

"Get With the Program"

Rehab series.¹ 3rd Sunday in Lent

John 2:13-25

[33] *Welcome, prayer.*

Have you ever been invited to join a health program? It seems like these fads come and go. I remember in high school, there was this big craze about oat bran. Did anyone get on the oat bran program? That actually seems tame compared to some of these strange programs²:

[34] Prancer-cise - Described as a "springy, rhythmic way of moving forward, similar to a horse's gait and ideally induced by elation..."

[35] Paleo Fitness - A "primal" way to stay in shape. The basic exercises are hanging from tree branches, carrying boulders, and lifting logs.

[36] Surfset Fitness - "Ride the waves" in an exercise program that takes place on a machine that looks like a miniature surfboard and simulates the instability of waves.

[37] Cycle Karaoke - This combines stationary cycling with karaoke. Each fearless soloist belts out the words to his or her favorite song from the gym's collection, while the rest of the class pedals along. Exercise your arms, legs, and vocal chords.

[38] JumpLife - A combination of mini trampolines, disco balls, and neon lights for an effect that's more like a dance party and less like an exercise program.

[39] ...Or you can do something like this guy. (*Church Appropriate Dance Moves video*)

[40] We should be concerned about our physical health. God gave us our bodies, and we should take care of them. We should also take care of our spiritual health. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:8, while "physical training is of some value, godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." As we take care of our bodies, we need spiritual health programs, too.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series>

² <https://www.rd.com/health/wellness/6-unusual-exercise-programs-worth-trying/>

[41] This is why we need God’s word. Consider Exodus 20, the original Ten-Step Program, also known as the Ten Commandments. This program was given to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness and remains a standard we can live by today: worship God only; honor the Sabbath; honor your parents; don’t steal, lie, murder, cheat or covet... That is a good program. Follow these commandments to keep your spirit in shape.

[42] As we read the Old Testament, we can see how various people followed, or didn’t follow, that program. Look at King David and King Solomon, for example. When they stuck to God’s program, trusting in God and worshiping God alone, then God would continue to bless them and keep their kingdom safe. For David, this seemed to work pretty well, but Solomon quickly abandoned the program; he married many foreign wives who stole his heart away, and the kingdom of Israel fractured.

[43] Much later, the prophet Daniel and his three friends were tempted to abandon God’s program by King Nebuchadnezzar; his program included worshiping Babylonian gods and eating their food. But Daniel and his friends resisted and stuck to God’s plan, earning blessings and seeing miracles as God protected them from the fiery furnace and the lion’s den.

[44] Good programs are helpful. But there is danger in believing just a program can save you. You might get carried away and forget your true priorities. You might modify the program from its original purpose or start skipping steps.

[45] In Jesus’ time, the Jewish people were into God’s program. They knew they were supposed to worship the Lord only. They taught that everyone had to celebrate Passover at the temple in Jerusalem. However, it seems they forgot the Author of the program, and instead they started looking for ways to make worship more “convenient.”

[46] Most of the faithful Jews had to make a long journey to the temple, and transporting animals for sacrifice was a big inconvenience. They might have been eaten along the way! So the Jewish leaders offered to “help.” They began selling animals for sacrifices. If you forgot your cow, sheep or dove, no problem. Just purchase one inside the temple, at outrageous prices, of course. If you didn’t have the proper “image-free” coins for the offering, that was covered, too. Just

go to the money changers’ tables to get the right currency, for a hefty exchange fee, of course. In some ways, I imagine the whole scene was like a Middle Eastern bazaar. It was noisy, chaotic, smelly and expensive.

The problem is, all this activity was happening inside the temple, specifically in the court of the Gentiles, the only place where foreigners were allowed to pray and worship. The distractions must have been overwhelming! And the noises and smells surely reached the inner courts, too.

[47] This is the scene Jesus encounters when he goes up to Jerusalem at Passover. Instead of a place of worship, he finds a chaotic market. The scripture describes a scary scene at his entry. Jesus, the gentle shepherd, takes a whip and cleans house. He overturns money tables. He drives out animals and their handlers. He yells at the sellers of doves: “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!”

[48] This story is recorded in all four gospels, but I notice that John specifically says Jesus tells off the dove handlers. Remember, there were cattle and sheep as well. Doves were the cheapest option available for sacrifice, which means that they were usually purchased by the poorest people. You might recall from the Christmas story, Jesus’ parents sacrificed doves. (Luke 2:24) This extortion was very personal for Jesus.

[49] Not only is the temple atmosphere being destroyed by noise and odors, the Jewish leaders are focused on profit, not worship. They are taking advantage of a captive market. We may be annoyed that a soft drink and a slice of pizza costs \$15 in a sports stadium, but I doubt any of us would crack a whip at the vendors. However, this racket is taking place in the house of worship, God’s house. No wonder Jesus is upset. This was not part of God’s program.

