

Spiritual Disciplines: Pathway to Christian Maturity

Spiritual growth is a biblical assumption of the normal Christian life. As people over the last two thousand years have responded to the redemptive message of the gospel they have, to varying degrees, matured in their faith experience. Thirty years ago, Richard Foster, in the beginning of his book, *Celebration of Discipline* wrote these words: “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people. The classical Disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths.”¹ In recent years George Barna has stated, “Christianity would be incredibly influential in our culture if Christians consistently lived their faith. The problem is that millions don’t live like Christians-and that’s partially because they don’t know how.”² (I Corinthians 3:1-3)

To become the spiritually mature people God intends us to be will require a disciplined life that will result in a lifestyle that will recognize and consistently respond favorably to God’s presence in our lives. Brother Lawrence in his insightful little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God* wrote of being so in tune to God’s presence in his life that whatever he did at anytime of the day, he would be keenly aware of God and do those things that pleased and honored him.

A good working definition of spiritual disciplines are those activities that we do that help us practice God’s presence. Paul, the apostle, in his letter to the Christians at Colossae wrote: “And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” (Colossians 3:17)

Christians certainly can live with spiritual distinction and please God in their thinking and actions, but the Christian who does it consistently is the one that has been marked and trained by discipline. As Jesus told Peter, “Stay awake and pray, so that you won’t enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:41). Spiritual disciplines can strengthen the flesh so right responses to God’s presence will be more consistent. Practice makes better!

Once a discipline has been developed it is easy to imagine we are spiritual now that we have done this. Essential in the purpose of spiritual disciplines is the understanding that it is God working in our lives. It is *grace* that has been given so the discipline can develop. We make lifestyle changes that enable such grace to occur. There is a partnership at work that has been described as *disciplined grace*. When we are faithful to exercise a spiritual discipline we can have confidence in the promise that God will meet us in the discipline, whether we emotionally feel it or not.

Again, from the New Testament writings of Paul we find instruction that he gave Timothy that is timely for us today. “But have nothing to do with irreverent and silly myths. Rather train yourself in godliness, for, the training of the body has a limited

¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 1.

² Available from http://www.stalbans.org.nz/teachings/jourdain/new_year.htm; Internet.

benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” (I Timothy 4:7-8)

Spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves even though they are wonderful habits or practices for the Christian. Their purpose is to provide a means by which believers can grow into mature disciples of the Lord Jesus. Scripture does not contain a list of such activities as such, but various writers have classified such practices in a number of ways. Dallas Willard categorized them into *Disciplines of Abstinence* and *Disciplines of Engagement*. Richard Foster has labeled these habits as *Inward Disciplines*, *Outward Disciplines*, and *Corporate Disciplines*. While the exact number of disciplines discussed may vary from writer to writer, the important thing to remember is their purpose—anything a person does in repetition to help him become spiritually mature. Certainly there are some such habits that have proven to be more intentional and effective by their very nature. In this paper I want to focus on four disciplines that I believe are foundational in our pursuit for spiritual maturity.

The Discipline of Solitude and Silence

While some writers may list these as two different disciplines they are more times than not examined and practiced together and I will do so here. Most of us live in a culture that is permeated with noise. Someone has said we suffer from noise pollution as much as we suffer from air pollution. With the advent of the cell phone and continuing sophisticated technology we are never anywhere without human contact. In addition to the constant flow of conversation the volume of most sound has increased substantially. Maybe this is due to the amount of sound that something is trying to be heard over or maybe it is due to a gradual loss of hearing or both. The problem has not caused a spiritual dilemma; it has amplified it. The constant sound we are bombarded with makes focusing on God and hearing his whispers in our souls much more of a daunting task. The psalmist expressed this need for all of us when he wrote: “Be still, and know that I am God...” (Psalm 46:10)

There is something about silence that enables us to hear with our soul. We need to again deeply sense that God is present and wants to impress us with thought and with awareness of his creation. It is in such silence that there is opportunity for the act of prayer to be completed. More often than not our praying is a time of telling God what we want to tell him, but not allowing time for him to reply. We are off to other responsibilities or engagements. Silence invites God’s response. In some ways silence is the most difficult of disciplines to develop. Many people do not like un-generated sound. It is unnatural. Such silence is void of music and all human sound. It creates the environment for one to better pay attention to God and to himself.

