



# SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

*“The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.” - Richard J. Foster*

*“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.” - Donald S. Whitney*

*“So why exercise spiritual disciplines? To know Jesus Christ. They are simply a means by which you come to know Him experientially.” - Charles Swindoll*

1 Timothy 4:7:  
*“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” (NASB)  
“Train yourself to be godly.” (NIV)*

*“Spirituality without discipline moves in hapless fits and starts; it is sporadic, dependent on fluctuating feelings and external circumstances. It requires little to no effort, but also produces little to no sustained growth, and thus little to no fruit.” - Brett and Kate McKay*

When we talk about spiritual disciplines, what are we talking about? We’re talking about **habits and practices** that promote spiritual growth, focus our lives on Jesus, and help us walk in step with the Spirit.

While this could be a new topic to some, the spiritual disciplines have marked the lives of Christians in a variety of forms for the past 2000 years, with their practice being born much earlier than that.

Even so, an overarching reality worth noting from the outset of this discussion is that we are each *unique individuals*. As such, just as we don’t all relate to people the exact same way, we can expect some frustration if we all try to relate to God in exactly the same way.

When God showed up in our world, he didn’t make us learn a new language in order to communicate with him; He spoke ours. And, while that doesn’t mean it won’t take any work to study and understand the scriptures, it should give us confidence that God can speak to each of us in ways that we can hear and understand. In fact, we should expect it.

Expressive, outgoing people can know God deeply. But so can the introverts. Public schoolers, homeschoolers, and no schoolers. Computer scientists, social workers, nurses, and CPA’s. Teachers, plumbers, CEO’s, cowboys, and stay-at-home moms. God can speak into your life in ways that you can hear and understand.

So, with the understanding that these things won’t look exactly the same for everyone, this article is meant to explore some of the common threads that will mark our lives as we seek to know Jesus deeply and follow him closely. Even as we practice them, we will no doubt practice them differently, for we *are* different. And that’s okay, even good.

Spiritual disciplines aren’t formulae or exact sciences, and thus you won’t find many specific instructions here. Nonetheless, these habits have helped countless generations come to know the Lord more deeply and follow Him more closely.

So, while they might feel unnatural and will certainly require some faith, I would venture to say that they’re worth any awkwardness we might feel as we stumble through them.

After all, perhaps the most important thing is not *how* you pursue God, but that you pursue him at all.

We hope this brief article might serve as a helpful tool in your pursuit.

## Silence & Solitude

*“May not the inadequacy of much of our spiritual experience be traced back to our habit of skipping through the corridors of the Kingdom like children in the marketplace, chattering about everything, but pausing to learn the value of nothing.”*  
- A.W. Tozer

In 1 Kings 19, as Elijah waited on the mountain for the LORD to pass by, God wasn't in the powerful wind. He wasn't in the earthquake. He wasn't in the fire. He came instead in a gentle whisper.

Likewise, when God's messiah showed up on the scene, He came not as a conquering warrior riding the finest chariot, greeted and praised by the masses. He came as a helpless babe, born into obscurity. And yet, to the ones who watched and waited, to those who listened in quiet desperation, God's Word was revealed in all His glory.

Can God speak loudly? Of course. But even loud voices are difficult to hear and discern in busy, chaotic places. I know my life is often representative of just such a place, and I dare say I'm not alone.

Setting aside times to sit (or stand, or walk, or lie down) in silence and solitude is done in recognition of this reality. God won't often shout us down or force us to stop and hear him. He won't thrust himself upon us without our permission.

But He does invite us to hear him, and He does have much to say.

The question is, **will you stop to listen?** Will you brave the awkwardness and discomfort of turning off your phone, cutting off the music, and finding a quiet place for a time?

Jesus himself, no doubt more in tune with the Father than any other to come before or since, was known to go off in search of solitary places (Mark 1:35). It stands to reason that, if we desire the closeness He enjoyed with God while on earth, if we seek the wisdom and insight He poured out, and if we envy the confidence and boldness with which He acted--

shouldn't we pay close attention to the habits that bore such fruit into his life?

I have little doubt His times of solitude with the Father were a critical part of those outcomes.

## A PLACE TO START

1. Find a quiet place: your room, your car, a walking trail, or a park bench with a view.
2. Turn your phone off and resist the urge to play music.
3. Don't beat yourself up by how quickly you get distracted or your mind wanders. It may feel more like a wrestling match than a peaceful respite with God.
4. Tell God you're there for him--to rest in Him, to listen to what He might say, to acknowledge His presence and His sovereignty.
5. And then just be still before Him for a time.

