Chapter Thirteen

THE PLACE OF HOLY HABITS

I would like to delight and inspire you one day with a violin rendition of Johann Sebastian Bach's Concerto in B-flat. "Close your eyes," I'd say. "Sit back and drink it in." When you were relaxed, receptive, listening, I would take the violin, tuck it under my chin, balance it beneath one outstretched arm, and with the other arm draw the bow over the instrument's arched, taut strings.

And I would shatter all your peace. I would wrench from that violin a sound reminiscent of many terrible things: the yowl of a cat whose tail is slammed in a door; the screech of sharp nails raked across a chalkboard; the shriek of rusty nails yanked out of parched planks; the wail of torture victims, their fingernails plucked off with pliers.

I can't play the violin.

But I want to. I think about it. I admire people who do it well. I love music made by violin masters. I'm sincere. And whenever I have the chance to play a violin, I try. I try really hard.

It's laughable. Of course I can't play the violin merely on the basis of my sincerity, my desire, my admiration for those who can play it. I can't play it

merely by trying. We all know it takes much more than that. In fact, what would trouble us, myself included, is if I could pick up the violin having never taken a lesson or practiced a note, and I was a virtuoso, making the instrument weep or laugh with the lightest caress of my nimble fingers. That would be uncanny. But thank goodness, no one expects that of me. I don't expect it of myself.

But here is the strangest thing: We do expect that. We expect it of ourselves and we expect it of others all the time. We expect it, not with the violin, not with marathon running, not with mountain climbing. But we expect it in spiritual matters. We honestly think that we ourselves and those around us should be proficient with spiritual power, moving and acting with agility and endurance, wisdom and purity, able to conquer long-established habits of sloth and rebelliousness, *simply on the basis of our desire and effort and sincerity.* Here's a refrain, a stock lament of the average Christian: "I really want to live for Jesus. I really try to live for Jesus. I really admire those who live for Jesus. I'm really sincere about living for Jesus. But I just keep messing up."

I want off borderland, but I keep stumbling back there.

We have to train to run marathons, climb mountains, play violins. That's the most basic idea in the world. It needs no further commentary.

We have to train for the spiritual life. That's the most lost idea to the world, and it requires whole books and sermon series to establish its value, even its validity.

Yet nothing other than that, and nothing less, will get us off borderland.

I was in a friend's guitar shop one day, and he was showing me a song he'd written. One of its chords spanned five frets. I was struggling to play that chord and finally gave up.

"I can't," I said. "I mean, look at these hands. I just can't play chords like that."

Right at that moment, one of the guitar teachers walked past. "Quit your sissy excuses," he said. "Just bloody stretch."

I wanted to call this section of the book "Just Bloody Stretch," but that didn't sound pious enough. However, that really is what I've set for myself as the goal of writing about in these last ten chapters: stretching our stiff, stubby fingers over five frets until that becomes natural, easy, and fluid; until good

music flows from it—practicing, note by note, scale by scale, the violin. I've set out to write about that kind of thing in our life with God—the plodding, aching persistence required to learn the practice of the presence of God.

This is about Godward habits. None of them are glamorous or exotic or novel. There is little delight in these practices themselves any more than there is delight in playing violin scales. The delight, rather, comes *through* them. None of them is in keeping with the mood and tone of the age: *Thirty Days to Influence with God. Seven Steps to Spiritual Dynamism. Think Yourself to Holy Power in Only Five Minutes a Day.*

But, as musical practice is the only way to make good music, so Godward habits are the only way off borderland.

Just bloody stretch.

IN THE FIRST PART OF THIS BOOK, WE EXAMINED SOME OF THE subtle slippery ways we evade God and some of the reasons we do that. The borderland stays in business, above all, through bad theology: a steady traffic of invented or distorted or half-baked notions about God. In part 2, I am not, however, intending to give you a doctrine of God. Rather, I intend to help you make the shift, huge and subtle both, by which you become fully present to the God who is, right now, right here, fully present with you.

