

REVISED
AND
UPDATED

SPIRITUAL
DISCIPLINES
FOR THE
CHRISTIAN
LIFE

DONALD S. WHITNEY

FOREWORD BY J. I. PACKER

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life

REVISED
AND
UPDATED

SPIRITUAL
DISCIPLINES
FOR THE
CHRISTIAN
LIFE

DONALD S. WHITNEY

NAVPRESS 

A NavPress published resource in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

For more information, visit www.NavPress.com.

© 1991, 2014 by Donald S. Whitney

A NavPress published resource in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from NavPress, P.O. Box 6000, Colorado Springs, CO 80934-6000.

NAV PRESS and the NAV PRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

ISBN 978-1-61521-617-8

Cover image by Shutterstock

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible,® copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® NIV.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is Available.

Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 14
6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Foreword ix

- CHAPTER 1: The Spiritual Disciplines . . .
for the Purpose of Godliness 1
- CHAPTER 2: Bible Intake (Part 1) . . .
for the Purpose of Godliness 21
- CHAPTER 3: Bible Intake (Part 2) . . .
for the Purpose of Godliness 37
- CHAPTER 4: Prayer . . . for the Purpose of Godliness 79
- CHAPTER 5: Worship . . . for the Purpose of Godliness 101
- CHAPTER 6: Evangelism . . . for the Purpose of Godliness 119
- CHAPTER 7: Serving . . . for the Purpose of Godliness 141
- CHAPTER 8: Stewardship . . .
for the Purpose of Godliness 159
- CHAPTER 9: Fasting . . . for the Purpose of Godliness 191
- CHAPTER 10: Silence and Solitude . . .
for the Purpose of Godliness 221
- CHAPTER 11: Journaling . . . for the Purpose of Godliness 249
- CHAPTER 12: Learning . . . for the Purpose of Godliness 271
- CHAPTER 13: Perseverance in the Disciplines . . .
for the Purpose of Godliness 287

Notes 305

About the Author 319

Scripture Index 321

Subject Index 327

FOREWORD

I was asked to write a foreword for this book before I saw it. Having now gone through it, I would in any case have volunteered for the job, so that I can go on record as urging all Christians to read what Don Whitney has written; indeed, to read it three times over, with a month's interval (certainly not less, and ideally, I think, not more) between each reading. This will not only make the book sink in, but will also give you a realistic picture of your seriousness, or lack of it, as Jesus' disciple. Your first reading will show you several particular things that you should start doing. In your second and third readings (for each of which you should choose a date on the day you complete the previous reading) you shall find yourself reviewing what you have done and how you have fared in doing it. That will be very good for you, even if the discovery comes as a bit of a shock at first.

Ever since Richard Foster rang the bell with his *Celebration of Discipline* (1978), discussing the various spiritual disciplines has become a staple element of conservative Christian in-talk in North America. This is a happy thing. The doctrine of the disciplines (Latin *disciplinae*, meaning "courses of learning and training") is

really a restatement and extension of classical Protestant teaching on the means of grace (the Word of God, prayer, fellowship, the Lord's Supper). Don Whitney's spiritual feet are blessedly cemented in the wisdom of the Bible, as spelled out by the Puritan and older evangelical masters, and he plots the path of discipline with a sure touch. The foundations he lays are evangelical, not legalistic. In other words, he calls us to pursue godliness through practicing the disciplines out of gratitude for the grace that has saved us, not as self-justifying or self-advancing effort. What he builds on these foundations is as beneficial as it is solid. He is in truth showing us the path of life.

If, then, as a Christian you want to be really real with your God, moving beyond the stage of playing games with yourself and Him, this book provides practical help. A century and a half ago the Scottish professor "Rabbi" Duncan sent his students off to read John Owen, the Puritan, on indwelling sin with the admonition, "But, gentlemen, *prepare for the knife*." As I pass you over to Don Whitney, I would say to you, "Now, friend, *prepare for the workout*." And you will find health for your soul.

—J. I. Packer

CHAPTER 1

THE SPIRITUAL
DISCIPLINES . . . FOR THE
PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

Ours is an undisciplined age. The old disciplines are breaking down. . . . Above all, the discipline of divine grace is derided as legalism or is entirely unknown to a generation that is largely illiterate in the Scriptures. We need the rugged strength of Christian character that can come only from discipline.