## Study & Meditation

*“The law of the Lord is perfect,  
refreshing the soul.  
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,  
making wise the simple.  
The precepts of the Lord are right,  
giving joy to the heart.  
The commands of the Lord are radiant,  
giving light to the eyes.”*  
Psalm 19:7-8 (NIV)

There's more than one way to read the scripture.

In practice, as with most things, we tend to find what's comfortable to us and settle into a routine. Our interaction with the Bible is no exception, and we may be shortchanging ourselves.

Some of us love to learn, dive deep into details, and feel more in control once we feel like we understand something.

Others struggle to make themselves read at all, and they're more likely to stop as soon as they find a

powerful verse, write it in their journal, and pray in response to it.

I would assert that both are helpful and that, in spite of our preferences, we NEED some of both.

If our only interaction with the scripture is about understanding, we run the risk of filling our minds but never our hearts. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,” Paul said to the Corinthians.

However, if our only interaction with scripture is in short bursts of only a few passages, surely we’re missing out on the larger story, the overall context of each book, and the threads that weave throughout our Bible. In search of something we can use right in this very moment, we fail to lay a strong foundation on which to build our lives. Iain Provan said, “It’s kind of scandalous to have a higher degree in something else and still be at level one in our biblical understanding.”

Therefore, I encourage you to seek some balance:

**Study** for understanding. Drink deep from the fountain of wisdom. Ask your campus pastors for some good resources for your level of biblical literacy.

**AND**

**Meditate** on what you read. Let the scriptures weigh on your heart and mind. Take time to pray about them. Ask God to use the Word to reshape you from the inside out. Most of all, seek to know Him through it. The scripture is just a window designed to help us see God.

## A PLACE TO START

1. Decide which practice is more foreign to your daily habits: Study or Meditation
2. Schedule 30 minutes a couple times this next week where you can go somewhere quiet with your Bible.
3. If you’re going to study, ask your corefa or campus pastor for advice on how to get started.

4. If you’re going to meditate, the Psalms or a gospel are a great place to begin (I love Psalm 130 & John 1).

- a. Don’t read more than a chapter or so.
- b. Read through the passages several times.
- c. Pray in response to them. What do they tell you about God? What change might they call for within you?
- d. Write something: a prayer, a poem, or a few sentences of praise.

5. Ask God to cement what you’ve read in your mind and to give you opportunities to share it with others.

## Thankfulness & Worship

*“What is it that prompts humility within me? What do I need to think or to do that will allow me to think less of myself and more of others? A full appreciation for the sacrifice that Christ made for me will do that.”*

- Charles Swindoll

Hebrews 12:28-29

*“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”*

Psalms 100

*“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.*

*Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come before him with joyful songs.*

*Know that the Lord is God.*

*It is he who made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving  
and his courts with praise;*

*give thanks to him and praise his name.*

*For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;*

*his faithfulness continues through all generations.”*

God deserves our worship. However, God’s commands about worship aren’t about Him at all; they’re about us.

God rallied again and again against idol-worship amongst His people. But why?

Read this passage from Psalm 135 (as well as Jeremiah 10: 1-16 if you'd like).

*The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
made by human hands.*

*They have mouths, but cannot speak,  
eyes, but cannot see.*

*They have ears, but cannot hear,  
nor is there breath in their mouths.*

*Those who make them will be like them,  
and so will all who trust in them.*

This psalm points to a reality that we see play out repeatedly in the story of God's people--**worship changes us**. And *what* we worship determines what that change looks like.

The man-made idols of the ancient Near East had the appearance of living creatures, but there was no life in them. They had nothing to say and nothing to offer. They couldn't hear cries of help in times of trouble. They couldn't stretch out their arms to save their people.

Thus, when the Israelites turned their worship from Yahweh to these idols of wood and metal, the people God had chosen to be the conduit of His truth and blessing to the rest of the world instead became people with nothing to say and nothing to offer. Their ears no longer listened to the cries of helpless orphans and widows, and their arms no longer reached down to save them.

They looked less and less like the God who delivered them from Egypt, and they became as lifeless and worthless as their idols.