Practicing the presence of God is what sustains and deepens us in the holy wild. But what sustains and deepens the practice itself? If God is present in the most ordinary moments, events, people, how will we on a growing basis transform the dimness of our eyes and the dullness of our ears into seeing and hearing? What will increasingly sharpen our attentiveness to God in our midst and strengthen our resolve to desire His presence rather than flee it? What will keep us off borderland?

The answer is holy habits, or what are often called spiritual disciplines. I want to call them holy habits because, as with all habits, they are practices that for a while we think about and work at but eventually weave so deeply into the rhythm of our lives that they define us. They become *our ways*. Like violin scales or five-fret chords, they are often awkward for us at first and produce dubious results. But persisted in, they become natural and create beauty.

I want to call them holy habits for another reason: They counter and replace the instinctive habits of slow-heartedness we've looked at. Borderland, after all, is the place we go *habitually.* It's what we're used to. Holy habits train us to be used to something else, something more—to life in the holy wild.

After all, the central obstacle in our relationship with God is not God's aloofness or remoteness, as though God needed chasing down or coaxing out. Holy habits are *not* shrewder techniques for tracking an elusive deity. They are, rather, ways of tracking ourselves down in our elusiveness—of either being still and knowing He is God or making every effort and knowing the same. They are ways of breaking and mending our Jonah hearts. They are ways of fleeing borderland rather than fleeing God.

IN HIS GOSPEL, MARK TELLS A STORY THAT PUTS THIS IN PERSPECTIVE. Jesus has announced to His disciples that some of them standing with Him will not see death until they behold the kingdom come with power. Next thing, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with Him up a mountain, and they do see it. Jesus is transfigured before them, revealed in all His kingly splendor, and speaks with Moses and Elijah. They hear the voice of God: "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him." *The kingdom come with power.* This is the real thing. This is not mere window dressing, mere carnival pitch. There is a kingdom, and it is among us, and if we could see it unveiled as it really is, we would be staggered by its grandeur, awe-struck by its dazzling beauty.

Then they come down the mountain. A scuffle and squabble is going on. A father has a son who is demon possessed, thrashing, frothing at the mouth, and Jesus' disciples have no power to cast it out. Despite all their trying and all their sincerity and all their wanting to, they can't budge that demon an inch from that boy. The disciples are embroiled in an argument with the teachers of the law about this. But it's obvious that they're all talk, too. They have no more power than the disciples do.

The passage continues:

> When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the

people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

"What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

Jesus is frustrated with the whole lot of them. He rebukes them and then impatiently demands, "Bring the boy to me."

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer." (Mark 9:14–29)

Why couldn't we drive it out? Why did we not have power for this? This kind, Jesus says, only comes out with prayer.

The most curious thing about this story is so obvious that we usually miss it: Jesus *doesn't* pray. Not here. Not now. He doesn't excuse Himself for half a day to go off into some austere solitude and soak Himself in invocations and intercessions. He just stands and delivers. He just says the word, and the demon scatters, hell-bent and terrified.

Jesus doesn't pray. My temptation is to say, "Well, it's different for Jesus. He's God incarnate. He doesn't need to pray to cast out demons."

But that's the wrong answer. Jesus became fully human. He emptied Himself, humbled Himself, became a man, a servant (Philippians 2). He was made like us in every way in order that He might completely understand our condition, with all our frailty and temptation and limitation (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15).

No, the correct answer is that Jesus does not need to pray at this moment *because He has already a well-established discipline of prayer.* Mark 1:35 is typical: "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." Or Luke 6:12: "Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God."

