

SPIRITUAL RUTS

ten principles to help you grow again

Guilt is ugly and it's powerful. It locks us in a cage where we forget about our freedom because we can't see past the bars. But I think there's something worse.

Indifference.

Indifference is the same cage, but the door is open. Rather than rush toward freedom, we languish in apathy.

For the spiritual life, guilt is disastrous and indifference is catastrophic.

Healthy things grow. There are natural seasons of vibrant growth and discouraging dryness. In the darker times, destructive spiritual ruts are created by guilt and indifference.

Redemption becomes poisoned and we're cut off from the Celebration Life we have in Christ.

This side of heaven, we will hurt people (and ourselves!). We will sin against God, missing the mark because of our pride and selfishness and desire for personal gain. Guilt follows on the heels of our foolishness, but it does have to take up permanent residency in our hearts. Guilt ought to drive us into God's presence.

BUT. Temptation still works in the shadow of our shame. It quietly urging us to ignore the guilt, deny it's existence. We make excuses and achieve mental acrobatics that defy reason. In the shadow of our shame we find rationalizations and entitlements:

"It's not that bad. Definitely not as bad as Johnny. I deserved that indulgence."

The spiritual rut becomes a stranglehold.

But there's hope. There is always hope because of Jesus. God will show up. What is our responsibility when we're stuck in the rut?

the first principle

Save the Best for Your Best

Come now, let us reason together . . . Isaiah 1:18

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Mark 1:35

The Creator of the universe wants to spend time with us. Our God is a relational God, and he invites us to spend time with him.

When I take a moment to remember this essential and elementary truth, I'm amazed. Shocked. Floored. Mystified. Humbled.

This is an appointment worth keeping.

If you were going to a job interview, you'd show up prepared. You wouldn't be tired, unfocused, or easily distracted. You wouldn't interrupt or rush it.

Time with God ought to have the same kind of priority.

Getting out of the rut begins with a mind shift: we ought to view time with God as one of the best things in our life. If we see this as the best, then we'll give it our best. We will never get out of the rut if we treat time with God as an obligation, like a class we don't like or a meeting we dread attending. We cannot show up and give God our left-over's.

Set aside your best time for the best person in your life: God.

the second principle

First Things Always

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. Revelation 2:2-5

The church in Ephesus was filled with survivors who didn't tolerate moral bankruptcy or fake claims of leadership. They endured hardship and persecution; they rejected wicked people and false teaching. In the midst of these admirable qualities, they had fallen from great heights and landed directly in a rut.

The kind of repentance is clear: do the things you did when you first became a Christian.

Remember the joy and excitement you had when you began taking God seriously? What about that feeling of anticipation and expectation you the moments before going to church or having a quiet time?

It's not enough to say, "I WANT THAT FEELING BACK." Everyone wants that feeling, even people who have been stuck in the rut for a long, long time.

We have to do something. We have to stop forsaking our first love and do the things we did at first.

Repenting is never easy, because we have to admit we're wrong—about the important things. We don't mind admitting we're wrong when it's safe. It's a whole new story when we have to sacrifice our ego.

When I first became a Christian, I spent a lot of time reading the Bible, making notes and writing out my questions. I journaled nearly every day because I didn't want to miss anything God might be teaching me. Sometimes I forget to do these "first things" because I pridefully label them as "basic," thinking that I'm too advanced for those baby steps (I'm ashamed that sometimes I even think, "I don't need to read this passage in Scripture, I've read it a million times before"). Nothing could be further from the truth! Leaving behind the "first things" is a sure way to remain in the rut.

What were those first things you loved to do? If you want to get out of the rut (or avoid it), you need to do the "first things" always. Here's a great goal: live every

day of faith as if it were the first day. Rediscover the "first things" you did to grow, and pursue them with all of your heart.

the third principle

Get Rid of the Guilt

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Philippians 3:12-15

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

You can't get out of the rut if you're holding on to guilt. It's a weight you can't carry if you expect to run the race God has set before you. Guilt has a place in our lives: it ought to be a warning, like the check engine light on your dashboard. You see the light and you get the car fixed. Guilt is also like those shock paddles the doctor uses to get a heart beating again. You can't live with that constant shock going through the system. You won't get out of the rut if guilt is continually coursing through your system.