V. RAYMOND EDMAN

Discipline without direction is drudgery.

Imagine six-year-old Kevin, whose parents have enrolled him in music lessons. After school every afternoon, prompted by his mother, he slouches into the living room and strums songs he must practice but doesn't like while watching his buddies play baseball in the park across the street. That's discipline without direction. It's drudgery.

Now suppose Kevin is visited by an angel one afternoon during guitar practice. In a vision, he's transported to Carnegie Hall. He's shown a guitar virtuoso giving a concert. Usually bored by classical music, Kevin is astonished by what he sees and hears. The musician's fingers dance on the strings with fluidity and grace. Kevin thinks of how stupid and clunky his own hands feel when they halt and falter over the chords. The virtuoso blends clean, soaring notes into a musical aroma that wafts from his guitar. Kevin remembers the toneless, irritating discord that comes stumbling out of his.

But Kevin is enchanted. His head tilts to one side as he listens. He drinks in everything. He never imagined that anyone could play the guitar like this.

“What do you think, Kevin?” asks the angel.

The answer is a soft, slow, six-year-old’s “W-o-w!”

The vision vanishes, and the angel is again standing in front of Kevin in his living room. “Kevin,” says the angel, “the wonderful musician you saw is you in a few years.” Then pointing at the guitar, the angel declares, “But you must practice!”

Suddenly the angel disappears and Kevin finds himself alone with his guitar. Do you think his attitude toward practice will be different now? As long as he remembers what he’s going to become, Kevin’s discipline will have a direction, a goal that will pull him into the future. Yes, effort will be involved, but you could hardly call it drudgery.

When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many believers feel as Kevin did toward guitar practice—it’s discipline without direction. Prayer threatens to be drudgery. The practical value of meditation on Scripture seems uncertain. The real purpose of a discipline such as fasting is often a mystery.

First, we must understand what we shall become. The Bible says of God’s elect, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29). God’s eternal plan ensures that every Christian will ultimately conform to Christlikeness. We will be changed “when he appears” so that “we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2). If you are born again (see John 3:3-8), this is no vision; this is you, Christian, as soon as “he appears.”

So why talk about discipline? If God has predestined our conformity to Christlikeness, where does discipline fit in? Why not just coast into the promised Christlikeness and forget about discipline?

Although God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends for us to grow toward it. We aren’t merely to wait for holiness; we’re to pursue it. “Strive for peace with everyone,” we’re commanded in Hebrews 12:14, “and for the

holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Notice carefully what that says: Without holiness—that is, Christlikeness or godliness—no one will see the Lord, regardless of how many times they have been to church or how often they have engaged in religious activities or how spiritual they believe themselves to be.

It’s crucial—*crucial*—to understand that it’s not our pursuit of holiness that qualifies us to see the Lord. Rather, we are qualified to see the Lord *by the Lord*, not by good things we do. We cannot produce enough righteousness to impress God and gain admittance into heaven. Instead we can stand before God only in the righteousness that’s been earned by another, Jesus Christ. Only Jesus lived a life good enough to be accepted by God and worthy of entrance into heaven. And He was able to do so because He was God in the flesh. Living a perfect life qualified Him to be a sacrifice that the Father accepts on behalf of others who by sin disqualify themselves from heaven and a relationship with God. As proof of God’s acceptance of Jesus’ life and sacrifice, God raised Him from the dead. In other words, Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life in complete obedience to the commands of God, and He did so in order to give the credit for all that obedience and righteousness to those who had not kept all of God’s Law, and He died for them on a Roman cross in order to receive the punishment they deserved for all their sins against God’s Law.

As a result, all who come to God trusting in the person and work of Jesus to make them right with God are given the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 1:13-14). The presence of the *Holy Spirit* causes all those in whom He resides to have new *holy* hungers they didn’t have before. They hunger, for example, for the Holy Word of God—the Bible—that they used to find boring or irrelevant. They have new holy longings, such as the longing to live in a body without sin and to have a mind no longer tempted by sin. They yearn to live in a holy and perfect world with holy and perfect people, and to see at last the One the angels perpetually praise as “holy, holy, holy” (Revelation 4:8). These are some of the holy heartbeats in all those in whom the Holy

Spirit resides. Consequently, when the Holy Spirit indwells someone, that person begins to prize and pursue holiness. Thus, as we have seen in Hebrews 12:14, anyone who is not striving for holiness will not see the Lord. And the reason he or she will not see the Lord in eternity is because he or she does not know the Lord now, for those who know Him are given His Holy Spirit, and all those indwelt by the Holy Spirit are compelled to pursue holiness.