We often lack spiritual power. We're so often helpless, hapless, speechless, bumbling in the face of the world's evil, brokenness, and demon-infested sickness. We have nothing to say to the desperate father whose faith is almost spent, eroded by each doctor or pastor or psychologist that has come along straining with all his might to do something and done nothing. Often, in response to our ineptitude and impotence, we get into arguments with the Pharisees. We squabble and bicker over theological fine points; we coin and bandy about big words like *dispensationalism.* We find fault with the church down the street: They're too liberal or too fundamentalist; they've gotten too preoccupied with the gifts of the Spirit or with the cessation of those gifts; they've reduced the gospel to good works or have forgotten that the gospel sends us out to do good works. Instead of praying, we fight. But secretly, when it's just us and God, we have a different question: "Lord, why can't we, *Your disciples,* do something here?"

He says something to the equivalent of, "Just bloody stretch." You can't play the guitar or the violin; you can't run a marathon; you can't climb a

mountain if you don't train. And you can't cast out demons—meeting with authority the world's evil and its brokenness head-on—if you don't pray. This kind only comes out by prayer. If you want to imitate me on the battlefield, imitate me in the boot camp. If you want to stand and deliver when the crisis hits, then get out of bed and pray before the sun gets up.

Practice holy habits.

I have a friend, Boyd, who can stand and deliver. He has a closeness with and a power through Jesus like few I've met. I often entrust him with weighty matters because I know he only acts or speaks out of Christ's authority. Here's what Boyd wrote me when I asked him his "secret":

> Mark, one of the ways that God has taught me to stay alive and focused on Him is through routine: routine in being with Him, routine in taking my medicines, routine in being with and loving my wife, routine in walking my dogs and playing with them, routine in exercise, routine in my routines. I guess that you could substitute the word *discipline* for the word *routine.*

Holy habits are that: *the disciplines, the routines by which we stay alive and focused on Him.* At first we choose them and carry them out; after a while they are part of who we are. And they carry us.

THIS IS NOT ABOUT AN HEROIC STRIVING OF OR AGAINST OUR WILLS. Holy habits, like all habits, obviously involve our wills: a resolve of will, sometimes a breaking of it. But these are not exercises in mere willpower. They assume, in fact, that willpower alone is insufficient to motivate us and sustain us in living in the presence of God.

We have far more won't power than willpower anyhow.

Recently I read Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to my nine-year-old son. Tom is a rabble-rouser, troublemaker, ringleader. His life is a carnival of pranks and escapades, and he gives grief to many. But Tom has a good heart. Many times when his mischief makes too much trouble for himself and those he loves, he firmly resolves with solemn oaths and tearful promises that

he's finished forever with his wild way of living. From now on he will lead a wholesome, godly, submissive, productive life—no more tormenting Sid and Mary, no more flouting Aunt Polly's rules and breaking her heart.

But he never keeps his resolves. His won't power is stronger than his willpower. Some new temptation lays hold of him, and off he goes again. His standard defense: "Auntie, I wish I hadn't done it—but I didn't think."[1] Mark Twain makes an amusing story out of that. But for many people, that pattern—forever *intending* to do right, but old ways and fresh temptations always rendering the intention powerless—is the central tragedy of their existence. *I wish I hadn't done it, but I didn't think.* They just can't seem, for all the willpower in the world, to break beyond the habitual, break free the natural.

Spiritual disciplines are not about mere willpower. The best definition I have come across for discipline is John Ortberg's (which is a distillation of Dallas Willard's teaching): *Any activity I do by direct effort that will help me do what I cannot now do by direct effort.*[2] The mountain climber begins with hikes up local hills, clambering up small outcroppings, scaling short cliffs, before he ever takes on Everest. The violin player begins by learning how to tune the violin, then play scales, then rudimentary pieces, before he attempts to master Bach. And the man or woman who chases God? Well, before we cast out demons, we pray. And we pray *not by getting up the first day at 4:00 A.M.* No, first we take on what we can manage: *an activity I can do by direct effort.* We get up, say, fifteen minutes earlier to start. Persisted in, it will *help me do what I cannot now do by direct effort.* This kind only comes out by prayer.

HOLY HABITS ARE NOT LEGALISM. WE ARE NOT TRYING TO EARN anything from God by being disciplined. He doesn't love us more if we practice holy habits or love us less if we don't. They're not about that. They are, rather, about experiencing more and more the kingdom presence and power of Jesus Christ that is available right here, right now.