Don't carry guilt for missing quiet times. This will lead to paralysis, numbing and the hardening of the heart. Convictions ought to move us closer to God, not further away. Every Christian makes mistakes. Conviction is the Holy Spirit's whisper inviting you back to the Cross, back to forgiveness in Christ. When you stumble in your faith, commit to "failing forward" and come to God and seek forgiveness in humility. If you slack off in your current devotional plan (we'll talk more about this later), don't try to catch up. **THIS IS A DEATH SENTENCE.** Simply continue to move forward. Rest in God's grace, **FOR IT IS THE ONLY WAY FOR CONTINUAL GROWTH.**

God forgives us, we ought to forgive ourselves. This is different from entitlement because we're driven further into God's presence and a life of obedience. Entitlement leads away from God into the World's way of living.

If you want to worship God in the way that he intended, you need to right the wrongs you've committed to others. So deeply do I wish this wasn't necessary for the spiritual life! If you've offended another person, you need to make amends to remove the stumbling block that's keeping you in the rut.

the fourth principle

Reject the Rituals

So then, the word of the LORD to them will become: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there--so that they will go and fall backward, be injured and snared and captured. Isaiah 28:13

Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. Matthew 6:1

It's abundantly clear in scripture that God is concerned with the condition of our hearts. We lack integrity when what we do isn't a true reflection of our heart. God is looking for pure hearts, not fake and falsified rituals. We cannot simply look good (according to others). We must also be good (according to God). God's rules are a roadmap for worship and a pathway to real life.

It is tragic when we take the Holy Law of God and turn it into a recipe for winning approval from Christians. The Bible calls this hypocrisy.

Lacking integrity creates a superficial faith. Superficial believers excel at criticizing others, because when I focus on the faults of others I can forget about my own. The result? Rather than pursue true intimacy with God, we become masters of ritual, we fake it so we can avoid the harsh judgments of others.

Try this on for size: Don't do spiritual exercises when you don't feel like doing them. Ignore that advice and I think you'll ritualize your faith. Your devotion to God will become nothing more than a series of meaningless actions. They will keep you from being attacked by other (superficial) believers, but you'll be dying on the inside. "Going through the motions" isn't a trajectory that'll get you out of the rut. You may impress others, but you won't impress God.

Here' is how this principle looks in my life. I hesitate to share this because it may look different in your life. If I don't feel like going to church, I don't. If I don't want to have an extended quiet time, I don't. This principle can be taken too far. I won't skip a spiritual discipline more than two or three times. After that, if I don't feel like doing something, there's a good chance my feelings need to be changed by my actions.

the fifth principle

Do Something Different

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.” Mark 2:21-22

Sometimes the rut isn't very deep, and we only need to make a minor change to get our spiritual life back on track. Everyone needs a spiritual growth game plan and that plan ought to have some variety. People approach structure and spontaneity differently...so I leave it to you to figure out how much planning and how much variety you need. Just don't forget you need both. If you're in a rut, go for what you're currently lacking. If you lack structure, add some. If you have lack variety, do something different.

Here are a few different options to give you some ideas (this isn't an exhaustive list!):

>> JOURNALING – Making the time to write down your thoughts has TREMENDOUS power to help you grow. The words are never good enough to describe what you're thinking and feeling, but they help make your mental life more specific and concrete. In this you can reflect openly and examine honestly what God is doing in your life.

- ...| write about a meaningful passage or verse...explore it in-depth
- ...| write about your life, examining your deeds, words, and thoughts
- ...| write out your prayers, this can help you stay focused in prayer
- ...| write out major life lessons and reread them periodically to remember what God has taught you in the past

>> THINKING – Staying focused for an extended time is hard for everyone, but the benefits make it worth it: what we think about determines who we are (See Romans 12:1-2).