And so, the urgent question every Christian should ask is, “How then shall I pursue holiness, the holiness without which I will not see the Lord? How can I become more like Jesus Christ?”

We find a clear answer in 1 Timothy 4:7: “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (NASB). In other words, if your purpose is godliness—and godliness *is* your purpose if you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, for He makes godliness your purpose—then how do you pursue that purpose? According to this verse, you “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.”

This verse is the theme for the entire book. In this chapter, I will attempt to unpack its meaning; the rest of the book is an effort to apply it in practical ways. I will refer to the scriptural ways Christians discipline themselves in obedience to this verse as the Spiritual Disciplines. I will maintain that the only road to Christian maturity and godliness (a biblical term synonymous with Christ-likeness and holiness) passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. I will emphasize that godliness is the goal of the Disciplines, and when we remember this, the Spiritual Disciplines become a delight instead of drudgery.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES— WHAT ARE THEY?

The Spiritual Disciplines¹ are those practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times. The Disciplines could be described in several ways.

First, the Bible prescribes *both personal and interpersonal* Spiritual Disciplines. This book is about personal Spiritual Disciplines, but they are not more important than the interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines, even if they are emphasized more frequently in most of the literature about spiritual growth.² So while some Disciplines are practiced alone, some are to be practiced with others. The former are personal Spiritual Disciplines and the latter are interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines. For example, Christians should read and study the Word of God on their own (personal Spiritual Disciplines), but they should also hear the Bible read and study it with the church (interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines). Christians should worship God privately, but they should also worship Him publicly with His people. Some Spiritual Disciplines are by nature practiced alone, such as journaling, solitude, and fasting (though individuals sometimes fast in conjunction with a congregational fast). Other Disciplines are by nature congregational, such as fellowship, hearing God’s Word preached, and participation in the Lord’s Supper—all of which require the presence of people.

Both the personal and interpersonal Disciplines are means of blessings for followers of Jesus and a part of growth in godliness, for the Bible teaches both. Moreover, Jesus practiced both, and becoming like Jesus is the purpose of practicing the Disciplines. So, for instance, the Bible tells us that on at least four occasions Jesus got alone to pray (Matthew 4:1; 14:3; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42), thereby practicing *personal* Spiritual Disciplines. Conversely, we’re told in Luke 4:16, “as was his custom, [Jesus] went to the synagogue on the Sabbath Day,” thus engaging in *interpersonal* Spiritual Disciplines.

Each of us is perhaps inclined a little more toward Disciplines that are practiced individually or toward those that are practiced corporately. Some, for instance, might think they could be all that God wants them to be, even without the local church, just by practicing the personal Spiritual Disciplines faithfully. Others may be equally deceived into thinking that they’ll make sufficient spiritual progress if they are deeply involved in the life of their church, believing that

somehow their participation in meaningful church activities will compensate for the lack of a personal devotional life. To lean too far toward our own personal inclination, however, will get us out of balance and deform our pursuit of holiness. Christians are individuals, but we are also part of the body of Christ. We experience God and we grow in His grace through both personal and interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines. So even though this book is about personal Spiritual Disciplines, understand that Christlikeness also requires the pursuit of God through the interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines.

Second, Spiritual Disciplines are *activities, not attitudes*. Disciplines are practices, not character qualities, graces, or “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). Disciplines are things you do—such as read, meditate, pray, fast, worship, serve, learn, and so on. The goal of practicing a given Discipline, of course, is not about *doing* as much as it is about *being*, that is, *being* like Jesus. But the biblical way to grow in *being* more like Jesus is through the rightly motivated *doing* of the biblical Spiritual Disciplines. Note it again—“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” Godliness—being like Jesus—is the purpose, but the God-given path to that purpose is through certain activities found in Scripture known as the Spiritual Disciplines. To put it another way, there are specific practices we are to do sometimes that cultivate generally being like Jesus all the time. So fasting is a Spiritual Discipline, because that’s something you do. Joy, strictly speaking, is not a Spiritual Discipline, because joy is something you experience, not something you do. Fasting itself is not the goal; rather joy is part of the goal of fasting, because joy is a Christlike quality. Joy does not come to you if you are spiritually passive; rather, joy is cultivated, but joy is cultivated by things you do. And the “things you do” that cultivate Christlike joy are the Spiritual Disciplines.

