

## Spiritual Disciplines: Why? What? How?

Jesus said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." (Mt 7:24)

Disciples of Jesus Christ intend to obey all things Jesus taught. Our difficulty is in the "how?" Experience has taught us that direct self-effort at letting go of anger, contempt, lust, and anxiety, not to mention loving our enemies is doomed to failure. But this is where the spiritual disciplines come in. Spiritual disciplines are planned activities that enable us to BECOME THE KIND OF PERSON who can easily and naturally obey the teachings of Jesus Christ.

To obey His teachings, we also realistically engage in a lifestyle similar to the one that He and His apostles practiced. That lifestyle includes spiritual disciplines such as solitude, service, fasting, and prayer. Those practices "work" by opening up our spiritual life to the direct influence of the Holy Spirit so that we become people permeated with divine love. As love becomes the foundation of our life, the teachings of Jesus are then routinely followed.

Spiritual disciplines are akin to physical disciplines, such as lifting weights and running. Like those disciplines, spiritual disciplines have their full effect only if engaged in on a regular basis, frequently, and over time.

The activities listed below though have stood the test of time as reliable ways to bring about inner transformation. These disciplines are not ways of "earning" grace but rather are wise practices that bring about spiritual strength. The place to start is by prayerfully experimenting in small doses. Results should become evident after just a few weeks of regular effort. Interacting with the Lord along with some trusted "fellow travelers" as you progress is very important. At different seasons in your life, you will find the need to practice different disciplines. Some will remain constant, but others will change as you continue to follow the Lord Jesus.

### **SOLITUDE**

In solitude, we create times to be completely alone with God and away from human companionship. Solitude wakes us to the constant presence of God, it disturbs our



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fleshly habit of "needing" people around us, and it brings godly focus to our life. Getting up early in the morning, having a lunch hour alone, walking in a park, and taking a weekend retreat are all ways to practice solitude.

### **SILENCE**

The practice of silence means getting away from noise and learning to listen to God's still, small voice. Inner silence will heal our being driven by fear. It can be practiced by driving with the radio off, sitting alone on back porch, walking in nature, but above all in contemplative prayer. In contemplative prayer, we sit quietly, waiting on God to speak, if He should so choose. Like a courtier waiting on his king, we are available to be addressed, but not striving to get his attention.

### **PRAYER**

Prayer takes many forms, but as it develops it becomes a lifestyle. In the words of Dr. Dallas Willard, "Prayer is talking with God about the things we are doing together." In other words, prayer is the communication between companions. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we listen, and sometimes we just enjoy each other's presence in silence.

### **FASTING**

Fasting is to go without food for a certain period of time. A common Christian practice is to take one or two days in the week, skip breakfast and lunch, and then eat supper. The discomfort felt in doing without food tends to press our attention towards God. Once practiced with some regularity, fasting is not nearly as difficult as one might think. What does fasting do for the believer? Fasting enables us to peacefully bear up when we don't get our way. Fasting breaks addictions to food, drugs, sex, and alcohol,

and it creates an ability to be "master" of our body in remarkable ways. Those who practice fasting find significant spiritual strength.

### **SERVICE**

Service, as a discipline, is the choosing to do some necessary thing for other people, particularly those you live and work with. If the service can be done in secret, so much the better. Choosing to serve breaks us free from the peevish, "Whose turn is it to serve now?" that commonly arises in human fellowship. In your home, or at work, pick the necessary chore that nobody else wants to do. Make that your service.

### **CELEBRATION**

The regular gathering with other believers to worship, praise God, give thanks, and enjoy Christian life together is a vital discipline. Complaining and "stressing," so common in worldly life, takes a back seat when disciples gather to turn their attention deliberately to Jesus Christ and celebrate Him. When Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," He wasn't kidding.

### **STUDY AND MEMORIZATION OF SCRIPTURE**

Thoughtful reading of the Bible requires a plan. One plan that works well is to use three bookmarks, one placed in Psalms and Proverbs, one in the Old Testament, and one in the New Testament. Each day, meditatively read one chapter in each section, moving the book mark as you do so. Reading Scripture is done at two levels: to gain a greater knowledge of God and His ways and to let His truth reconstruct our thinking, attitudes, and feelings. Our media culture affects our vital understanding in completely wrong, even outrageous ways. Only a steady diet of God's Word can transcend the anti-Christ indoctrination from our modern world. Classic passages of Scripture should be memorized and recited often. The human mind is designed to memorize. Taking one line at a time, repeating it regularly until you "have it," then adding one more line is the key to successful memorization.

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