One can easily see that to experience such silence one has to pay attention to the circumstances surrounding himself. Special attention and planning may very well be needed to arrange such an environment. That is why silence is so often coupled with solitude. Solitary places allow the mind and heart to refocus. If Jesus found it necessary to be alone (Mark 1:35) then how can we not also do the same? It is interesting to note that at the very beginning of his earthly ministry Jesus went into the desert for forty days

of solitude where he would be silent. No doubt it was during that time he received confirmation and direction from his Father concerning his coming ministry.

It is in solitude and silence that one may more fully discover how best to use his words. The writer of Ecclesiastes wrote there is a “time to be silent and a time to speak...” (Ecclesiastes 3:7) Perhaps it is in the silence that one learns when and what to speak. Because of the amount of communication that we are bombarded with there is need for the words of the Christian to be marked by timeliness and wisdom, not frequency.

Implementing Silence and Solitude into Our Lifestyles

As earlier suggested this habit may very well be the most difficult of spiritual disciplines to develop and practice with any regularity. Most of our lifestyles have become too fast-paced with too many responsibilities in too little allotted time. There is little margin in our lives. For silence and solitude to happen there will need to be planning to carve out such opportunities. Solitude and silence can occur in the midst of our daily lives, but making such a time will require resourcefulness and creativity. Early morning or late evening schedules may need to be altered. Middle of the day meals may be a chance to spend some time alone in silence. Discovering a place in our lives where we are less apt to be interrupted is a part of the challenge of the development of the discipline. Even time spent driving a car by oneself can be an opportunity if the intent to spend time alone in silence is there. At intervals in our schedules there is the need for withdrawal from our normal routines to a place away where we can have a more extended time to practice this discipline. Such retreats can last for half a day, a day, a weekend or a week. The longer the time the more planning is required.

Initial thinking may be there are too many reasons why I can't do this. This discipline, while taught little, is a major pathway to spiritual maturity. Unless we are willing to make lifestyle changes to get alone in silence with the Father our spiritual development will be greatly hampered. This time for study and listening to the Father speak to us is foundational for growth. Being in church activities everyday will not replace what this time alone with God can do.

Where can I go to be alone with God? _____

When during the day can I make opportunity to do this? _____

Bible Reading (Lectio Divina)

For many Christian leaders Bible reading and study has become the means to preparing a teaching or preaching assignment. There is a dimension of sacred reading from Scripture known as lectio divina that is reading, not for assignment, but for life. Tony Jones in his insightful book, *The Sacred Way*, describes the Bible reading experience of a friend:

He came to the Bible naked, so to speak, and let himself be clothed by God's Word. He came neither as a Bible scholar nor a teacher getting ready for a lesson;

he didn't have to stop every two verses and answer questions in a study guide. No, he read the Bible as a sacred object, as a living, dynamic revelation of God to *him*.³

This is *lectio divina*. It is reading from Scripture for the purpose of growing in intimacy with God, of discovering how the written Word can become the living Word in our lives. Such reading does not focus on the historical aspect of Scripture, but on the devotional component. From what is being read, how can one more fully practice God's presence?

The practice of *lectio divina* can be traced back to St. Benedict around 500 years after the birth of Christ and has been a part of monastery life ever since. However, it must be noted that this practice is not peculiar to the Catholic Church. *Lectio divina* is a helpful method of Bible reading for anyone desiring deeper intimacy with God. It consists of four steps or phases:

