



Spiritual Disciplines

A Practical Strategy

Practices such as reading Scripture and praying are important — not because they prove how spiritual we are — but because God can use them to lead us into life.

—John Ortberg

Jesus is the way to life — and not just life after death, but life here and now. When he said, “Follow me,” he meant it. In all he did and taught, Jesus conveyed that our spiritual life takes place in our physical reality as well as in the heart. If we believe what he said about the spiritual life, it only makes sense we should do what he did.

The practices of Jesus have been recognized for centuries as the core activities of the spiritual life. In the same way a runner is equipped to compete in a marathon by the discipline of physical training, so training through spiritual disciplines frees us to live each day with the “easy yoke” and “light burden” Jesus spoke of (Matt 11:30).

Disciplines do not earn us favor with God or measure spiritual success. They are exercises which equip us to live fully and freely in the present reality of God — and God works with us, giving us grace as we learn and grow.

Meditation: The ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word.

Meditation is the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word. Christian meditation allows for a precious space in time for a meeting between God, the Lover, and we, the beloved. We can meet with God in ever-growing familiarity and intimacy not because of any of our special abilities, but simply because we come willing to enter into a listening silence. It is a creation of space, emotionally and spiritually, in our often hectic and hurried world, allowing the Creator of the universe to meet with us as he met Moses, face to face, as a friend.

What happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart.

—Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline

(Additional quotes on this page from same source.)

Prayer: The interactive conversation with God about what we are doing together.

Prayer is the interactive conversation with God about what we are doing together. Prayer is, first and always, listening to God — seeking to grasp what his will is in any given circumstance. In listening and perceiving God's will, the pray-er is inevitably a participant of change, within oneself and those circumstances and lives for which we pray. Prayer is a process of lifelong learning as we seek to approach our Father with openness, honesty, and trust as his child.

Our prayer is to be like a reflex action to God's prior initiative upon the heart.

Fasting: The voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity.

Fasting is the voluntary denial of an otherwise normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity. The focus of biblical fasting is always on spiritual purposes. The heart of one who is fasting is to seek God, most often privately and with no motive to gain approval from people. Fasting provides the opportunity to reveal those things that control us. It reminds us that we are sustained by every word of God and it restores balance in a believer's life regarding priorities and nonessentials.

Fasting must forever center on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained.

Study: The mind taking on an order conforming to the order of whatever we concentrate upon.

The discipline of study first demands a humble spirit, recognizing that the chief end is not merely to amass information, but to experience it, learn from it, and be changed by it. It is vital to study not only books, but also those things around us such as nature, relationships, events, and cultural values. Through the steps of study – repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection – a person emerges transformed, in awe of the beauty of God and the world around them.

Remember that the key to the Discipline of study is not reading many books, but experiencing what we do read.

Simplicity: An inward reality that results in an outward life style.

Simplicity is the joyful unconcern for possessions we experience as we truly “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). Persons living in simplicity realize freedom from anxiety by viewing possessions as gifts from God, remembering we are stewards to care for God’s gifts to us, and making our goods available to others. Simplicity is a declaration of war on materialism and it reorients our lives, perspectives, and attitudes.

Contemporary culture lacks both the inward reality and the outward life-style of simplicity... We are trapped in a maze of competing attachments.

Solitude: An open relational space for being found by God and freed from competing loyalties.

The experience of solitude varies widely from taking advantage of the little solitudes in our days to setting aside planned times of retreat to step out of our daily patterns in order to enter into the silence of God. This discipline, which is necessarily married to silence, leads also to greater trust in God to be our Justifier as even the very words we speak are tamed.

Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place.

Submission: The discipline which frees us to let go of the burden of always needing to get our own way.

Growth in the discipline of submission requires a person to consider the ways with which they view other people. A person acting in submission will be respectful and considerate of all people. They will first be submissive to the Triune God, then the Scriptures, their family, neighbors, the body of Christ, those broken and despised, and finally the world. Leadership and power are found and demonstrated by becoming a servant of all.

Jesus calls us to self-denial without self-hatred. Self-denial is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. Our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want.

Service: The many little deaths of going beyond ourselves which produces in us the virtue of humility.

While the discipline of service has a wide array of manifestations, from hospitality to listening and many beyond, at the center is found a contentment in hiddenness, indiscriminancy, and a pattern of service as a lifestyle. A person choosing to serve will find tremendous freedom in giving up the need to be in charge.

True service builds community. It quietly and unpretentiously goes about caring for the needs of others. It draws, binds, heals, builds.

Confession: Experiencing the grace and mercy of God for healing the sins and sorrows of the past.

Though through our Mediator, Jesus Christ, we may confess our sins and be directly forgiven by God, we also have the opportunity and admonition to “confess our sins to one another” (James 5:16). In receiving a confession by a sister or brother in Christ, a believer has an incredible chance to minister understanding and forgiveness.

God has given us our brothers and sisters to stand in Christ’s stead and make God’s presence and forgiveness real to us.

Worship: Entering into the supra-natural experience of the Shekanyah, or glory, of God.

Worship is entering into the supra-natural experience of the Shekanyah, or glory, of God. Worship is far beyond a mere period of time spent singing on Sunday morning. It is a lifestyle spent ceaselessly laying aside our humanly initiated activity, giving way to the teaching of Jesus and the activity of the Holy Spirit. We offer our whole being in worship: our voices in song, our bodies in posture, our spirits in prayer; all for the purpose of first loving the Lord our God.

Worship is the human response to the divine initiative.

Guidance: Knowing in daily life an interactive friendship with God.

People who are followers of Christ are continually growing as we learn to heed the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Jesus in our individual lives. But we also must strive towards unity in the body of Christ as we seek the will of God in a corporate manner. Just as God led his people Israel by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night through the wilderness, he longs to guide us now, not only as individuals, but also as a body.

*Unity rather than majority rule is the principle of corporate guidance.
Spirit-given unity goes beyond mere agreement. It is the perception that we
have heard the Kol Yahweh, the voice of God.*

Celebration: A life of “walking and leaping and praising God” (Acts 3:8).

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God loves to celebrate and loves even more when we, as his people, join him in celebrating all the wonderful things he has done for us. Joy that is exhibited in celebration keeps everything else going, produces energy and makes us strong. This genuine and sustaining joy is achieved through obedience to God. Celebration manifests in endless ways: singing, dancing, laughing, as well as taking advantage of celebrating festivals, holidays, and the milestones of life.

Celebration comes when the common ventures of life are redeemed.