

Jesus' Kingdom Movement

The Gospel of Matthew

If I Were Just Someone Else: Jealousy, Identity, and Desire

Part 1: Building Stamina in the Age of Shortcuts

Matthew 3:13 – 4:11

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Introduction: Imagine If

In 2016, a family psychologist brought together a group of 68 teenagers – ages 12 to 18 – during a school holiday. She asked them to go for 8 hours without electronic devices. They could not get on a computer, a phone, radio or TV. They were allowed to engage in a number of “classical” activities by themselves: exercising, writing, reading, playing musical instruments, painting, needlework, singing, walking, going to parks and museums, cooking, eating, cleaning, and so on. They could talk to a cashier, but otherwise they had to be by themselves.

I'd like you to imagine yourself in this experiment. How would you do? In hour number one? Hour number two? Hour number three? Hour number four? Hour number five? Hour number six? Hour number seven? What would you do in hour number eight?

For the first one or two hours, the young people felt okay. After three hours, 10 people dropped out of the experiment. Why? Because they felt so much anxiety. By the end of the eight hours, all but 3 youth had dropped out. Almost everyone started feeling fear and anxiety. Twenty-seven of the teens experienced nausea, sweating, dizziness, hot flushes and abdominal pain. Five of them experienced intense panic attacks. Three had suicidal thoughts.

One young lady who made it to the end brought the psychologist her diary. She had described in detail how she felt by the eighth hour. After reading it, the psychologist started to experience physical symptoms of anxiety.

When describing what was happening to them during the experiment, 51 people used phrases like “dependence,” “I can not live without,” “dose,” “withdrawals,” “I need,” and so on. All of them, without any exceptions, said that they were extremely surprised by the thoughts that were crossing their minds during the experiment, but they were unable to examine them rationally because of the overall deterioration of their psychological state.

What happened? Why did it happen? And what does it mean? Was there something about this particular group of teenagers? Maybe. Did she happen to just get 65 out of 68 extroverts? I doubt it. Clearly, this highlighted addiction and a few other things. But I think there's a deeper story. It's about attachment. These teenagers were attached to their devices. They thought they were attached to other people, but they were attached to their phones. They were attached to a shortcut.

Relevance

We are born to be attached to other people – first to our parents or parent, then appropriately to others, and ultimately to Jesus by the Spirit and through Jesus to God the Father. We all want attachment, connection. But it takes *stamina*.

When you get a “like” on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, what do you feel? You feel a little excitement, right? Someone likes me! And your brain puts out a little dopamine. What does dopamine do? Basically, you feel pleasure. Dopamine makes you happy as if you accomplished something or connected with someone. But have you accomplished something? Did you connect with someone? Or did you take a shortcut?

Tech companies know what they're doing to us. Facebook added the “Like” button in 2009, and when they did, they saw interactions go up, ad revenues go up, sales go up. People were hooked. They also did an experiment. They know that the Like button caused more stress and anxiety, especially among teenagers. But it was too profitable so they kept it. So it's not just our mental health. It's the quality of our love that suffers, in an age of shortcuts.

Other studies have shown that babies and toddlers are getting worse sleep. Why is that? Screen time.¹ Parents are providing too much screen time to toddlers and babies. I know from being a parent myself that it's tempting to just hand a little kid a screen, or put something on the screen. But when and what are still so, so important. It's important not to take shortcuts.

People who take shortcuts sound like this. "Sorry, okay, is that what you wanted to hear me say?" There's no, "Help me to know you better so I can try not to do that again." Instead, you get, "Look, I said sorry. Can you just drop it?" That's a shortcut.

Or this: When I notice my children cut someone else off in conversation, I say to them, "Hey, hey, but enough about you. Let's talk about me." That's like cutting someone off on the road, only in a conversation. It's always better to let someone finish, and usually to go deeper into them. What I'm responding to is taking shortcuts to connection. We live in an age of shortcuts. And yet we desire connection and community. The problem seems to be that we have become more and more conditioned to take shortcuts.