1. *Reading of the passage*-This is a time for reading scripture without Bible notes or helps like you would read a novel. An easily read translation will be a big help. Reading aloud is preferable because it requires more focus and concentration. Paying attention to surroundings like comfort and light is important. A brief prayer before reading asking the Holy Spirit to interpret for you is appropriate. Finally choose a time to read when you are more fully awake and alert.
2. *Meditating on the passage*-This is a time to pay attention to the emotions you experience in reading the passage. How does the particular scripture you are reading make you feel? Spend some time thinking about your emotions resulting from the passage. One way to practice this step is to imagine that you are a part of the scripture. In your mind place yourself in the environment. What are you experiencing through your five senses? Do not rush this time. It can be very insightful in making the scripture come alive to you.
3. *Prayer*- Even though you may have asked God already to bless the reading and interpret it for you, this a definite time of asking God for illumination. What does the passage mean? What do the emotions experienced say to you?
4. *Contemplation*-This phase is the most difficult because it incorporates the other three. It is a time of envisioning the Lord Jesus explaining how you are to live out the scripture. Journaling can be an advantageous aspect of this step. Write down what the Holy Spirit is saying to you about the passage.

³ Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 48.

This method of Bible study is a means of intensely focusing on the written word of God. It is devotion prompting a continuing discipline that God will honor and a result is he will reveal himself to you in a more intimate way.

Implementing Lectio Divina into Our Daily Lives

Many Christians have a habit of daily Bible reading, but the experience seemingly does little to foster their spiritual growth. There can be any number of reasons for this futility. Lectio Divina is not an end in itself, but a means to more intentionally encounter the living Word in the written Word. It is the intent and the focus of the reading that will bless and change the one who perseveres in the discipline. Let me remind you of a two important factors.

First, don't become disheartened with early attempts. The intensity of the focus may require practice for it to begin bearing fruit. **DON'T GIVE UP!** Secondly, pay attention to practical issues like using a translation that reads easily with good lighting when you are at your mental best. Allow enough time for the process to work. Seriously consider the journaling component of the contemplation step. Begin by reading passages that are familiar and can be easily visualized. Reading from *Revelation* would not be a good place to begin. Like any discipline committing a specific time on a regular basis for this event will better enhance the chance that you will actually do it.

The Discipline of Simplicity

The third discipline I want to present for discussion is that of "simplicity." Richard Foster defines the spiritual discipline of simplicity as an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. It involves choosing to live life with fewer material possessions and fewer scheduled demands for the purpose of providing time for spiritual contemplation and freeing time, energy, and resources to more fully devote life to a ministry to others. Such a lifestyle is developed in stages. The one desiring it must decide at which level he can begin. There is a sense of adventure in such a manner of living, but it will require a great deal of discipline and sacrifice to implement and continue the practice. It is a very practical way to practice God's presence in one's life because it removes some of the obstacles that detract from a life that is more marked by things of the spirit in contrast to things of the flesh. (Matthew 6: 25-33)

Unlike some other disciplines it directly affects more than just the individual choosing to practice it. It is really a spiritual discipline for a family who chooses to make lifestyle choices that really go against cultural flow. From outward appearance it is the most visible of the disciplines and usually invites questions. Prayerful care must be taken not to become spiritually proud. It is an intentional choice to significantly redefine the "good life" and more fully focus on the spiritual rather than the material.

I want to briefly suggest three possible expressions of the spiritual discipline of simplicity that can be practiced in gradual lifestyle increments.

- The Observance of a Sabbath- (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20: 8-11) The biblical concept of a Sabbath has its origin in a day each week designated for physical

rest. Later it was also the day chosen to host group worship. While the OT Sabbath was the last day of the week and Christians have chosen to primarily use Sunday, the first day of the week as their corporate worship day, the specific day chosen is not a significant factor. It is the spirit and purpose of the day that is important. While Sunday may contain time(s) for worship it is far from a day of rest for most of us, often marked by meetings, errands, shopping, and recreational pursuits. There is usually little physical rest, the biblical intent of the day. If life were to be reoriented so that weekly there was a day set aside for physical rest, worship, contemplation, and unhurried time with family and friends, the rest of the week might progress with a deeper awareness of God's presence and purpose.

- Learning to say “No,” to activities and opportunities that are not the best use of our time and energy- For many of us we are undisciplined so we are not careful to discern and select those ministry activities where our gifts and abilities can be best utilized. Rather, we choose doing many things that are not the best use of what we can offer and that leaves us physically and emotionally drained. Simplicity calls for life quality, not a quantity of events. It is marked by a pace of life that is non-hectic and allows time for God's surprises.
- Choosing to free up material resources to enable the support of more ministry needs-For most of us to be able to give more to the needs of others will mean choosing to spend less on ourselves. It is ingrained in us that the “good life” is materially centered and is our right. Many of us have so much in material possessions we don't fully appreciate all we do have and use very little of them in meaningful ways. We fall far short in gratitude. Richard Foster gives us three truths that can guide our use of possessions. First, all that we have is a gift from God. Second, what we have we can trust to God. Third, what we have is available to others.

