

## Introduction to the Spiritual Disciplines

### 1. What are the spiritual disciplines?

#### a. A definition:

*The Spiritual Disciplines are the personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times. ...The Spiritual Disciplines are the God-given means we are to use in the Spirit-filled pursuit of Godliness.<sup>1</sup>*

### 2. What are the goals of the spiritual disciplines?

#### a. Growth in holiness/Christ-likeness.

Christ-like is what we will be in the New Creation (Romans 8:29 and 1 John 3:2), and we are to pursue growth in this direction now, not simply wait for it to be bestowed in the future. While the first passage below makes clear that this is Jesus' work within us by the Holy Spirit, the next two point to the role we are to have in this transforming work:

*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which come from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).*

*Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).*

*Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present and life to come (1 Timothy 4:7-8).*

#### b. A deepening knowledge of/relationship with God

Through faith in Christ and the benefits of His atoning work on the cross, our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to the God to whom we were previously estranged. Being therefore saved into relationship, and one in which we are to relate to God as 'Abba, Father', we ought to seek to know God in ever deepening ways. This involves not only learning more information about Him, but deepening our relating and intimacy with Him.

The Puritan Pastor, Richard Baxter, advocates a disciplined life:

*...to prevent a shyness between God and thy soul. Frequent society breeds familiarity, and familiarity increase love and delight and makes us bold in our addresses. The chief end of this duty is to have acquaintance and fellowship with God, and therefore if thou come but seldom to it, thou wilt keep thyself a stranger still.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Baxter, as cited in Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), p. 187.

### 3. What do the Spiritual Disciplines look like?

Spiritual Disciplines include:

- a. Bible study and meditation on Scripture
- b. Individual Prayer
- c. Corporate Prayer
- d. Corporate Worship
- e. Evangelism
- f. Service
- g. Stewardship
- h. Fasting
- i. Giving
- j. Silence
- k. Solitude
- l. Simplicity
- m. Journaling
- n. Spiritual direction
- o. Spiritual partner/friend
- p. Sabbath-keeping
- q. Spiritual Retreats

### 4. Why do we need spiritual disciplines?

God changes and grows us in a number of ways. He uses other people (Proverbs 27:17), whether friends, enemies, parents, spouses, siblings, children, co-workers, neighbours, pastors or strangers. He uses circumstances (Romans 8:28). He uses *our own decisions* concerning how we spend our time, what we value and give attention to, including in the area of how we are investing in our spiritual growth.

This third category differs from the first two in being *internal* rather than external. We choose what patterns we will or will not put in place, and which helpful or unhelpful habits will become the rhythms of our life. We are the ones who choose whether we will discipline ourselves for the sake of spiritual growth. Such choices ultimately hinge on inward conviction rather than outward coercion. We can't control what other people will say or do to us, or what will happen to us, but we do have control over whether we put Spiritual Disciplines in place in our lives and persevere with them.

God grants us a measure of choice regarding our growth in godliness and the deepening of our relationship with Him. He uses our decisions in this area to work on us from the inside out. We all make decisions in this area. The most common are to read the bible and pray. There are many others we could make. Sometimes we struggle even to make these two. The lack of any decision in this area is still a decision.

Some concrete reasons include:

**a. In the New Testament discipline is a crucial part of the Christian life**

- Hebrews 12:4-11
- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27
- 2 Timothy 1:7

Howard Rice, in *Reformed Spirituality*, says about the place of discipline in the Christian life:

Although grace is a gift, which is always freely given, we determine how we will respond to that gift. The Christian life is shaped by that response. .. Discipline in the Christian life is not a luxury. Without it we become confused, lose our way, compromise our principles, and discover that we are not the people we had intended to be. No one is so sturdy in the faith that the temptation to surrender bit by bit does not erode conviction. Days go by and we discover that, instead of growing in grace in these days, we have wasted them.<sup>3</sup>

**b. Living the Christian life well involves establishing life patterns and habits which aid this**

Dallas Willard:

[N]o one ever says, “If you want to be a great athlete, go vault eighteen feet, run the mile under four minutes,” or “If you want to be a great musician, play the Beethoven violin concerto.” Instead, we advise the young artist or athlete to enter a certain kind of overall life, one involving deep associations with qualified people as well as rigorously scheduled time, diet, and activity for the mind and body.<sup>4</sup>