Third, I want to limit the subject matter of this book to those Spiritual Disciplines that are *biblical*, that is, to practices taught or modeled in the Bible. Without this limitation, we leave ourselves open to calling anything we fancy a Spiritual Discipline. Thus

some might declare, “Gardening is a Spiritual Discipline for me,” or “Exercise is one of my Spiritual Disciplines,” or claim that some other hobby or pleasurable habit is a valid Spiritual Discipline. One of the problems with this approach is that it can tempt people to assert something like, “Maybe meditation on Scripture works for you, but gardening does just as much for my soul as the Bible does for yours.” And the result is that virtually anything can be designated a Spiritual Discipline, and worse, it means that we determine for ourselves what practices are best for our spiritual health and maturity rather than accepting those God has revealed in Scripture. I believe a case can be made—to a greater or lesser extent for each—that the following personal Spiritual Disciplines are commended in Scripture: Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, and learning. Is this an exhaustive list? No, I wouldn’t presume to maintain that. A survey of other literature on the subject would reveal additional candidates for consideration as biblical Spiritual Disciplines to be practiced by individual Christians. But I do believe it can be argued that the ones discussed in these pages are the more prominent ones in Scripture.

Fourth, this book takes the position that the Spiritual Disciplines found in Scripture are *sufficient* for knowing and experiencing God, and for growing in Christlikeness. This is based upon the fact that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). These verses tell us that Scripture, because it is divinely inspired, provides the guidance Christians need to “be complete, equipped for every good work,” including the good work of pursuing “the purpose of godliness.” So whatever else a person might claim regarding the spiritual benefits he or she receives from a practice not found in the Bible, at the very least we can say this about that activity—it is not necessary. If it were necessary for spiritual maturity and progress in holiness it would have been recorded and promoted in Scripture.

Fifth, the Spiritual Disciplines are practices *derived from the gospel, not divorced from the gospel*. When the Disciplines are rightly practiced, they take us deeper into the gospel of Jesus and its glories, not away from it as though we've moved on to more advanced levels of Christianity. New Testament scholar D. A. Carson makes this point eloquently:

The gospel is not a minor theme that deals with the point of entry into the Christian way, to be followed by a lot of material that actually brings about the life transformation. Very large swaths of evangelicalism simply presuppose that this is the case. Preaching the gospel, it is argued, is announcing how to be saved from God's condemnation; believing the gospel guarantees you won't go to hell. But for actual transformation to take place, you need to take a lot of discipleship courses, spiritual enrichment courses, "Go deep" spiritual disciplines courses, and the like. You need to learn journaling, or asceticism, or the simple lifestyle, or Scripture memorization; you need to join a small group, an accountability group, or . . . Bible study. Not for a moment would I speak against the potential for good of all of these steps; rather, I am speaking against the tendency to treat these as postgospel disciplines, disciplines divorced from what God has done in Christ Jesus in the gospel of the crucified and resurrected Lord. . . .

Failure to see this point has huge and deleterious consequences. . . . First, if the gospel becomes that by which we slip into the kingdom, but all the business of transformation turns on postgospel disciplines and strategies, then we shall constantly be directing the attention of people *away* from the gospel, *away* from the cross and resurrection. Soon the gospel will be something that we quietly assume is necessary for salvation, but not what we are excited about, not what we are preaching, not the power of God. What is really

important are the spiritual disciplines. Of course, when we point this out to someone for whom techniques and disciplines are of paramount importance, there is likely to be instant indignation. *Of course* I believe in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, they say. And doubtless they do. Yet the question remains: What are they excited about? Where do they rest their confidence? On what does their hope of transformation depend? When I read, say, Julian of Norwich, I find an example of just how far an alleged spirituality may be pursued, in medieval form, directly attempting to connect with God *apart* from self-conscious dependence on the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus—the very matters the apostle labels “of first importance.” Wherever contemporary pursuit of spirituality becomes similarly distanced from the gospel, it is taking a dangerous turn.³