Implementing Simplicity in Our Lives

For an individual or family to begin practicing simplicity it would be wise for them to begin slowly and grow in the discipline by use and experience. Such a radical lifestyle change will be difficult and the intent is for it to be long-term change, not a temporary experiment that ends in failure. We should make incremental changes in how Sunday is observed. What are current Sunday activities that can be scaled back or eliminated? If you are not currently doing so allot time for a Sunday afternoon nap. Schedule time for family and friends to be together to enjoy each other. Such times are not meant to produce a lot of work to get ready for, but the opportunity for being with the most special of human relationships is what is important.

Another idea is to examine weekly calendars and schedules to see if there are activities that are time consuming that do not really add to the total well being of our lives. Making time for “margin” in our lives means not all of our time is scheduled. There is time for just “being” and not always “doing.” Indicators that life is too hectic are when families are not able to eat most of their evening meals together or there is no time for serendipity opportunities.

Consider taking inventory of all the material possessions that you have that are seldom or ever used. What would it mean if those things were no longer in your life? Examine critically where you spend your money. What are the things you spend money on that provide no significant value? Can you discover how to free up an additional \$25 (or more) each month to use for meeting others' needs? Remember to begin by looking for opportunities to make small changes rather than wholesale plans. The lifestyle of simplicity will evolve, but for it to be spiritually enriching will be the result of a desire to become more Christ-like.

The Discipline of Scripture Memory

One last spiritual discipline I want to address is that of Scripture memory. It is a rarity to find adults who are intentionally memorizing Scripture for the purpose of practicing God's presence. There is any number of reasons why we say we can't memorize, as we grow older, but we can learn what we choose to learn. Scripture is clear in its teaching that this discipline is important.

"I have treasured Your word in my heart so that I may not sin against You."

Psalm 119:11 (HCSB)

Many of us have had the experience of attempting and in some cases memorizing Scripture, but like all disciplines unless it is practiced consistently it proves to be a futile attempt as an ongoing habit. I would like to incorporate into this paper a presentation by John Piper that better explains the value of memorizing Scripture.

Why Memorize Scripture?

BY JOHN PIPER

First, a few testimonies: I have it third hand, that Dr. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Seminary once made the statement (and I paraphrase) that if it were his decision, every student graduating from Dallas Theological Seminary would be required to learn one thousand verses word perfect before they graduated.

Dallas Willard, professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, wrote, "Bible memorization is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation. If I had to choose between all the disciplines of the spiritual life, I would choose Bible memorization, because it is a fundamental way of filling our minds with what it needs. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth. That's where you need it! How does it get in your mouth? Memorization" ("Spiritual Formation in Christ for the Whole Life and Whole Person" in *Vocatio*, Vol. 12, no. 2, Spring, 2001, p. 7).

Chuck Swindoll wrote, "I know of no other single practice in the Christian life more rewarding, practically speaking, than memorizing Scripture. . . . No other single exercise pays greater spiritual dividends! Your prayer life will be strengthened. Your witnessing will be sharper and much more effective. Your attitudes and outlook will begin to change. Your mind will become alert and observant. Your confidence and assurance will be enhanced. Your faith will be solidified" (*Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 61).

One of the reasons Martin Luther came to his great discovery in the Bible of justification by faith alone was that in his early years in the Augustinian monastery he was influenced to love Scripture by Johann Staupitz. Luther devoured the Bible in a day when people earned doctorates in theology without even reading the Bible. Luther said that his fellow professor, Andreas Karlstadt, did not even own a Bible when he earned his doctor of theology degree, nor did he until many years later (Bucher, Richard. "[Martin Luther's Love for the Bible](#)"). Luther knew so much of the Bible from memory that when the Lord opened his eyes to see the truth of justification in Romans 1:17, he said, "Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory," in order to confirm what he had found.

