

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

An Open-Handed Life

Part Two of a series "Lifelong Discipleship"

Luke 18.9-14

October 26, 2025

Today's sermon is the second of three about phases of discipleship in our lives. Last week, we focused on early discipleship, the struggle to get our lives together, pictured as a wrestling with God and with ourselves. Next week, we'll consider the end of life and preparation for death—or as the choir sings, “for our departing.” Today, the big middle, the long years and decades of adult life. Ron Rolheiser calls discipleship in this part of life the struggle to give our lives away.

At first, that might not seem right. For most people it's no struggle at all to have your life taken away, not by force, perhaps, but in the daily grind of responsibilities for family, job, community. I think many people would say they're struggling just to hold it together more than give even more of it away. But that's the deeper wisdom in Rolheiser's perspective. The struggle is to be the kind of person who gives it freely and generously rather than one who relinquishes it begrudgingly and resentfully, and to be the kind of person whose humility and gratitude give them strength from a source much deeper and much greater than they are. As we grow in Christ through the years and the experiences of life, we pray to become people who give more freely and discover that it is in giving that we receive.

Giving our lives isn't always dramatic, but sometimes it is. On the night of April 15, 1912, Annie Funk found a seat in one of the last lifeboats about to be lowered from the sinking Titanic. She was on her way home from India, where she was serving as the first woman to be a missionary. She'd been summoned home to be with her mother who was ill and dying. But as the command, “Lower away,” was being shouted she saw a mother with children in the throng left behind on the deck. She did not hesitate to call out, to summon them to the boat, to give up her place, and then watch them swing over the side to safety as the Titanic began to break apart and slip into the North Atlantic depths. It was just like Annie to do something like that, her friends all said. A memorial at the Hereford Mennonite Church Cemetery, in Pennsylvania honors her. It reads:

SHE WAS COMING HOME ON HER FIRST FURLOUGH, WHEN DEATH OVERTOOK HER IN THE WRECK OF THE STEAMSHIP TITANIC OFF THE COAST OF NEWFOUNDLAND. HER LIFE WAS ONE OF SERVICE IN THE SPIRIT OF THE MASTER – NOT TO BE MINISTERED UNTO BUT TO MINISTER.

When the moment of crisis came, Anne Funk, disciple of Jesus Christ, knew what to do. She made the moment of tragedy into a moment of grace, the fruit of a deep and lifelong relationship with Jesus—she gave her life away, echoing the words of the famous prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Grant that I may not so much seek

*to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in forgiving that one is forgiven,
it is in dying that one awakens to eternal life.*

This is the growth in Christ that adult life invites you into over and over and over, if not in dramatic ways then in a thousand ways. There is no spiritual path in all the world intended to leave a person in a beginning state for their whole lives. We're intended to grow, and that growth involves change. And that change involves struggle. In the New Testament, it's a change from milk to solid food. In the great spiritual classics of Christianity, it is pictured as an ascent up the spiritual mountain. In the early phase, you are still at the base, getting ready, but then you begin to grow in God, mature in your discipleship, and you are on the ascent. An ascent up a mountain is a fitting image because it hints at the struggle that's involved.

Consider the story Jesus tells of two men praying at the temple: One is a Pharisee. Let's take him at face value; he is as he thinks he is—righteous, obedient, faithful, just, disciplined. If you met him on the street you'd recognize him as a pillar of the community, a model of the faith. He's devoted to God. And he prays, "Thank you, God—for me. Thank you I am not like other people—who aren't me. Thank you that I'm not like thieves or those who are unjust or adulterers, even like that tax collector over there." He doesn't steal, he practices justice, he's faithful. Other people may be like that, and maybe he used to be like that, but he's not anymore. He's grown up, he's matured; he's gotten his life together, at least in outward things.

He's quite aware that others haven't done so, not like him. One of them is standing not too far away. A tax collector, pretty much the worst kind of person, a free agent working for the empire against his own people, enforcing official tax levies and free to add on whatever he could for himself. The pharisee thanks God he's not like the tax collector. For his part, the tax collector would not even lift his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast—an act of humility, even desperation—"God, be merciful to me—a sinner."