Sixth, the Spiritual Disciplines are *means, not ends*. The end—that is, the purpose of practicing the Disciplines—is godliness. I define *godliness* as both closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ, a conformity that’s both inward and outward, a growing conformity to both the heart of Christ and the life of Christ. This Christlikeness is the goal, the reason we should practice the Disciplines. Without this purpose in our practice, the performance of Spiritual Disciplines—no matter how consistent or vigorous—is vain and nothing more than an empty husk of godliness. So while we cannot be godly without the practice of the Disciplines, we can practice the Disciplines without being godly if we see them as ends and not means. The next section of the chapter is devoted to developing this crucial aspect of the theology behind the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines.

So the Spiritual Disciplines are those personal and interpersonal activities given by God in the Bible as the sufficient means believers in Jesus Christ are to use in the Spirit-filled, gospel-driven pursuit of godliness, that is, closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES— THE MEANS TO GODLINESS

The most important feature of any Spiritual Discipline is its purpose. Just as there is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar or piano apart from the purpose of playing music, so there is little value in practicing Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them (see Colossians 2:20-23; 1 Timothy 4:8). That purpose is godliness. Thus we are told in 1 Timothy 4:7 to discipline ourselves “for the purpose of *godliness*” (NASB).⁴

That’s what the godly heroes of Christian history have done. From biblical times to our time, godly people have always been spiritually disciplined people. Call to mind some heroes of church history, people such as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Bunyan, George Whitefield, Lady Huntingdon, Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, Lottie Moon, George Müller, Dawson Trotman, Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. How did they develop such a reputation for godliness? It wasn’t as though God somehow anointed them with holiness in ways He hasn’t bestowed on the rest of us. It may be true that He blessed these believers in terms of ministry fruitfulness in ways that He hasn’t conferred upon many others, but in terms of conformity to Christ, they made progress the same way that all Christians do—through the Spiritual Disciplines. And in my own pastoral and personal Christian experience, I can say that I’ve never known a man or woman who came to spiritual maturity except through discipline. Godliness comes through discipline.

Actually, God uses three primary catalysts for changing us and conforming us to Christlikeness, but only one is largely under our control. One catalyst the Lord uses to change us is people. “Iron sharpens iron,” says Proverbs 27:17, “and one man sharpens another.” Sometimes God uses our friends to sharpen us into more Christlike living, and sometimes He uses our enemies to file away our rough, ungodly edges. Parents, children, spouses, coworkers,

customers, teachers, neighbors, pastors—God changes us through these people.

Another change agent God uses in our lives is circumstances. The classic text for this is Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Financial pressures, physical conditions, even the weather are used in the hands of Divine Providence to stimulate His elect toward holiness.

Then there is the catalyst of the Spiritual Disciplines. This catalyst differs from the first two in that when He uses the Disciplines, God works primarily from the inside out. When He changes us through people and circumstances, the process works mainly from the outside in. The Spiritual Disciplines also differ from the other two methods of change in that God grants us a greater measure of choice regarding involvement with the Disciplines. We often have little choice regarding the people and circumstances God brings into our lives, but we can decide, for example, whether we will read the Bible or fast today.

So on the one hand, we recognize that even the most iron-willed self-discipline by itself will not make us more holy; instead, it may make us more like the Pharisees. Growth in holiness is a gift from God (see John 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 2:11). On the other hand, that doesn’t mean that we’re to do nothing to pursue godliness, just living the life we want until and unless God decides to make us holy. What we are to do is discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness, practicing the God-given Spiritual Disciplines as a means of receiving His grace and growing in Christlikeness.

In Colossians 1:29 the apostle Paul illustrated how these two—the efforts of a Christian and the work of God—can occur simultaneously in a person indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In this text Paul spoke of his labors to help believers become “mature in Christ,” declaring, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29). Notice that Paul said that he himself was toiling, but he then affirmed that the energy for

this struggle came from Christ. That Paul had the desire and the power for ministry was entirely of the grace of God (see Philippians 2:13). And if any lasting fruit resulted from his labors, Paul gave all the glory to God. But sometimes it surely felt as though all the toil was of Paul, and at the end of each day, Paul was the one who was work-weary.