Meditate on a single verse or phrase, turning it over and over to consider what it means.

Memorize a scripture that is especially meaningful and personal. This change the way you think and give you power when tempted.

>> PRAYER – Every relationship is improved by talking, and prayer is just talking and listening to God.

- ...| Make a new prayer commitment: set an attainable time goal to pray, choose something that's a little bit more than what your current habit.
- ...| Pray out loud: this may feel a little awkward, but saying the words can help create a deeper focus.
- ...| Say nothing, and just listen. This is tough, it's hard to "keep yer mouth shut."
- ...| Confess your guilt, forgiveness is ESSENTIAL to grow spiritually, and God wants us to ask him specifically for grace.
- ...| Kneel while you pray, approaching God in humility does wonders for a heart.
- ...| Sing a favorite praise song.

>> READING – God's Word is the best way to learn about him and who he's made us to become. All believers have the Holy Spirit who will teach us as we take time to be with God.

- ...| Read a large portion of Scripture (two chapters or more) to get general ideas and thought flow
- ...| Read a small portion of scripture and carefully digest each verse
- ...| Occasionally make the time to read an entire book of scripture
- ...| Read a devotional book
- ...| Do deeper study and read some Biblical study reference materials

One last thing: location is important: it's good to have a consistent place where you can easily retreat to be with God and free from distractions. It's also good to have some special places (like a beach or a park) where you can enjoy God's creation.

the sixth principle

Open Your Mouth, Open Your Eyes

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees . . . Deuteronomy 8:10-11

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Deuteronomy 4:9

We humans can get comfortable with just about anything. We excel at looking for comfort, enjoying our comfort, and fighting for our comfort.

Our needs drive us forward to achieve and accumulate. When we get what we're after, we are satisfied. Satisfaction's power diminishes our drive and comfort takes over. I'm not just talking about the essentials like food, clothing, and shelter. Every time we get what we want, comfort is around the corner.

Consumption leads to comfort, but the engine that takes us there is stereotypes. A stereotype is a powerful assumption that says, I KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN. Stereotypes aren't all bad, in fact, we need them to live a normal life. Learning from our past experiences is a form stereotyping. If we couldn't learn from the past, every situation would be completely new and different, we would lack confidence and have no ability to act quickly.

For example, when you go to sit down in a chair, you probably throw yourself into it without much thought. What about the very first time you sat in a chair, what was that like? First, you observed other people sitting. Next you grabbed the chair and tested its strength. Finally, you climbed up into it and began to relax, knowing it would hold you. After several successful attempts, you "stereotyped" what it means to sit in a chair. At some point, you grew up enough to throw yourself into a chair without a second thought.

Some parts of our life ought to be stereotyped. We must not stereotype our spirituality. If we do, we lack the wonder because we are no longer looking for God to do the unexpected. When we have a "been there, don't that" attitude towards God, we're in a deep spiritual rut.

The antidote is two-fold: We must open our mouths to praise God. We must also open our eyes to watch our lives.

Praising God means thanking him for his blessings. Praising God for the good things he did in the past will alert us to watch for them in the future. Waiting expectantly for God to act is a sure way to fight off spiritually devastating stereotypes. The best way to get ready for God to do something new is to thank him for the new things he did in the past.

It is also important that we become careful observers. Keeping a close watch on our lives will prepare us to tackle the beginning stages of stereotyping our faith. Instead of waiting for the shipwreck, we can make important adjustments when we veer off course. If you're in this rut, start praising God today, and commit to keeping a close watch on your life.

the seventh principle

Be Diligent without (trying) To Do It All

. . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Philippians 2:12-13

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-- fruit that will last. John 15:16

Growing spiritually is a lot like water skiing.