**c. Specific disciplines can help us to address specific sins or struggles in our lives**

Sins and Negative Patterns	Corresponding Disciplines
Gossip/sins of speech	Silence, self-examination
Anxiety and worry	Breath prayer, Scripture reflection
Envy and competitiveness	Solitude, self-examination
Discontent	Attending to desire
Self-reliance	Silence, prayer, community
Avoidance patterns	Community, spiritual friendship
Over-busyness	Solitude, discernment, Sabbath, rule of life
Anger and bitterness	Silence, self-examination, confession
Feelings of inadequacy	Examen of consciousness, self-knowledge and celebration
Guilt, shame	Solitude, confession, forgiveness
Lust	Attending to desire in God’s presence
Restlessness and stress	Solitude, silence, breath prayer
Lethargy and/or laziness	Caring for the body, exercise
Lack of faith	Prayer, Scripture
Feelings of isolation	Examen of consciousness, community
Selfishness and self-centredness	Prayer and worship in community
Lack of direction	Discernment, listening to the body <sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), pp. 186-187.

<sup>4</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), p. 187.

- d. **Specific disciplines can help us to grow specific fruit/qualities**
  
- e. **Without spiritual disciplines in our lives, we are susceptible to defaulting to the ways of our society, or becoming captive to the ‘tyranny of the urgent’**

Howard Rice:

In reaction to these excesses of judgmentalism, self-righteousness and rigidity [of the Puritans and nineteenth-century conservative Evangelicals], much of American Protestantism has vigorously rejected the whole notion of taboos. ...Most Protestants have, despite feeling somewhat guilty, have accepted the pattern of conspicuous consumption in our society without question. Except for attendance at church on Sunday mornings, it is often impossible to tell Christians apart from the rest of society by any external standard. An urgent question that we all still face today is how we shape the pattern of our living so that there is something that holds together our belief and our practice.<sup>6</sup>

Howard Rice:

The Christian life must have some shape, some central way of expressing itself. If left to chance, Christians are likely to be carried away by the latest cultural fad, or lulled into compromise with some form of idolatry. Without some clear priorities to provide guidance, we easily fall into a pattern of responding to crises as they come, or making priorities of whatever demands our attention the loudest. When that becomes true for us, time for God gets squeezed out in the press of responsibility for a host of people and things. The shape of the Christian life is its piety or spirituality. Only through careful self-discipline and the nurturing strength of the community of faith are Christians enabled to establish and sustain a spirituality rooted and grounded in faith. The spiritual life is one that requires constant practice if it is not to degenerate into religion that is little more than duty.<sup>7</sup>

- f. **The watching world needs Christians to practice what we preach**

## 5. **What are some fears or dangers associated with spiritual disciplines?**

- a. **The fear that they downplay the importance of grace in the Christian life**

Dallas Willard:

We are saved by grace, of course, and by it alone, and not because we deserve it. That is the basis of God’s acceptance of us. But grace does *not* mean that sufficient strength and insight will be automatically “infused” into our being in the moment of need. Abundant evidence for this claim is available precisely in the experience of any Christian. We only have to look at the facts. A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in the manner of Christ when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), pp. 185.

<sup>7</sup> Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), pp. 180-181.

<sup>8</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 4-5.

**b. We might wrongly trust in our own efforts to make ourselves holy or right with God.**

Howard Rice:

[The spiritual disciplines] can, of course, become a new legalism, a way of binding the conscience and of producing the smug, self-satisfied attitude that destroyed the framework of Puritan piety. But each of the means of grace can also be a way in which we are made more ready to become faithful as God chooses to lead us. We need to be careful not to make discipline into a new law, but we need to be careful that we do not reject all guidance and try to live by what feels right in the moment.<sup>9</sup>

**c. We might become proud of our own progress in the disciplines, and look down on others****d. We might become discouraged when we fall short of our intentions**

Unless we understand that the means of grace are gifts, they can become burdens, and we shall discover that we berate ourselves for not living up to our own expectations. We are often more severe with ourselves than God's graciousness to us should permit. Our use of the means of grace is not for the purpose of satisfying God, but for the renewal of our lives. We do not have to achieve some standard of perfection in order for them to be helpful for us.<sup>10</sup>

**e. We might become overly-inward focused, bordering on monastic****6. Where should I start when it come to the spiritual disciplines?****a. Learning the way of Christ by looking to Him and His whole life**

Dallas Willard:

My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing – by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father.

What activities did Jesus practice? Such things as solitude and silence, prayer, simple and sacrificial living, intense study and meditation upon God's Word and God's ways, and service to others.<sup>11</sup>

Following "in his steps" cannot be equated with behaving as he did when he was "on the spot". To live as Christ lived is to live as he did *all* his life.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), p. 197.

<sup>10</sup> Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), p. 197.

<sup>11</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 5.