

The Spiritual Disciplines

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

“And we all...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor 3:18)

To Consider: Spiritual growth does not occur merely by reading our Bible, going to church, or being involved in church-related activities.

Our New Identity and Two Kinds of Maturity

Believers are a different species of humanity. We have a new identity (**Gal 2:20** “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” **2 Cor 5:17** “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” **Philip 2:15** Paul says we are to be “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world”).

To be sure our new identity is challenged to mature whenever we encounter difficult circumstances or unlovely people. Yet if any maturity is gained from these unexpected encounters it is at best incidental, occasional, sporadic. In contrast, the kind of maturity that results from a life focused on spiritual formation is lasting and deep because it springs from a life that is disciplined, intentional, purposeful. Habits of holiness built into our lives allow us to experience the power of God’s grace and carry us through difficult circumstances. If we are going to experience a deep and lasting spiritual maturity we must be disciplined about it. Put simply, we *will* reap what we sow.

The Necessity of the Disciplines

Spiritually mature people are disciplined people. Quite frankly, there is no other way to become like Christ. While unlovely people and difficult circumstances are rarely under our control, the Disciplines, by contrast, are always under our control. The more we invest in them the more we grow in Christlike character. The more we work at developing habits of the heart that look like, think like, and act like Jesus, the more conformed to Jesus we become. “Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus” (**Philip 2:5**).

What are the Spiritual Disciplines?

The Disciplines are...

- *A means and not an end.* They are the journey and not the destination. They are a way of adjusting our minds, shaping our character, and conforming our actions after the pattern of Jesus’ life.
- *Divine instruments* used to perform the symphony of God’s amazing grace on our hearts.
- *Tools for cultivating Christ-likeness* into the soil of our hearts so we imitate Jesus’ character both spontaneously and habitually. They are like a brush and a palette in the hands of a painter or a hammer and chisel in the hands of a sculptor. Without them the artist’s potential would never be realized. Therefore, the Disciplines foster spiritual maturity and unleash “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (**Col 1:27**).
- *Like a road map* that points us in the direction of experiencing God’s power in our lives. They ensure we reach our destination and are the pathway to experiencing the abundant life about which Jesus spoke (**Jn 10:10**).

The Spiritual Disciplines

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

- “Consciously undertaken or chosen activities that enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort” (Dallas Willard). Jesus warned that “apart from me you can do nothing” (**Jn 15:5**) and this applies not only to our salvation but to our sanctification; our progress in holiness.

The Disciplines are not...

- *A new label put on old activities.* If nothing changes in our lives as we learn about the Disciplines, then we’ll remain right where we are in our spiritual formation. Something different *must* be introduced into our lives if the Disciplines are to have their way with us. This is not an exercise in academic competence. The goal is to become transformed by not merely informed of the Disciplines.
- *A means of entering into a saving relationship with Jesus* but the instruments for nurturing a relationship that already exists. Without the Disciplines, our relationship with Jesus will become cold, stagnant, distant.
- *A way of earning God’s favor*, but a means of experiencing his transforming grace in our lives. However, we must not think that we can sit back and do nothing in the name of “grace” and expect to become more like Christ. The relationship of faith to works has been sorely misunderstood. While we affirm with all the rigor of biblical authority that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, a faith that does not work is no faith at all (**Jm 2:14-26**). Every genuine believer is “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (**Eph 2:10**) and by these good works actively participates in the process of maturing in Christ, which the Bible calls “sanctification.” In fact, the Disciplines cannot be viewed as a means of gaining merit before God, since our worthiness before God comes to us from Christ in us and not from ourselves (**Philip 2:9**). So, while the Disciplines can never improve our standing before God, they will promote intimacy with God and help us develop an authentic spirituality.

Where Are the Disciplines?

Every human has an invisible dimension; a hidden place where thoughts run deep, intentions are developed, feelings are weighed, and character is formed. Scripture calls this the “heart” and it is the place where the Disciplines begin. The heart is so important that God tells you to “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (**Pr 4:23**). Again, the prophet Samuel says “For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (**1 Sam 16:7**). Biblical Christianity is first and foremost a religion of the heart well before it’s a religion of the head or the hands.

