

Steps to Spiritual Decline

Pastor James Foley – Sunday, April 8, 2018

Main Theme – Identifying and analyzing common steps (missteps) that catalyze spiritual decline

WORSHIP & PRAYER

WELCOME & ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **Upcoming Events (Regular)**

- Post-Service Prayer – Immediately After Each Service
- National Day of Prayer – Thursday, May 3, at Noon (Unity)

Ephesians 4:3 (NIV)

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

- E.E. – Introductory session this Wed. (6:30pm)
- WM – Tuesday Evening, May 8, from 6:30–8:30pm
- Men's Breakfast – Saturday, May 12, from 9–10:30am

MORNING OFFERING

At this time, I want to call forth our ushers.

-Thank you for your faithfulness in giving to the Lord/His work

-Your giving fuels the work of Christ in and through this church

May the Lord bless you as you give! May you experience His faithfulness in kind!

HAITI UPDATES

A number of people expressed interest in serving in Haiti (praise God)! For those who have expressed such an interest – please fill out the Mission E4 application at your earliest convenience. If you have any questions, please see me. Keep Taran in prayer as he's in Haiti.

VOLUNTEER UPDATES

We need to collect CORI/Background Check-related information from any volunteers who serve within a ministry dedicated to infants, toddlers, children or teens. If you have not yet completed the necessary forms, see me or Elysia following service.

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- **DISMISSAL OF CHILDREN FOR CHILDREN'S CHURCH**
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OPENING REMARKS

As always, it is wonderful to see you. I look forward to these weekly moments of worship and instruction. I pray that you are ready to receive what God has for you today! Please have your Bible at the ready and be prepared to take some notes.

WOMEN'S RETREAT

This weekend about fourteen of our women are away at WOMEN'S RETREAT. I pray the Lord's richest blessing upon them as they conclude their weekend getaway and return home. May they be renewed and encouraged in the Lord! May the spirit they bring home divinely impact the whole of this assembly!

NOTE – The theme for the retreat this year is 'NO MORE GROUND'...

i.e., The women will be challenged to stand up to the spiritual and circumstantial forces that lead to spiritual loss, that they might advance into all that God has for them (taking new ground). The abundant life that Christ offers does not come accidentally, but as Christians diligently apply biblical principles over the long-term (a long obedience in the same direction).

KEY – That's why the Bible challenges you and me with the following:

James 1:22 (NIV)

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

THIS MORNING

This morning, I want to share a COMPLEMENTARY message, albeit it from a different perspective. My hope is that the word that goes forth at retreat AND the word that goes forth here today will—together—generate interpersonal discussion and personal transformation.

Q. How impacting might it be if wives at retreat/husbands at church shared what they learned?

Q. How impacting might it be if friends who are away/those present shared what the Lord said?

NOTE – If the women are addressing steps that promote spiritual growth, I want to address steps that commonly promote spiritual DECLINE. These are steps (i.e., missteps) I have taken from time to time in the 20-years of my spiritual journey. These are steps that I have seen time and again over the course of 15-years of pastoral ministry (often to disastrous spiritual ends).

DECLINE (A TWO-FOLD WORD)

As we delve in, I would like to offer a two-fold word on spiritual decline:

1) Decline is a RESULT OF CHOICE...

I am NOT saying that Christians wake up in the morning and purpose to live in a declined state.

KEY – No one says...

“I am going to do my best to grieve my Lord and God today!”

“I am going to make sure I give the enemy a foothold in my life today!”

“I am purposing to live so far below my spiritual potential and upward calling!”

I AM saying that decline happens as Christians—i.e., well-meaning Christians—fail to prioritize the Lord and apply His principles. Thus, decline is not chosen directly per se, though it is the direct result of many smaller choices that precipitate decline.

2) Decline is often a SLOW PROCESS...

It is a deterioration that occurs over the course of large segments of time (e.g., months and years). Therefore, such decline is particularly DIFFICULT to identify as we get caught up in the busyness of life.

KEY – Apart from an ongoing connection with the Lord (i.e., a point of spiritual reorientation and realignment), we drift slowly but certainly. It is our tendency in fact! Ever look up and wonder about yourself: “How did I ever get here?”

ILL – I recall as a child I liked swimming in the ocean. That, by the way, is no longer the case. We would vacation at Hampton Beach or Cape Cod once a year, and I loved to swim. I recall that we would set up our beach umbrella and blankets and I would make a bee-line for the water.

