

Four Spiritual Lessons I Learned from Mountain Biking

While growing up, I loved riding my bike around the neighborhood. We spent hours doing “tricks” down our steep driveway. I distinctly remember my brother standing on the bicycle seat as he careened down the incline. I’m sure we gave my mom a heart attack ... or maybe she was blissfully unaware inside the house.

As I got older, we put aside our “tricks” and started exploring the many miles of urban bike trails. I’ve always enjoyed biking because you get to see more things quicker than you would while running or walking.

This is probably too true of my personality as well. I’m a little too curious and a little too excited about what’s around the next bend.

So naturally, upon moving out to Colorado nearly 10 years ago, I was interested in mountain biking. The first time I went mountain biking I was hooked; it was like a grown-up version of what I did as a kid! The technical aspect kept things interesting (if not a little spicy) and nothing could beat the joy of riding a flowy downhill trail.

Over the years, I’ve enjoyed improving my technical skills, and I’ve also noticed a few parallels with my spiritual life as well:

1. Look where you intend to go.

In mountain biking, one of the most basic skills actually deals with your gaze (i.e., where you are looking).

Look where you intend to go.

It’s that simple.

If there is a difficult tight turn, don't focus on the turn; focus on where you want to end up.

When your gaze is right, most often you will automatically adjust everything in your body position to make that tight turn happen.

Spiritually, what are you gazing at? What are you focused on in life right now?

As New York City pastor Timothy Keller says in his book "Counterfeit Gods," our hearts are idol-making factories. We quickly turn even the good things in our lives (family, friends, money, etc.) into "ultimate" things. God alone deserves our worship.

Are you spending your time gazing at Him and meditating on His many attributes? Or are your thoughts consumed with the news, difficult relationships and your to-do list?

Too often, I'm guilty of the latter.

I used to be overwhelmed by the fruit of the Spirit list in Galatians 5. It seemed impossible to check off the list each day! How am I supposed to achieve love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control on a consistent basis?!

Fix your gaze.

Jesus is our example in the Christian life. All I need is to focus on worshipping Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), and everything else (through the Holy Spirit) will adjust and come in alignment with God's Word.

2. Don't focus on the obstacle.

The fun (and sometimes scary) part of mountain biking comes with navigating technical obstacles. It may be a root or a rock or a narrow "squeeze" on a section of the trail or a drop

or a jump. Or, if you're lucky, it's a fun combination of different obstacles!

While there are different techniques to navigating different obstacles, one of the basic principles is to not focus on the obstacle.

Of course, you can't completely ignore the obstacle.

Recognize it.

Appreciate that it's there ... but don't stare at it while you try to go over it or around it.

When you focus on the obstacle, it's extremely difficult to get past and, more likely than not, you'll run into it.

Mountain biking obstacles remind me of all the different distractions in life. Each person has different distractions that tend to trip us up. Maybe for you it's people-pleasing or maybe it's self-sufficiency. Maybe you tend to find security in how much money you have made or saved.

Whatever it is ... it will never be enough to just try harder not to sin. In fact, that's almost a perfect recipe that you will fall into it again.

Instead, we must focus on a new love. Turn-of-the-18th-century Scottish minister and theologian Thomas Chalmers wrote a piece called "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," which argues this truth.

Chalmers argues that it's not enough to say "don't sin." We have to replace our old desires with a new love of Christ. When we delight ourselves so thoroughly in Christ, it is then that our old desires fall away.

Don't focus on the obstacle. Focus on counting "everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8).

3. Uphill feels a lot longer than downhill.

This is not a mountain-biking technique but rather an observation. The length of the climb always feels longer when you're going uphill. Of course, the time and effort is more but the actual distance you travel is the same.

It is the same with any kind of personal or spiritual trial you're facing.

If you're in an uphill season, it can feel like it will never end! Sometimes it's hard to remember what going downhill is even like! Sometimes we blame God for being cruel because He's given us hills to climb.

But oh the faith that God grows while we battle trials.

James 1:2-4 (ESV) reads, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

It seems preposterous to "count it all joy" when faced with a devastating heartbreak or a difficult trial. But Romans 5:3-5 (ESV) sheds a little more light on the subject. Verses 1-2 tell us that because of Christ, we have access to grace and we can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

In our "uphill" seasons, we are being made more like Christ, our living hope (1 Pet. 1:3) and that is something to rejoice about.

4. Just keep pedaling. There is hope!

The key to mountain biking when you are in a steep section is to down shift your gears and keep pedaling. If you fail to down shift, it will become too difficult to continue and you will topple over.

Your end speed in a steep section doesn't really matter. (I have had a hiker pass me on the trail.) Just keep pedaling.

So if you're in an "uphill" season, keep pedaling.

Keep praying.

Keep reading God's Word.

Keep meeting with other believers.

Keep singing songs of praise.

Just keep pedaling.

Your heart may not be in it. You may question if you believe any of this stuff but just keep pedaling.

Hebrews 12:1b-2 (ESV) reminds us to "...run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

The author of Hebrews then tells us to consider Jesus and all the hostility He faced and draw strength from His example. We're also instructed to draw comfort from God's correction as it shows that He loves us (v. 3-14).

But if these aren't comforting words right now, just keep pedaling.

Rejoice in this: our living hope, Jesus, was resurrected on the third day.

He is coming again and soon He will make all things right.

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4, ESV).

Conclusion

If mountain biking can be a reminder of God’s rich truths for me, what might it be for you? Get out there and hit the trails! Spend some time with God while admiring His creation. You never know what He might teach you on the adventure.

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