In order to ski, two essential elements must work together: the boat and the skier. The boat's power cuts through the water. The skier's power keeps him standing. Of course, the person is far weaker than the boat, but the boat alone can't make a person ski. Both must work together, closely coordinated, to make a successful ski run. To grow spiritually, our power works with God's power. This is God's design. We work out our salvation as God works in us.

Many non-growing Christians fall out of balance in one of two ways: lacking diligence or trying to do it all alone. We cannot sit back, comfortable on the couch with our feet on the coffee table and expect God to grow us while we do nothing.

On the other hand, we cannot do it all on our own, rushing ahead of God and wonder why he doesn't fit into our plans. Being too liberal or too legal will keep us in the rut.

God chose us LONG before we ever chose him. He loves us more than we love ourselves. It's his lead we must follow: being diligent without (trying) to do it all on our own.

the eighth principle

Stop Measuring God's Love

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. Ephesians 2:4-5

For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Psalm 57:10, 108:4

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. Ephesians 3:17-19

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6

Have you forgotten how much God loves you? We'll never get out of the rut without that perspective. Remembering God's love puts everything back in place.

...| When I forget God's love, my guilt lingers.
...| When I forget God's love, my joy is fleeting.
...| When I forget God's love, my compassion shrinks.
...| When I forget God's love, my pain grows.
...| When I forget God's love, my purpose is forgotten.
...| When I forget God's love, my fears become my focus.

God's love meets our every need. It lights up our every darkness. It redeems every thought. It decimates every threat and erodes our fear-driven need to control.

In the quiet places within our soul, we all wonder wordlessly: Do I really matter? A question we only consider because we're broken.

I learned in economics says that a thing is worth whatever a person is willing to pay. God paid the highest possible price: the life of his Son Jesus. We matter. We matter very much. While our love will wear out and dry up, his love is surpasses understanding.

His love is higher than the heavens and it forms the solid foundation beneath our feet. It is beyond our understanding, and confirmed deep within our hearts. He loves us more than we love ourselves.

What will it take for you to remember, and rest in, God's love?

the ninth principle

Realize You're Not Alone

*What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.
Ecclesiastes 1:9-10*

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear . . . he will also provide a way out . . . 1 Corinthians 10:13

Loneliness magnifies our problems and change become inconceivable. In the rut, we're fed a constant diet of lies:

"This doesn't happen to others..."

"If I was a real Christian, I wouldn't be struggling this much..."

"No one else can understand what's happening to me..."

"There is no way out, this will never end..."

With each lie, we withdraw from community and put on a superficial mask. We shout without screaming, "Please ignore this train wreck I call my life. Kindly move along, nothing to see here."

Since the beginning of time, God's people have gone through spiritual ruts, times of dryness and distance from God. While the rut may be new to you, it's not new for God. He knows how to meet you in the dry places and draw you closer to him. Every mature believer you know has experienced—and overcame—their spiritual ruts.

You are not alone! There is great comfort here, and it's waiting to be found. Take heart! You can, with God's help, climb out of the rut. No problem you face will ever be too big for you and God to handle.

the tenth principle

Position isn't Progress

Oh, don't worry; I wouldn't dare say that I am as wonderful as these other men who tell you how important they are! But they are only comparing themselves with each other, and measuring themselves by themselves. What foolishness! 2 Corinthians 10:12 (The Message)

Spiritual ruts can be subtle. Sometimes we think we're growing when we really aren't. Comparisons often land us in this trap.

Comparisons lead to trouble: when you compare your own spirituality to another person, you'll always lose. If you see the other person as less mature, you become puffed up with pride. If you see the other as more mature, you can become discouraged.

Pride leads to laziness and complacency. Discouragement leads to giving up. Both end up in the same place: a faith that's stuck in a rut.

There will always be someone who is spiritually "above" you and "below" you. This shouldn't affect our attitude about our own spiritual progress. We are to always consider others better than ourselves— no matter what (see Philippians 2:3).

Your progress toward God is important, not your position in comparison. It doesn't matter how far you've run; just make sure you keep running.