercises the MEANS necessary to achieving it. Dallas once said: *“People who pursue VIM with vigor grow to their full potential.”*

Dallas Willard learned that truth from the parables of Jesus. Think, for example, how many of Jesus’ parables are about VISION. In Matthew chapter 13, Jesus says: **44 The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. 45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. (Matt 13)**

In these and numerous other parables, Jesus is trying to say: “Open your eyes. Catch a vision for what is valuable (like a treasure), beautiful (like a pearl), important (like relationships). Don’t just drift or stumble through life; set your sights on the great things God has given you or wants for you – and which, in your clearest moments, you know you want for yourself – and make that vision your grand obsession. It’s the start of a new year. What do you want to be different a year from now? What’s the vision you have for your relationships, your health, your proficiency, or spirituality? Describe that vision. Write it down. Color it in.

And then, secondly, develop an INTENTION to pursue that vision. Be like that person who sold everything to buy the field where he found a treasure. Be like that merchant who saw that perfect pearl and ran off to liquidate his savings in order to obtain it. In other words, don’t just wish you had a deeper relationship with God, a better connection with your family members, a greater influence for good in the world, a higher GPA, a finer career, or golf game. Wishing is for *dabblers*. Disciples don’t merely wish, they walk. They get intentional about pursuing a worthy vision.

In Luke chapter 14, we read that: **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. 27 And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple... 31 “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against 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? 32 If 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. 33 In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.**

Now, we know from countervailing things Jesus says elsewhere that he is not literally calling us to hate our family members or liquidate all of our assets. Jesus is speaking in hyperbole here to get our attention. What he's trying to say is that discipleship is different from dabbling. It requires an intentional commitment that will involve paying some costs. Do you think that 15 year-old, Coco Gauff, who amazed everybody at the U.S. Open this past week merely wished she might be a great tennis player? Do you think my friend Bill just spontaneously woke up at 4 am to do his devotions and start working on his game? Do you think those remarkable followers of Jesus who seem to handle adversity, conflict, and prosperity with such impressive grace became that way accidentally? No. Dabblers might think that. But disciples know that the great ones on this earth, catch a vision, develop an actual intention to move toward that vision, and then, finally, exercise the MEANS.

In his closing comments in his most famous message, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said this: **24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.** Why didn't the house fall when the Hurricane swept through? Because the homeowners were inside hoping it wouldn't? Because they got lucky and the storm got downgraded to a Category 2? Nope. It's because long before the winds began to blow, someone wise chose to exercise some important MEANS to give himself the best chance of doing well if a storm came. He built his house on the rock.

IV

I'll be blunt: We live in a Dabblers' World today. The message and pattern in many places is that it doesn't matter much where you go or how you build or what sort of foundation your life has or how well you are bolted to it. Any ground is probably as good as another, especially if there are enough people like me settling there. But ask the guy who built his house on the sand how that worked in the long run. If could impart one huge, transforming truth to you as we start this season ahead it would be this: God LOVES you and wants a great life for you and all his children. He cares about how we are building our lives.

My friend, John Ortberg, puts it like this: "To love someone is to desire and work toward their becoming the best version of themselves. The one person in all the universe who can do this perfectly for you is God. He has no other agenda. He has no unmet needs he is hoping you can help him with. And he knows what the best version of you looks like... God's primary will for your life is not the achievements you accrue; it's the person you become... God is at work every moment to help you become his best version of you."

So, as you go into this year ahead, caught a vision of what that best version of you might look like? Maybe it's to become a great athlete like I've described today. Perhaps it's to be a dramatically better student, family member, or friend. Maybe it's to excel in your work life or some other sphere. All that's good; but please catch the vision of becoming the kind of person who would make the most of those realities if you achieved them and would be just fine, even if things got very stormy on the path to your dreams. Jesus makes clear that, above all else, God wants us to become people whose character and conduct bears a stunning similarity to his. That's the treasure, the pearl of great price worth committing ourselves to. God wants you and me and our loved ones to become people who can handle adversity, celebrity, conflict, criticism, resources, and opportunities for influence as beautifully as Jesus did.

But we have to develop a true intention to pursue that vision and then exercise the means that cooperate with God's efforts to build that kind of life. So here's my challenge for you: Pick one of the historic means of growing as a disciple of Jesus and truly commit to it for these next three months. Come worship with your church family every week you are in town. Join a Christian small group or a midweek Bible study. Start using a Christian devotional daily. Serve on one of the ministry teams that make this church go, or maybe even better, start viewing your workplace, your home, wherever you are during the week as a place of serving Jesus.

In short, make a *SHIFT from dabbling to discipleship* and see what God does with that. Maybe you don't win the Senior Amateur this year. Maybe something dramatically more life-changing than that takes place. But this I do know: If you really make this shift, God is going to work powerfully for you and through you with it. For Jesus says: **"I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly." (John 10:10)**

Let's pray together...