It's just like counteracting junk food. The best remedy for eating junk food is eating healthy food. People who specialize in spotting counterfeit money study real money. The best remedy for attachment to screens is building attachment to people. And yet we are less and less able to do that.

After the experiment, 14 of the teenagers immediately logged in to social networks, 20 called their friends, three participants called their parents, and five went to visit their friends in person. Others turned on the TV or plunged into playing computer games. In addition, almost all of them soon thrust their headphones into their ears. For them, all the symptoms of stress disappeared immediately after the termination of the experiment.

So what kind of people are we becoming? In an age of shortcuts, we need to build stamina. And Jesus has his special kind of stamina and we need to develop it in partnership with him.

Context

I'd like to look together with you at a story when Jesus was offered shortcuts to doing deeper work in himself. He didn't take them. But how and why? Keep those questions before you as we look at Matthew 4:1 – 11, the story of Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by the devil.

The Gospel of Matthew is one of the four authoritative biographies of Jesus, along with the Gospel of Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew was considered to be the handbook for how to follow Jesus, and how to train others to follow him, too. That is called discipleship. So the entire Gospel of Matthew is about discipleship, learning to follow Jesus. When we look at Jesus in the wilderness, we are looking at him at the beginning of his public career, when he began to announce that he was the King of Israel. He was bringing the kingdom of God, the reign of God on earth for the renewal of all things.

The Shortcut to Popularity: v.5 – 7

I'm going to save the first of the three temptations for another time. We are looking at the second and third temptations. The shortcut to getting lots of likes. And the shortcut to being an influencer. Here is the shortcut to getting lots of likes:

4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil... 5 The devil took him into the holy city and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you'; and 'on their hand they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'

Basically, the devil is saying to Jesus, why not be a celebrity? Imagine being in Jesus' shoes for just a minute. This is how you can wow people. Go to the most crowded place, the temple in Jerusalem. I've watched wingsuit videos, bungee jumping videos, cliff diving videos. People who challenge their fear of death -- they get clicks and Likes.

¹ Anna Sanford, "Babies Are Losing Sleep -- And Touch Screens Are to Blame," *Salon*, August 9, 2017; https://www.salon.com/2017/08/09/babies-are-losing-sleep-and-touch-screens-are-to-blame_partner/

They even get a few people to imitate them. And that's the problem. If Jesus did this, what would happen next? Some crazy people would jump off cliffs and buildings. That's not the point!

What is the point, then? The point is to let the Spirit of God burn the love of God all the way into your own humanity. Jesus is not a superficial person who takes shortcuts with you and me. But even for him, and especially for him, there were these shortcuts he was tempted to take. So Hebrews 5 says that he learned obedience to God the Father. He became perfect in his humanity. You mean, he wasn't already perfect? He didn't already know obedience? No. He built stamina as a human being.

Now, you can understand why the devil tempted Jesus. He was really changing the agenda. He was saying, "You don't have to burn away the selfishness in that human nature you're wearing. You can just let the sin-sickness fester in there. In fact, you can let it get the upper hand. You can just take a shortcut to getting the Likes. Use the angels to show your power. You don't actually have to love people! You don't have to help people be anchored in God's truth."

Jesus rejected all that. Jesus built his attachment with God the Father *through stamina*. Jesus had built up to these forty days in the wilderness being with the Father by the Spirit. Now that was a special time even for Jesus, which I'll get into later, but we know Jesus regularly spent time with the Father alone. When he was a child, Jesus would listen to the story told in Scripture. When people were looking for him, sometimes Jesus would still go off to a mountain or some other quiet place to listen to the Father, to talk with him. Why did he do that? He was investing stamina into his humanity by the Spirit. He was also preparing to listen to us, to deepen his attachment to us in a human way. He would be our king who loves us very personally. But even for Jesus, it was a spiritual fitness plan. He had a rhythm. Even for Jesus, he built stamina over time. It was not instantaneous.