One of them is on the road to true faith, and it's not the one who looks like he's got it together. For all his outward virtue, the Pharisee is trapped in the immaturity of his own self-righteousness. It may be a steep climb, but at least the sinner who confesses his sin knows his place before God and dependence on divine help. We can't dismiss the ways the tax collector hurts his neighbors, but we can have hope that, with God's help, he's on the path of redemption. Only one of these two will go home justified in the eyes of God. The one who is humble.

A stumbling block to our growth is pride, such as that of the Pharisee. Pride is the enemy of faith when it turns you inward and causes contempt toward others, especially others who need your help not your judgment. “Pride in the [person who is growing older] takes the form of refusing to be small before God and refusing to recognize properly our interconnection with others. [Pride] is a refusal to accept our own poverty; namely, to recognize that we are standing before God and others with empty hands and that all we have and have achieved has come our way by grace more so than our own efforts.” (Rolheiser)

A maturing, humble person sees their life more and more in terms of what they can give because they recognize all that they’ve been given. It is, this path with Christ, in every way, the path of grace: Grace received, grace given, and grace embodied. The humble giving of life, expressed in grace, rooted in gratitude.

Around his seventy-fifth birthday, the Australian novelist Morris West wrote a series of autobiographical essays titled, *A View from the Ridge*. In the prologue, he suggests that by the time you reach age seventy-five you need to have only one word left in your spiritual vocabulary—“gratitude”—and that maturity is attained precisely at that moment when gratitude begins to drown out and cauterize the hurts in your life. As he describes it: “Life has served me as it serves everyone, sometimes well and sometimes ill, but I have learned to be grateful for the gift of it, for the love that began it and the other loves with which I have been so richly endowed.” (Rolheiser, Ronald. *Wrestling with God*, 175.)

The reality we experience in adult life is that our lives, in all the loves and responsibilities, in our joys and our deep, searing pain—that our lives, in one way or another and in all kinds of ways are claimed from us bite by bite, minute by minute, dollar by dollar constantly. Rarely does the drama of discipleship rise to the rhetoric of taking up our cross and following Jesus, but sometimes it does or gets awfully close to it. It looks a lot more like getting out of bed one more day and showing up for work one more time and doing well at work again, after doing it yesterday and all year. And doing that after getting the children off to school, and navigating home life, and new aches and pains, and maybe the friends, and worrying about the parents, and dealing with the neighbors. And Wordle. And then all the other things—the bills that keep coming, and the meetings that keep getting scheduled. And all of this held in the tension between who you want to be—generative, good, kind, loving, lovely, fun, responsible, healthy-- and who you feel like you are—tired, a failure, undisciplined, even a hypocrite in your darkest alone moments.

Take up your cross—absolutely, if it came to it. Take up your daily life—that feels harder. The struggle isn’t in letting go of your life—your life’s going to be required of you in a million ways. The struggle is in living with such grace that you’re giving it freely, willingly, joyfully, and purposefully in the joy and in the pain. Generously. This is how we grow. Not by gaining but by giving and discovering the life is in the open hand not the clinched fist.

Humility and gratitude are the fruit of life with Christ. Together, they lead to a generosity that grows in us toward others and toward life with God. Toward others who need us and depend upon us, toward others who hurt us.

Toward the end of his life, St. Paul writes that he is being poured out like a libation. A libation is a sacrificial offering to God. He was able to say his life in the end was an offering poured out to God precisely because he had come to understand his life all along was a sacrifice offered to God. This wasn't a new revelation in a moment of unusual piety. It was the way he lived his life in the grace of God who had become his life—ever since that moment on the road to Damascus. It was the way he lived his life, and we can, too.

I love that St. Paul gives us this language of a drink offering. We, too, can choose this perspective—I give my life as an offering to God and to all the loves I serve. We have to choose it over and over and over again until it becomes deep-rooted within us in the struggle to give our lives away and do so with joy in the offering. In confidence in the one who gave me this life and this opportunity, I do so in hope that God will use what little I am able to give to bless others and the world. This is love. This is the life of grace to which we are invited, and to which we are called.

A discipleship that is generative in the drama and drudge is living life in the day to day, in the freedom that comes through humility, gratitude, and generosity. It is by grace like this that we are set free to truly live, even when it feels like we're just dying. It is by grace that anything we say or do may be placed into God's hands and used for good.

May we grow in this faith through all the years of our lives, always with the prayer "Have mercy on me a sinner." And always with the prayer, "All that I am, and all that I have, I place into your hands."

Amen.