This is not to say that *what* we do or *how* we think does not matter. But, Jesus makes it clear that “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil” (**Lk 6:45**). Put simply, when the inside is clean, then the outside takes care of itself. The progress of Christianity always moves from the inside out, not from the outside in and the Disciplines ensure we’re moving in the right direction. Therefore, *the place from where the Disciplines come and the target toward which the Disciplines are moving is the core of our very being; the human heart.*

The Christian Life: Knowing, Doing, and Being

It’s been said that the Christian life can be summed up in three ways: knowing, doing, and being. Without question, we’re required to *know* certain things: knowledge of our Savior’s death

The Spiritual Disciplines

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

and resurrection, for instance, or that God exists and the Bible is true. And, we're surely called to *do* many things, such as obey our Lord, serve those in need, and the like. But these first two activities have primarily to do with our head and our hands. It's unlikely that we'll become the kind of people God wants by merely knowing and doing. Unless these activities issue from our heart they really don't produce spiritual maturity. Hence, the third activity is the focal point of spiritual formation. It entails *being* the kind of person God intends. We're not called just to exercise patience; we're called to *be* patient. It's not enough merely to show kindness; we're to *be* kind. James commands us not just to endure, but to "let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (NASB, **Jm 1:4**). The Disciplines, therefore, cultivate the soil of our hearts where genuine spiritual growth takes place.

What is the Aim of the Spiritual Disciplines?

The goal of the disciplines is to make us more like Jesus Christ in thought, word, deed, habit, and attitude. We are called to imitate Jesus...

- *When treated harshly by others, **Heb 12:3** "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."*
- *When serving others in the Body of Christ, **Rom 15:2-3** "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself."*
- *In everything we do, **1 Jn 2:6** "whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked."*
- *In love for others, **Eph 5:2** "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us"*
- *When welcoming brothers/sisters who share different convictions, **Rom 15:7** "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you."*

You see, God has a very specific goal for each of us: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the image of his Son*" (**Rom 8:29**). This is not merely at the end of our lives but *during* our life now. Every instance, every encounter, every relationship, every circumstance is moving us in this direction and we can be sure that God meets his goals! Our final spiritual destination is laid out by Paul to the Philippians: "he who began a good work in you *will bring it to completion* at the day of Jesus Christ" (**Philip 1:6**) and Paul ached for the Galatians' growth when he writes "my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you!*" (**Gal 4:19**). John the Apostle insists that "when he appears *we shall be like him*" (**1 Jn 3:2**). While our destination is Christlikeness, the vehicle that gets us there is the Spiritual Disciplines.

Do the Spiritual Disciplines Have Biblical Support?

1 Tim 4:7-8 God exhorts you to "train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." "Godliness" has value for life today and life in eternity. How do we become "godly?" By "training" (Greek, *γυμνασία* = gymnasium) ourselves.

Rev 3:2 Jesus warns the believers at Sardis, "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die." This is an implicit call to grow up in your faith.

1 Cor 9:25-27 "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." While directly applying to Gospel proclamation, Paul

The Spiritual Disciplines

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

indirectly calls us to rigorously order our priorities after the Gospel life recognizing that we're never "off duty" when it comes to Christian living. We never retire from diligent, self-controlled Christian living, especially since the world is watching!

The Christian life is naturally, or should I say "supernaturally," one of progress and the Disciplines are the means used to move us forward. Listen to the progress of faith that God expects: **2 Pt 1:5-10** "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall."

The writer of Hebrews issues a strong rebuke to believers who should have progressed after being in the faith for some time. There is no excuse for not disciplining ourselves for the sake of godliness. **Heb 5:12-14** "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained [Greek, *γυμνασία*] by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."

Reflection/Direction/Decision

1. Identify at least 2 areas of your life that need renovation and renewal? What's holding you back from growth in these areas? Are you willing to add change in your life to see victory and experience spiritual progress?
2. Commit to memory **Psalm 139:23-24** and make this your prayer each day.
3. Is there a relationship between spiritual disciplines, spiritual fruit (**Gal 5:22-23**), and spiritual gifts (**1 Cor 12:8-11, 28; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 4:11**)? If so, what is the nature of the relationship? For example, can one display spiritual fruit and not be disciplined? Can one be disciplined and not display spiritual fruit?