Illus: I want to illustrate how important Jesus is with a contrast. I once had a roommate. He and I were going in different directions in life. I was going deeper with Jesus. He was not and although he was a nice guy and a considerate roommate, he was interested in shortcuts. One time I came back from a party. It was about midnight. We were chatting. We went to bed at the same time. As we turned the light in our room off, he asked, "So how was the party?" I said, "Okay, but some people were drinking a lot and it reminded me of my dad's alcoholism." In those days, I was allowing myself to feel the weight of my dad's choices – which I had avoided doing before that – and thinking about my relationship with him. And if someone says something like that to you, that's usually an invitation to ask deeper questions. Get to know me better. Instead, he changed the subject, made some joke. A little while later, he was asleep. I laid there in the dark and talked to Jesus and wept. For over a year before that, I had been journaling and pouring my heart out to Jesus, processing my whole life with him. I knew not only his presence but his attention. It was the comforting feeling he gives when he says, "I'm listening."

One of the challenges that we're going to take on together is to pay attention to God daily. We're reading Rich Villodas' book *The Deeply Formed Life* and discussing it once a week. This book challenges us to carve out regular times to be attentive to God. In the same way that you'd talk to a loved one every day or almost every day, we talk to God, and listen for Him. Some people pray in the morning, others in the evening. Some people read Scripture or play worship music. Some people use the Ignatian practice called the *examen*, finishing each day with a reflection, "Where did I sense God's presence most today? Where did I miss God's presence most today?" These are the spiritual disciplines that we practice to build stamina.

In v.7 Jesus said to the devil, 'On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.' He did not take a shortcut. There was only one way to burn the love of God and love for God into his humanity. And that was morning by morning, minute by minute.

The Shortcut to Being an Influencer: v.8 – 11

The devil then tries another shortcut:

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; 9 and he said to him, 'All these things I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.' 10 Then Jesus said to him, 'Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and serve Him only.' 11 Then the devil left him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to him.

Illus: The shortcut is to be influential without actually suffering anything. As a parent, one of the moments that I look for when each of my children faced a choice. Did my son love piano enough to suffer for it? Did my daughter love singing enough to suffer for it? Did my foster daughter love running on the track team enough to suffer for it? And when they hit that wall, that hard choice, I encouraged them further. Those moments were so important for me because when I did sports, music, art, and school, I hit the same wall, the same choice. Do I love this enough this enough to suffer for it? That is stamina.

Jesus faced the same choice, and so do we. Do you want to just dabble and flirt in the redemption of all creation? You can serve Satan instead of God. But Jesus says, "No." Worshiping God and serving God means living the life of God and pouring out the love of God even when no one else is looking. For Jesus, it meant completing the long story that God has held together from His end because He is faithful: God has always wanted human beings to grow up and become bearers of His likeness. But ever since we corrupted ourselves, we've had to partner with God to receive His cleansing power. No one had the stamina to do that, which is why Jesus had to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He had to be the faithful one who received the medicine of the Holy Spirit at every moment. And now we are called into that journey.

We stop short usually because we underestimate how bad the problem is. We try to manage our symptoms, and other people's symptoms. Then we get all depressed at ourselves when we mess up, or we get shocked and outraged when other people mess up. Why? Those are just reminders that we need stamina. There are no shortcuts. Do you love Jesus enough to suffer for him?

Illus: Back to the social media experiment with the teenagers. One of the three teenagers who successfully completed the experiment spent eight hours gluing together a model of a sailing ship, with a break for a meal and a walk with the dog. Another teenager spent the time organizing his stuff. Those two young people didn't feel negative emotions at all during the experiment. Why? Because they had learned to love other things, and not be addicted to social media. But, 63 of the teenagers said the experiment had been useful for them in terms of allowing them to learn more about themselves. Six repeated the experiment on their own and claimed that on the second, third or fifth time they managed to last the whole day without serious problems.

We can learn to love things that take eight hours. But it takes stamina, doesn't it? We can also learn to love Jesus, which will take a lifetime and then some. So let's practice the things that build stamina. Deep within us, there is a heart-level muscle that is waiting to be strengthened, waiting to be developed. It's the muscle that trusts Jesus and loves him. So let's do that!