

## Stage One: The Purgative Way

**Purgation: Luke 10:1-8**

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This morning, we continue with a series on three ways of approaching spirituality: the purgative way, the illuminative way, and the unitative way.

The first of these ways, the purgative way, has to do with purging ourselves, or purifying ourselves from negative attitudes and behaviors that prevent us from having a close relationship with God, and replacing them with prayer and trying to live a virtuous life. Sometimes this process involves spiritual darkness and suffering—the birth pangs of leaving the old self and find the new self in Christ.

The second way, the illuminative way, represents a maturing of faith, a deepening of our connection with God. What may seem contrived or forced in the purgative way becomes more comfortable in the illuminative way. Spiritual practices, such as prayer and meditation, seem more natural and so does living a virtuous life. Moving to the illuminative path does not mean that our purgation is complete. But detaching ourselves from that which gets in the way of our relationship with God becomes somewhat easier. Spiritual practice becomes less something we struggle with, to something we genuinely desire.

Finally, the third way—the unitive way-- is a state of continual awareness of God . It is also described as communion, or union, with God. The believer comes to know God in a deep and profound way, blessed with insights into the mind of God. It is the state of relationship of which mystics speak: an acute awareness of the abiding presence of God.

These spiritual “ways” are sometimes called “stages,” but thinking of them in this way is only partly accurate. While it is true that the purgative way clears the pathway for the illuminative way, and the illuminative way is most often a prerequisite for full union or communion with God. But it is also true that our work of purgation is never finished; we may experience illumination one day and find more to purge from our lives the next. And

outside of Jesus and a relatively few other great religious leaders, saints and mystics, it is not common to dwell permanently in a state of union or communion with God.

I feel fortunate that I get to wrap up our thinking about the purgative way this morning. It seems like the way of the beginner, and even though I've been a Christian and a church member for most of my life, when it comes to the spiritual life, I often feel like I'm just beginning.

For the past two weeks, Jerry has been addressing the topic of "sin," and how sin gets in the way of the believer's relationship with God. Sin must be purged from our lives and replaced by spiritual practices and right living. Today, I want to focus on perhaps a less profound but equally present reality in the purgation process: purgation from stuff.

The passage from Luke 10 that Lois read this morning describes Jesus' strategy for spreading his gospel message. He recruited 70 people to go to all the places where he planned to go. It was kind of like having 70 John the Baptists preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. If we were to read beyond verse 8, we'd find Jesus' admonition that the disciples should proclaim the gospel only where they find receptive listeners; but where there is lack of interest or hostility, they are to leave quickly, shaking the dust off our their feet.

In Mark's and Matthew's versions of the story, Jesus sends only twelve, and seems to give them more authority than in Luke: the authority over unclean spirits. Also, in contrast to Luke, where Jesus' disciples give him a detailed report about their journey, there is no mention of this in Mark or Matthew. But in spite of these differences, the basic story line is the same.

What I want to focus on this morning is what the disciples took with them for their journey—or rather what they did *not* take for a road trip that undoubtedly must have lasted several weeks, given the mode of transportation they used: their feet. They were to take no purse, no bag, no sandals. Don't take time for the customary greeting of other travelers along the road. Don't complain about the food or the accommodations: eat whatever your hosts provide and don't move from house to house.

Mark's version is more explicit: take no food ("no bread") and no money. Jesus allows the disciples to wear sandals and carry a staff, but only one article of clothing ("one tunic"). In Matthew, Jesus is even more demanding than in Mark and Luke: "In case there

was any doubt about what Jesus mean by “no money,” Matthew spells it out: no gold, no silver, no copper.” No bag, no extra clothing, no sandals, not even a staff. Having more than the bare essentials would impede the disciple’s ability to convey the message Jesus sent them to proclaim.

This story begs the question: Does gospel living mean doing without basic creature comforts? How much stuff are we asked to purge from our lives in order to be on the journey toward spiritual health and wholeness?

For some people who don’t have a lot in the way of money or material possessions, it is hard to imagine having to get rid of some of it in order to be more connected with God-- as if not having enough food or enough money to pay your bills is helpful for spiritual growth. On the other hand, in a time when jobs are scarce, even for those with skills, experience, and education; in a time when government assistance keeps people poor enough that they have to seek additional aid from private charities, it seems that God is the only one we can count on.

I was never poor, except by choice. Choosing to live poor voluntarily is a privilege. During my first year in Mennonite Voluntary Service, and for a couple of years afterwards, I was living on the edge. I lived in an apartment in Denver that was almost as small as my current living room. When I pulled the murphy bed out its closet, there was no room to walk around it. My kitchen was the size of a small closet. I didn’t have much stuff—there was no room for it. There was little or nothing I could have purged in the way of money or material possessions. As I look back, I think I did feel closer to God then than I often do now. That big house I own gets filled with stuff. Life is a lot more comfortable now; but on the other hand , I wonder to what extent my possessions impede my journey toward discipleship.

A frequent source of stress to me, and a constant stressor for Geneva, was the many boxes of stuff I’d brought from previous homes and also accumulated while living in our current home. There was plenty of it to clutter our office in the house, but most of this stuff had been relegated to our garage. Many of these boxes, I hadn’t looked in for 10, 20, even 30 years. Geneva offered many opportunities to purge them once and for all, but I wouldn’t let her. I just knew that if she did, there would be some valuable information, some memory, if I didn’t salvage, I’d regret it for the rest of my life

Last summer, the ultimate deadline after many previous deadlines approached. Geneva’s summer cleaning project was moving to the garage, and my stuff had to go. I

spent a long Saturday, going through box after box. Most of the stuff got recycled. But some of it brought back memories that I will be forever grateful to review: old pictures, letters from a couple of former girlfriends, notes from classes I'd taken and workshops I'd conducted. Some of these things I recycled, not feeling a need to look at them again; others, I kept for my memorabilia box or for my file drawers on subjects ranging from "advocacy" to "Zionism." I only have six boxes left to sort through.

This has been my ritual of purgation: my way of letting go of what was causing me stress, cluttering up my life, and competing with more important things that needed my attention. The challenge will be to redirect all of the time I've spent on organizing my life to the pursuit of my relationship with my family, my friends, the church, and God.

Jesus' admonition to his disciples to leave everything behind when they went on their journey was not the goal; it was the means to the end of proclaiming the gospel. Removing barriers that interfere with pursuing the spiritual life is an important first step, but it is a means to the goal of living a life centered on God. The way of purgation-- leaving what is harmful and unnecessary behind, practicing spiritual disciplines and living a virtuous life-- prepares the path toward greater illumination; and possibly, communion, even union, with God.