There is a key confusion in modern Christianity that greatly hinders us. We are overly prone to see legalism lurking behind every exhortation to strive and make an effort to be holy. Every time I say, "Work *out* your salvation," someone will hear me say, "Work *for* your salvation." The two are utterly dif-

ferent things. But our confusion stems from a theological distinction we make that is simply not biblical: We contrast grace with effort. We say, "I live under grace. I don't need to strive. I don't need to make an effort. I reject all that legalistic entrapment and rigmarole, that monkish rubbish."

But grace and effort are not opposites. Grace and *earning* are opposites. *Working for* your salvation is a heresy. *Working out* your salvation is basic Bible. Grace and effort are allies.[3] There are eight New Testament Scriptures that tell us that because God has already given us all things, we therefore must *make every effort* to do what leads to peace and mutual edification; *make every effort* to enter through the narrow door; *make every effort* to keep unity; *make ever effort* to be holy; *make every effort* to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him. Hebrews 4:11 is especially piquant: *Make every effort* to enter rest. Work to rest. The Greek here, I think, is "Just bloody stretch."

The difference between working *out* our salvation—making every effort—and working *for* our salvation can be quickly and easily explained. *You can only work out what you already have.* You already have salvation through Jesus Christ. And with His salvation, we possess every last thing we need to live the full, joyful abundance of that life. But we still have to work it out. We still have to make every effort.

This is how the apostle Peter puts it:

> His divine power has given us *everything we need* for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

You have everything you need to live a holy life, to know the heights and the depths of God's presence and power, to experience God with you, to live victoriously. Not one thing is lacking. But now look at the next verse:

> *For this very reason, make every effort* to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to

> godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:3–8, emphasis mine)

Everything you need, you've got. *For this very reason, make every effort.* Add things, bit by bit, step by step. Don't rush at it all at once. Though everything you need for godliness is at hand, you won't actually be acting godly until you've got some more basic things in place. Hike up the local hills first. Later we'll talk about Everest. You want to get to the point where you can actually love your enemies? You want to get to the point where if someone strikes you, your instinct is actually to turn the other cheek rather than to strike back? When somebody curses you, your gut reaction is actually to bless them in return? Where you can cast out the demon from the tormented boy at the pleading of his yet more tormented father? Well, begin here: *Add to your faith, goodness, and then....*

If you live like this—a disciplined life, making every effort, doing by *direct effort that which will help you do what you cannot now do by direct effort*—you will be able to stand and deliver in the moment of crisis. Again, Peter puts it this way: "If you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Your knowing God will be no mere head knowledge, some dry theological conceptualization. You will know God from the inside out.

And if you don't make every effort because you can't be bothered with the inconvenience? Peter goes on to describe those who have not been disciplined: "If anyone does not have [these qualities that we make every effort to acquire], he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins" (2 Peter 1:9). The undisciplined live in an amnesiac state, always forgetting the most basic thing: They have been cleansed from their past sin and are not the man or woman they once were. They are a new creation. They are not stuck with the old self, unchangeable, its dead weight of guilt and regret and desire thick in the flesh. But they forget that.

Those who do not make every effort are like the blind man whose sight is restored but who never adjusts to that. He remains in his old ways, tapping

his cane on the sidewalk, rattling his cup at the curb, reading by Braille, groping and shuffling, turning light into darkness, day into night.

Stuck on borderland.

ONE LAST MATTER. THE EASIEST THING IN THE WORLD IS TO ENGAGE holy habits for the wrong reasons. To turn them into feats of strength, contests of endurance, displays of self-righteousness. To fast, say, just to prove you can go thirty hours or three days or two weeks without food. Or to fast to lose weight. To pray mainly so that you can feel good about yourself. Always lurking behind our acts of self-denial and self-discipline is the whisper and nudge of self-indulgence: *You will get the glory.*

Jesus warned about this: "When you fast, when you pray, when you give to the poor, do not be like the hypocrites. Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven" (see Matthew 6:1, 2, 5, 16).