That's the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines. The desire and the power for them are produced by the grace of God. But Christians themselves must practice the Disciplines. For example, a deep, insatiable hunger for the Bible is a gift from God, but we are the ones who must turn the pages and read the words. God doesn't pull our passive bodies over to the desk and cause our hands to open the Bible and draw our eyes back and forth over the pages without any effort on our part.

The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. The word rendered "discipline" in the New American Standard translation is the Greek word *gymnasia* from which our English words *gymnasium* and *gymnastics* derive. This word means "to exercise or discipline," which is why the King James Version renders 1 Timothy 4:7 as "exercise thyself rather unto godliness," the English Standard Version as "train yourself for godliness," and the New International Version as "train yourself to be godly." It's a sweaty word with the smell of the gym to it. So think of the Spiritual Disciplines as spiritual exercises. To go to your favorite spot for prayer or journaling, for example, is the spiritual equivalent of going to a gym and using a weight machine. As physical disciplines like this promote bodily strength, so the Spiritual Disciplines promote godliness.

A Bible story that illustrates another way of thinking of the role of the Spiritual Disciplines is in Luke 19:1-10. It's the famous account of the conversion of the tax collector, Zacchaeus. Because he was so short, Zacchaeus was unable to see Jesus in the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus when He passed by. When Jesus came to the place, He looked up, called

Zacchaeus by name, and told him to come down. The two went to the tax collector's house, where he believed in Christ for salvation and resolved to give half his possessions to the poor and return with interest all tax money he had wrongfully taken.

Think of the Spiritual Disciplines as ways by which we can spiritually place ourselves in the path of God's grace and seek Him, much like Zacchaeus placed himself physically in Jesus' path and sought Him. The Lord, by His Spirit, still travels down certain paths, paths that He Himself has ordained and revealed in Scripture. We call these paths the Spiritual Disciplines, and if we will place ourselves on these paths and look for Him there by faith, we can expect to encounter Him. For instance, when we come to the Bible, or when we engage in any of the biblical Disciplines—looking by faith to God through them—we can anticipate experiencing God. As with this tax collector, we will find Him willing to have mercy on us and to have communion with us. And in the course of time we, too, will be transformed by Him from one level of Christlikeness to another (see 2 Corinthians 3:18). So again, by means of these Bible-based practices we consciously place ourselves before God in anticipation of enjoying His presence and receiving His transforming grace.

Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys football team for most of three decades, said, "The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don't want to do in order to achieve what they've always wanted to be."⁵ In much the same way, Christians are called to make themselves, by the Spirit's power, do what they would not naturally do—practice the Spiritual Disciplines—in order to experience what the Spirit gives them a desire to be, that is, to be with Christ and like Christ. "Discipline yourself," says the Scripture, "for the purpose of godliness" (NASB).

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES— GOD'S WILL FOR CHRISTIANS

The original language of the words "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (NASB) makes it plain that this is a command

of God, not merely a suggestion. Holiness is not an option for those who claim to be children of the Holy One (see 1 Peter 1:15-16), so neither are the means of holiness—that is, the Spiritual Disciplines—an option.

The expectation of disciplined spirituality is implied in Jesus' offer of Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." The same is true in this offer of discipleship: "And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'" (Luke 9:23). These verses tell us that to be a disciple of Jesus means, at the very least, to learn from and follow Him. That's what the twelve apostles of Jesus did—they followed Him around, and as they did, they learned from Him. But for them to follow Jesus required discipline; they had to go where He went and when. Following Jesus today and learning from Him still involves discipline, for you don't follow someone accidentally—at least not for very long—nor do you learn as much accidentally as you do by discipline. Are you a disciplined follower of Jesus?

That discipline is at the heart of discipleship is validated by 2 Timothy 1:7, which says, "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." A key component of this self-control in a follower of Jesus is spiritual self-discipline.⁶ Further, Galatians 5:22-23 declares that one evidence of the influence of this God-given spirit of self-control is greater self-control in our own lives, especially as followers of and learners from Jesus.

The Lord Jesus not only expects these biblical Spiritual Disciplines of those who follow Him, He is the model of discipline for the purpose of godliness. And if we are going to be Christlike, we must live as Christ lived—insofar as sinful humans can. We cannot do what Jesus did as God, but *Christian* living means we should seek to follow His human example of how a person lives in fellowship with the Father. Although Jesus is much more than our example of spirituality—for He is also our Lord, our King, our Savior, our Substitute, our Righteousness, our Judge, and many other

things to us—He is not less than our example of spirituality. And when we look to Jesus we see an example of disciplined personal piety, of how to live in consistent communion with God.