So here are a few reasons why so many have viewed Scripture memorization as so essential to the Christian life.

1. Conformity to Christ Paul wrote that "we all, . . . beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18)) If we would be changed into Christ likeness we must steadily see him. This happens in the word. "The Lord *revealed himself* to Samuel at Shiloh *by the word of the Lord*" (1 Samuel 3:21). Bible memorization has the effect of making our gaze on Jesus steadier and clearer.

2. Daily Triumph over Sin "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. . . . I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:9, 11). Paul said that we must "by the Spirit . . . put to death the [sinful] deeds of the body" (Romans 8:13). The one piece of armor used to kill is the "sword of the Spirit" which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:17). As sin lures the body into sinful action, we call to mind a Christ-revealing word of Scripture and slay the temptation with the superior worth and beauty of Christ over what sin offers.

3. Daily Triumph over Satan

When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness he recited Scripture from memory and put Satan to flight (Matthew 4:1-11).

4. Comfort and Counsel for People You Love

The times when people need you to give them comfort and counsel do not always coincide with the times you have your Bible handy. Not only that, the very word of God spoken spontaneously from your heart has unusual power. Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." That is a beautiful way of saying, *When the heart full of God's love can draw on the mind full of God's word, timely blessings flow from the mouth.*

5. Communicating the Gospel to Unbelievers

Opportunities to share the gospel come when we do not have the Bible in hand. Actual verses of the Bible have their own penetrating power. And when they come from our heart, as well as from the Book, the witness is given that they are precious enough to learn. We should all be able to sum up the gospel under four main headings (1) God's holiness/law/glory; 2) man's sin/rebellion/disobedience; 3) Christ's death for sinners; 4)

the free gift of life by faith. Learn a verse or two relating to each of these, and be ready in season and out of season to share them.

6. Communion with God in the Enjoyment of His Person and Ways

The way we commune with (that is, fellowship with) God is by meditating on his attributes and expressing to him our thanks and admiration and love, and seeking his help to live a life that reflects the value of these attributes. Therefore, storing texts in our minds about God helps us relate to him as he really is. For example, imagine being able to call this to mind through the day:

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:8-14)

I used the word "enjoyment" intentionally when I said, "communion with God in the enjoyment of his person and ways." Most of us are emotionally crippled—all of us, really. We do not experience God in the fullness of our emotional potential. How will that change? One way is to memorize the emotional expressions of the Bible and speak them to the Lord and to each other until they become part of who we are. For example, in Psalm 103:1, we say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!" That is not a natural expression for many people. But if we memorize this and other emotional expressions from the Bible, and say them often, asking the Lord to make the emotion real in our hearts, we can actually grow into that emotion and expression. It will become part of who we are. We will be less emotionally crippled and more able to render proper praise and thanks to God.

There are other reasons for memorizing Scripture. I hope you find them in the actual practice.

Implementing Scripture Memory in Our Lives

Like all disciplines, *Scripture memory* must be practiced on a consistent basis to be meaningful. One reason we have so often failed at memorizing Scripture is we have set our goal far too low. We commit to memorizing one verse a week and reason we can do that in one sitting. Consequently, it never becomes a daily discipline. In lieu of committing to memorize one verse a week, choose to memorize passages (several verses together) which will require more consistent practice. For example instead of memorizing Psalm 23:1, memorize all of Psalm 23; instead of memorizing John 3:16, memorize John 3: 16-18. It is really easier to memorize passages than isolated verses because passages carry more complete thought patterns and make more sense. You will find an excitement about the possibility of memorizing entire chapters in the Bible rather than verses.

Three additional thoughts are: first, memorize Scripture from the same translation that you primarily use. Switching back and forth between translations is confusing. Second, write out the Scripture you are trying to memorize on cards and carry them with you. You will find opportunities throughout the day to read and meditate on the Scripture.

Writing the Scripture yourself is better than pre-printed cards because in the writing you are learning. Third, find ways to use the Scripture you are learning. The more you use it the more you will remember it. Meditating on it while you are drifting off to sleep at night is another idea to enhance the memory process.