For the first few minutes, I would look back and wave at my mom and dad (spotting where they were by the beach umbrella). But as time went on and I was busy at play, I’d look back and not so quickly see them. Often, the umbrella was 20–30 yards from where it had been.

Q. Did my family move? No

Q. Did the umbrella move? No

I moved as the currently slowly moved me along. It was so gradual I hadn’t even noticed at all! This parallels the drift that can all too easily happen in a spiritual sense! Please take note...

SETTING THE STAGE

KEY – With all of this said...

Q. What are the steps that lead to spiritual decline?

Allow me to put forth 3–4 of the more common steps I have experienced and encountered...

SELF-ABSORPTION PT. 1

Many decline when they become overly focused on SELF (i.e., making everything about them)...

In essence, decline happens as a sense of pride begins to operate. Human pride (i.e., the tendency to think and act like we are the center of the universe) is the mother of all sin and the nastiest of sinful humanity.

-WE KNOW that Scripture calls us to prioritize a love for God and others:

Matthew 22:35–40 (NIV)

35 . . . [An expert in the Law] tested him [Christ Jesus] with this question: 36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

-WE KNOW the Bible calls us to sacrificial service (i.e., placing others’ needs above our own):

Philippians 2:3–4 (NIV)

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

-WE KNOW that such service is reflective of the Lord and Master we claim to honor and serve:

Philippians 2:5–8 (NIV)

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage [grasped];
7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Matthew 20:28 (NIV)

“. . . [The] Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

-WE KNOW that there is great joy in giving and in working to humbly serve God and others:

Acts 20:35 (NIV)

'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' [Attributed to Christ – Oral Teaching]

-WE KNOW that such service (preferring others in the Name of the Lord) will be blessed:

John 13:12–17 (NIV) [Context – Washing the Disciples' Feet]

12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. 13 “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

SELF-ABSORPTION PT. 2

Q. Yet how often do we Christians live in an opposing manner?

-Governed by fleshly instincts, we relegate the Lord and those around us to secondary and tertiary levels of priority. Many live as though the Great Commandment should be rendered in the following way:

“‘Love yourself with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor once you have exhaustively loved yourself.

-Operating according to our sinful nature, we resist service and selflessness. Such things are far too costly. Everyone wants a crown but very few are out looking for Crosses. Everyone wants to be known as a servant, but not many line up to roll up their sleeves when there’s feet to be washed. “I will take care of the needs of the Lord and others once my needs, dreams, aspirations and desires are fully met (never)! I will minister as I ought when and only when it is easy and convenient (never)!”

-Led by our carnal nature, we revel in receiving, but give little (and only when absolutely necessary). Thus, we forfeit the blessings and favor that correspond to godly prioritization, service and the giving of our time, talents, finances and of ourselves.

KEY – If you want to decline, make it all about you. Live in the exact opposite manner Jesus did!

LIVE IN FEAR PT. 1

Moving along, allow me to note a second step to spiritual decline. Adopt a spirit of FEAR...

-WE KNOW that Scripture calls us 'fear not':

Joshua 1:9 (NIV)

9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

John 14:27 (NIV)

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

-WE KNOW that God has not called us to fear those who oppose us:

2 Timothy 1:7 (NIV)

7 For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

Matthew 10:28 (NIV)

28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

-WE KNOW that God has not called us to fear challenging times and earthly circumstances:

Luke 12:22-32 (NIV)

22 Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. 24 Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! 25 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? 26 Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

27 "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 28 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! 29 And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. 30 For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

32 "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

Isaiah 41:10, 13 (NIV)

10 So do not fear, for I am with you;
 do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
 I will strengthen you and help you;
 I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

13 . . . I am the Lord your God
 who takes hold of your right hand
 and says to you, Do not fear;
 I will help you.

-WE KNOW that fear is in opposition to faith – and that without faith we cannot please Him:

Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)

6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

LIVE IN FEAR PT. 2

Q. Yet how many still operate in a spirit of fear?

- Consider how many read ‘fear not’ in the Word yet prefer to live in on. anxiety
- Consider how often people cower before spiritual and earthly forces borne of fear
- Consider how often people default to fear in challenging times (as if God isn’t faithful)

Fear is a paralyzing agent. It saps faith, forward momentum and vitality. If you want to decline:

- Adopt a spirit of fear
- Cultivate a spirit of fear
- Resist any calls to gen. faith

SPIRITUAL NEGLIGENCE PT. 1

Moving along let's consider another surefire step toward spiritual decline (one that I believe the most common cause of decline, period): Many Christians decline because they FAIL TO PRACTICE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES that promote growth...