[50] The Jewish authorities, the self-appointed “spiritual trainers,” confront Jesus but make no attempt to arrest him. I think this is a sign of their guilt: they know this commerce in the temple courts is unethical. So instead, they challenge Jesus, demanding a sign as proof of his authority to change the temple set up. It is as if they say, “We think this program works. What do you have?”

Jesus offers this sign: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (John 2:19) Jesus intentionally misleads them. He is talking about his own

body. Jesus says his program is not about a building. It’s about his body. Jesus builds up the church through his own life, death, and resurrection. Now that is a radical program!

[51] God’s program can be boiled down to two words: follow Jesus. If anything else – money, social media, gossip, food, sports, whatever – if anything steals your heart away from Jesus, you need to give it up and get back on God’s program. Various scriptures talk about this, but my favorite is Matthew 6:21- “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” From their actions inside the temple courts, it was clear that the merchants’ hearts were with their greed, not their God.

[52] If Jesus were your personal trainer, what would he tell you? Are there some tables in your life he would overturn? Are there times when you are more concerned about managing your money than you are about maintaining your relationship with the Son of God? Are there times when you do not prioritize your schedule, and you give God the cold shoulder?

It can be easy to compromise. It’s easy to take a day or two off from the program. It’s tempting to flat out quit the program when it’s tough, especially when the results aren’t instant, or when we make mistakes.

[53] God knows. As followers of Jesus Christ, we do not have an easy life. It is not easy to follow the God’s program for us, but it is worth it. Matthew 7:14 says the road is difficult and narrow that leads to eternal life. When the road gets tough, those are the times we want to throw in the towel and give up on God altogether. We quit attending worship. We quit reading the Bible. We quit talking to our brothers and sisters in faith. We even give up on ourselves.

God’s program offers us hope. Yes, God gave us the commandments, but God surely knew we would break them. The commandments were meant to expose our need for God, our need for grace and mercy. Faith is not about doing the right thing for the sake of the law – it is about having a right relationship with the One who gave the law. The question is, will we stick with our heavenly Trainer, and will we stick with each other?

[54] Look what happened in John chapter 2. Temple worship had been compromised. The poor were being taken advantage of. People were more

focused on profit than on worship. I bet even some faithful Jews had had enough and stopped coming to Passover. But Jesus cleansed the temple. He set things right. I don't know how long his reform lasted, but it lasted long enough to impact those who listened, namely, his disciples.

[55] In our world today, worship can be compromised to the point that others who would faithfully participate are excluded. We may even stop worshipping the true God. We may fall off the program. I fully realize there are families of this church who have withdrawn over the years, some even recently. We cannot control their actions; we can only love them and pray for them.

[56] God's program is about grace. God restores people. God restores us. If we allow it, God can restore our churches. Not just this one. All of them. It might be disruptive, even surprising, like seeing Jesus with a whip. However, if we stick to God's program, passion for God will consume us, in a good way, just as it consumed Jesus.

[57] Are you following God's program? Are you believing that the love of Christ is enough for you? Are you making a habit of confession, prayer and devotion? Or have you made some modifications along the way, fallen off track and come close to throwing in the towel? Lent is our time of wilderness, of reflection and honesty, letting God know our struggles, and turning towards God, not away, as we look for hope. Today can be the day that you return to God, that you follow the best spiritual program with the best spiritual trainer ever: Jesus.

Today, as we celebrate communion, we can recommit to God's program. In the bread and cup, Jesus calls us to remember the length that he went to restore us back to God. Let's take that step together now, starting with this prayer of confession.

O God, Your light has filled our lives, but we have not shared it with others.

Lord, have mercy on us.

You have marked us as your own in baptism, but we have not lived as your faithful people.

Christ, have mercy on us.

You have called us to be a light to the nations, but we have hidden our light under a bushel.

Lord, have mercy on us.

Transform us by the power of your Holy Spirit so that we may live out our baptism as your new creation, forgiven and made whole by your matchless love in Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Moment of silent reflection)

Pastor: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

People: **In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.**

All: Thanks be to God! Amen.

Memory Verse: Micah 6:8

“...What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Reflection Questions:

1. What programs had you tried? What was the most helpful? Least helpful? Why?
2. Do you think God intends for us to follow his commandments perfectly? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Jesus cleared the temple? What would you have done if you had been in his shoes?
4. Have you ever left an organization, or even a church? Why? Did you ever rejoin?
5. What is God asking you to do this week to stay with him in the “program” of the gospel?