Despite the example of Jesus and the teaching of the New Testament about Christianity as a life of disciplined spirituality, many professing Christians are spiritually undisciplined and seem to have little Christlike fruit and power in their lives. However, many of them are remarkably disciplined in other areas of their lives. I've seen men and women who discipline themselves with zeal for the purpose of excelling in their career, but who discipline themselves very little "for the purpose of godliness." I'm sure you've seen people who will devote time to learning to play an instrument, knowing that it takes countless hours to acquire the skills; who will practice hard to improve their sports performance, knowing it takes work to become proficient; who will commit to a long curriculum of intense study to complete a degree, knowing it takes sacrifice to succeed. Then many of these same people will give up quickly if they find that the Spiritual Disciplines don't come easily, as though becoming like Jesus would not take much effort.

I've seen Christians who are faithful to the church of God, who frequently demonstrate genuine enthusiasm for the things of God, and who are committed to the preaching of the Word of God, yet who trivialize their effectiveness for the kingdom of God through lack of discipline. A woman in her sixties once came to my wife and me for counsel, a woman who had spent a lifetime in conservative Bible-believing churches. Over the decades this faithful worker had served in just about every volunteer ministry position open to her. But through tears she admitted, "I know how to do everything in the church, but I don't know how to read the Bible and pray." Spiritually such people are a mile wide and an inch deep. There are no deep, time-worn channels of communing discipline between them and God. They have dabbled in everything but disciplined themselves in nothing.

MORE APPLICATION

There is danger in neglecting the Spiritual Disciplines. The greatest danger of neglecting the Spiritual Disciplines is the danger of missing God—forever; not because personal piety earns anyone a place in heaven, but because it characterizes those who are on their way there. In other words, some who fail to practice the Disciplines disregard them because they simply have no appetite for them, and they have no appetite for them because they have no hunger for God. They do not know God, so the God-given means of personally experiencing and enjoying God have little appeal. To them, the Spiritual Disciplines are tedious religious duties to be endured as little as conscience or reputation will allow, not a banquet of God on which their famished souls long to feed as much as possible.

For those who do know God through the gospel of Christ, there's another danger in neglecting the Disciplines. A selection from the pen of a writer many years ago timelessly illustrates the danger. Commenting on the difference between the disciplined and the undisciplined way, he wrote,

Nothing was ever achieved without discipline; and many an athlete and many a man has been ruined because he abandoned discipline and let himself grow slack. Coleridge⁷ is the supreme tragedy of indiscipline. Never did so great a mind produce so little. He left Cambridge University to join the army; but he left the army because, in spite of all his erudition, he could not rub down a horse; he returned to Oxford and left without a degree. He began a paper called *The Watchman* which lived for ten numbers and then died. It has been said of him: "He lost himself in visions of work to be done, that always remained to be done. Coleridge had every poetic gift but one—the gift of sustained and concentrated effort." In his head and in his mind he had all kinds of books, as he said himself, "completed save for transcription." "I am on the eve," he says,

“of sending to the press two octavo volumes.” But the books were never composed outside Coleridge’s mind, because he would not face the discipline of sitting down to write them out. No one ever reached any eminence, and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline.⁸

Likely from your own observations you could name athletes, musicians, or students who displayed enormous potential, but who failed to live up to that God-given potential simply because they could not discipline themselves to practice. Something similar can happen in the spiritual realm to Christians. While few of us will have Coleridge’s intellectual or poetic gifts, all believers have been given spiritual gifts (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-7). The mere presence of spiritual gifts, however, guarantees no more spiritual fruitfulness than Coleridge’s mental gifts assured the production of books and poetry. Just as with athletic, musical, or intellectual gifts, so also spiritual gifts must be developed by discipline in order to bear spiritual fruit. Thus, the danger of neglecting the Spiritual Disciplines is the danger of bearing little spiritual fruit—your life counting little for the sake of the kingdom.

There is freedom in embracing the Spiritual Disciplines. Many hear the term *Spiritual Disciplines* and think of bondage and burdens—things they have to do, not freedom. Nevertheless, there is a freedom in the Christian life that comes not through indolence, but discipline.