It is important to keep in view the *why* of these habits. Knowing the why helps us avoid two equally destructive tendencies: pride in doing well and weariness in doing good.

So why cultivate and practice holy habits? When Peter lists the virtues that we're to make every effort to add to our faith, the crowning virtue is love. Paul, more poetically, says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 13: "If I can speak in the tongues of men and angels...if I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge...if I have faith that can move mountains.... If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love...I am nothing...I gain nothing."

The goal of the disciplined life is love: to more and more live in and live out the two greatest commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, strength, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. The touchstone of whether you're rightly engaged with any discipline is to ask, "Is my love getting stronger, deeper, richer?" Something is wrong if you find that any discipline or habit you practice is making you arrogant, self-righteous, contemptuous, judgmental: "Well, I can fast for eight days straight; I get up at 4:00 A.M. every day and pray for two hours. If I ever sin, and I rarely do, I confess it

within twenty-four hours. What are you doing for the Lord, sissy boy? You guys are all wimps!"

I took my wife out on a special date last Mother's Day. First, I took her and our children and my wife's mother and father out for Sunday brunch in Cowichan Bay, a little seaside fishing community. Then her parents took our children back to our house, and I took my wife down to Victoria for the evening. I had reserved a hotel room overlooking Victoria's inner harbor, where sleek, white yachts and wide-hulled whalers cut *V*s in the glassy water. We walked downtown, past the domed and stately parliament buildings and the ivy-clothed Empress Hotel, and enjoyed a lingering late night dinner together. We walked back along the wide concourse that encircles the harbor, and we looked at all the artists' stalls along there. We returned to our hotel, had a swim in the pool and a soak in the hot tub. In the morning, we had a leisurely breakfast and then went shopping.

There were disciplines involved in having a weekend like that. I had to make the arrangements. I had to come up with the money. I had to carry out the plan. It wasn't just going to happen. I had to make every effort for it to happen. But none of those things were done for their own sake. I wasn't making phone calls, spending money, driving to Victoria just as exercises that had some worth in their own right. The value of each of those things was strictly related to the value of their purpose: intimacy with my wife.

Of course, there's always the danger that I'll do any of those things for the wrong reason. I might have done it so that I could tell you about it in a book, and you would be impressed with me: *My, what an affectionate, attentive husband he is.* I might have done it to try to bribe my wife into letting me get a new something or other, or to oblige her to be more affectionate and attentive to me in the bedroom. I might have done it to get away from my in-laws. I might have done it because I'm thinking about buying shares in the hotel I booked in Victoria and I wanted to check the place out. I might have done it because I'm a spendthrift and I was concocting some extravagance to fill my emptiness.

All bad reasons. This alone is the right one: I did it for love. I wanted to show Cheryl my love for her and to have an intimate and playful evening together to deepen that love. It's that simple.

Why would anyone pray, fast, confess, study? It's death to do these things for their own sake. How dull, how bone wearying, how corrupting. It's death to do them to impress or bribe or oblige someone or to avoid something. The ultimate purpose of discipline is love—that we might actively love God more and more and tangibly love our neighbor more and more. The reason we endure any of these disciplines, cultivate any of these holy habits is for the joy set before us. These things bring us joy because they move us closer to the heart of God and allow us more and more to participate in His very nature.

I HAVE GOOD NEWS: GOD IS HERE, RIGHT HERE. JESUS IS PRESENT now, right now. The Holy Spirit still hovers over the earth, still moves in our midst, still dwells within those Christ has claimed. All you need for life and godliness has already been given.

But, Lord, where? Why don't I see this? Why don't I experience it, notice it, tap into it? Why won't the demons submit to me? Why can't I stand and deliver? And why is my love such a flickering pale thing? Why am I stuck on borderland?

This kind only comes out through holy habits.