- Reading of the Word
- Ongoing Prayer to God
- Ongoing Life of Worship

I have said it before and I will say it again: I've NEVER seen a healthy Christian who continually neglects these bedrock elements. I could spend the rest of my ministry doing nothing but calling people to read the Word, pray and worship and it would not be wasted time!

KEY – So as not to be overly repetitive, allow me to frame this a different way:

- Life is full of life-DRAINING elements (diff. for each person – examples?)
- God has provided life-REPLENISHING elements (Word, Prayer, Worship)

Q. What happens when your life abounds in life-draining elements and no time is made for life-replenishing elements?

- The same thing that happens when you run a car and don't add gas now and then
- The same thing that happens to your body when you do not eat, rest and drink water

NOTE – This is a reality that Christ understood well.

Q. Was Jesus busy? Yes! Far more than you or I ever will be.

Q. But did the Lord prioritize time in the Word, in worship and in prayer? NO!

1) Jesus in Worship & the Word

Luke 4:14–17 (NIV, Emphasis Mine)

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, *as was his custom*. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

2) Jesus & Prayer

Luke 5:16 (NIV)

Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

SPIRITUAL NEGLIGENCE PT. 2

Q. Did the Lord prioritize time in prayer, worship and the Word? YES [Why don't we?]

Q. Can we imagine Jesus saying, "I'm too busy to pray or read the Word?" NO [Why do we?]

KEY – If you want to ensure spiritual decline, neglect the spiritual disciplines that promote health! I am not going to lie. I have great concern over what I am seeing in the upcoming generation (my generation). There seems to be little priority for church, the Word, worship, etc. Everyone is so busy to put the Lord first – and we wonder why we are floundering spiritually?

Gang, it's no surprise. If the only time you talk to the Lord or open your Bible (for real) is a Sunday now and then (if that for many), your decline is inevitable.

ISOLATION PT. 1

Lastly, Christians inevitably decline when they practice isolation (forego church & fellowship)...

So many people try to GO IT ALONE. However, let us remember that Christianity is a team sport. Yes, your salvation is incredibly personal and you will stand before the Lord alone. However, biblical Christianity occurs in the context of community.

Sometimes people will tell me that they don't need organized religion (preferring disorganized religion?). They don't need church when they can read a Bible at home on their own and sing songs to the Lord in the car.

Q. But how long do you have to read/study before you come across texts that indicate we were meant to live in the context of community.

-Not long at all in fact! Within a page or so you come across the following:

Genesis 2:15–18 (NIV, Emphasis Mine) [Creation of Man]

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.
16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." 18 The Lord God said, "It is ***not good*** for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

-THROUGHOUT THE OT, Jewish believers practiced their faith in the context of community (e.g., Feasts of the Lord, ongoing Temple worship, etc.) Check the songs of ascent (Ps. 120–134)!

In fact, the Jews always identified their position before the Lord in a corporate way: they were the children of Abraham and members of the chosen/elect people of God. The greatest fear of a faithful Jew was ostracism by the community of faith!

-THROUGHOUT THE NT, the communal nature of faith (church) is evident:

Matthew 6:9–13 (NIV, Emphasis Mine)

9 “This, then, is how you should pray:

“**Our** Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name,
 10 your kingdom come,
 your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 11 Give us today our daily bread.
 12 And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
 13 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from the evil one.’

Acts 2:42–47 (NIV)

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

ISOLATION PT. 2

If you want to decline, FAIL TO PRIORITIZE...

- Corporate worship
- Corporate training
- Corporate fellowship
- Corporate outreach & witness

Remember: it is the animal that gets separated from the herd that gets eaten. The banana that gets separated from the bunch is the one to get peeled!

CONCLUSION

Q. Steps to spiritual decline?

- Make it all about you
- Live in a spirit of fear
- Neglect sp. disciplines
- Try and go it alone

Q. Steps to spiritual increase?

- Prioritize God and others
- Adopt a spirit of faith
- Practice sp. disciplines
- Connect deeply w/ others