We can illustrate this principle by observing the freedom that comes through mastery of any discipline. For instance, watching a consummate guitar player pluck and strum those six strings almost gives the impression that he was born with the instrument attached to his body. He has an intimacy and a freedom with the guitar that make playing the thing look easy. Anyone who’s ever tried to play realizes that such musical liberty and flair with a guitar comes only from decades of disciplined practice. Likewise, freedom through discipline is seen not only in proficient musicians, but also in

all-star shortstops, expert carpenters, successful executives, skilled craftsmen, excellent students, and moms who daily manage home and family well.

Freedom through discipline is the idea behind what has become known as “the ten-thousand-hour rule.”⁹ This is an observation based upon research indicating that to become an expert in anything, for anything to become second nature, you must perform that activity—such as playing the guitar—for at least ten thousand hours. And it’s not just a matter of repeating an identical task—such as playing the same song—for something like four hours per day, five days per week, fifty weeks per year for ten years; rather there must also be a deliberate, ongoing effort (usually under the guidance of another) to improve overall performance. Thus in the case of a musician, a wide variety of songs, styles, and drills would be rehearsed so consistently and with such increasing complexity that an ever-developing freedom with the instrument would result.

In one sense we might call discipline “the price” we must pay for freedom. But Elisabeth Elliot is more precise when she explains that “freedom and discipline have come to be regarded as mutually exclusive, when in fact freedom is not at all the opposite, but the final *reward*, of discipline.”¹⁰ So while stressing that freedom requires discipline, let us not forget to emphasize that discipline rewards us with freedom.

What is this freedom of godliness? Think again of our illustrations. For instance, a guitar virtuoso is “free” to play a difficult arrangement by Segovia while I am not. Why? Because of his years of disciplined practice. Similarly, those who are “free” to quote Scripture are those who have disciplined themselves to memorize God’s Word. We may experience a measure of freedom from spiritual lethargy through the Discipline of fasting. Or we may sense some liberation from self-centeredness while engaged in Disciplines such as worship, service, and evangelism. The freedom of godliness is the freedom to do what God calls us through Scripture to do and the freedom to express the character qualities

of Christ through our own personality. This kind of freedom is the “reward” or result of the blessing of God upon our engagement in the Spiritual Disciplines.

But we must remember that the mature freedoms of discipline-nurtured godliness do not develop in a single reading through the Bible or in a few forays through some of the other Disciplines. Scripture reminds us that self-control, such as that expressed through the Spiritual Disciplines, must persevere before it ripens into the mature fruit of godliness. Observe closely the sequence of development in 2 Peter 1:6—“to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness” (NIV). The bridge between Spirit-empowered self-control and godliness is perseverance. Occasional self-control results in occasional godliness. But self-control with perseverance results in more consistent Christlikeness. True godliness requires not merely a ten-thousand-hour pursuit, but a lifetime of perseverance.

There is an invitation to all Christians to enjoy God and the things of God through the Spiritual Disciplines. All in whom the Spirit of God dwells are invited to taste the joy of a Christ-centered, gospel-based, Spiritual Disciplines lifestyle.

Remember Kevin and his guitar? The drudgery of his daily practice would take on an entirely new spirit once he realized that someday he would be playing for a packed house in Carnegie Hall. The discipline of practice would gradually become the means to one of the greatest enjoyments of his life.

Any discipline—from guitar practice to Scripture memory—without direction is drudgery. But the Spiritual Disciplines are never drudgery as long as we practice them with the goal of godliness (that is, closeness to and conformity to Christ) in mind. If your picture of a disciplined Christian is one of a grim, tight-lipped, joyless half-robot, then you’ve missed the point. Jesus was the most disciplined Man who ever lived and yet the most joyful and truly alive. Though more than our example, nevertheless He is our example of discipline. Let us follow Him to joy through the

Spiritual Disciplines. Focus on the person and work of Jesus in each of the Disciplines. Through them, learn from, gaze upon, and enjoy who Jesus is and what He has done. By means of the Disciplines, let the truths of the gospel restore your soul. Engage in the Spiritual Disciplines given by God in Scripture so that you are continually shown your need for Christ and the infinite supply of grace and mercy to be found by faith in Jesus Christ.