Today, while the idols may differ, we face the same fate if we speak with more awe about cars and celebrities than we do about the Living God. Great jobs, attractive spouses, and even good reputations are things we may find ourselves striving after and serving with the bulk of our resources. We chase fun, comfort, adventure, and leisure. But to what end? And at what cost?

Can we serve ourselves without becoming selfish?

Can we strive after surface-level things and still become people of depth and wisdom?

Can we bow before the temporary and still have any connection to the eternal?

Can we ignore the priorities of Jesus without becoming His enemy?

So, who will you worship today?

To whom will you extend your gratitude?

How will you show your thankfulness?

And what will you lay on the altar before King Jesus?

When it was His turn, He placed himself there.

Thankfulness and worship set things right in the sense that we see God for who He is and what He does, as well as who we are in relation to Him. They reset our perspective. They stave off discontentment. They free us from chasing things that don't matter, and they help us find joy in what's already been given. They make us more generous. They make us more gentle. And they make us more fun to be around.

A few scriptures for further thought: John 4:1-26, Philippians 4:4-7, Romans 12:1-2.

## A PLACE TO START

- In one sense, for the Christian, all of life is a worship offering to Jesus. But it is good for us to practice giving adoration and praise, thanks and reverence.

- Spend 15 minutes or so, maybe 2-3 times this week, intentionally giving worship and praise to God. Here are a few ideas if you don't know where to start:

- Make a list of everything you can think of to be thankful for, and then spend some time acknowledging God as the giver of every good gift (James 1:17).

- Read Psalm 145. Spend time praising Him for His character. Write your own Psalm based on your experience of God thus far. Think about how you may have experienced Him through the created world and through His people.

- Music can be very powerful. I definitely find some Christian music more substantive than others; ask some other Christians for recommendations, and spend time listening or singing, paying careful attention to the lyrics.

- Do something for someone in need. Don't tell anyone about it. Just thank God for the means and the opportunity to do so.

## Confession

Romans 3:23-24

*"There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*

1 John 1: 8-9

*"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

Proverbs 28:13

*"Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy."*

*"Recalling and confessing our sin is like taking out the garbage: once is not enough."*

- Cornelius Platinga Jr.

Sin is not arbitrary. Sin is sin because it disrupts the peace and flourishing of the world, its people, and their relationships with God and one another. What God created is inherently good, and it's we who screw it up because we want independence, control, and to do what we want. And when everyone thinks and acts like that, well... look around.

Thankfully, in spite of how we've soiled ourselves and soiled His world, God hasn't given up on us. Jesus' sacrificial love displayed on the cross is a resounding "Yes!" to the question, "Is there still hope for us?" Praise God and thank you Jesus.

We can also thank Him for shooting straight with us.

The Bible doesn't pull any punches and doesn't pretend we're better than we are. We're sinners--it's that simple. All of us. And while God molds and restores and redeems us over the course of a lifetime, there won't be a time in this life when temptation doesn't tug at us to forsake God's way. It's this reality that necessitates confession.

God is light (1 John 1:5-6), and **sin breeds in darkness**. When we refuse to be honest about the thoughts and behaviors we have that fail to reflect God's character, values, and priorities, **sin's roots grow deeper and deeper**. Of course, deeper roots make things far more difficult to remove, and the fruit they bear in our lives multiplies.

Sin may start out in small, almost trivial thoughts and behaviors, easy to dismiss and gloss over. But, as my dad has always said, "Sin will always take you further than you wanted to go, keep you longer than you wanted to stay, and cost you more than you wanted to pay."

For this reason, God has blessed us with the fellowship of believers--people with whom we can be open and honest about our sin and who can help us deal with it.

Paul paints a picture of the church being like the human body in 1 Corinthians 12. In doing so, he explains our interdependence and how much we need and belong to one another. Think of your own body... Sure, a finger is just a small part of the whole. But if that finger is infected and goes untreated, it can make the whole body sick.

Likewise, if someone amongst us suffers, we all suffer (v.26). So we bear each other's burdens (Gal 6:2), so that the body can grow and build itself up in love as each part does its work (Eph 4:16).

- Confession is about purging infection from our lives.

- Confession is about drawing a line in the sand about who we're going to be and how we're going to live.



- Confession is about unlocking the shackles and shaking loose our oppressors so that we don't live as slaves to our sinful nature.

As God said to Cain in Genesis 4, "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

I say to you now--don't try to master it alone. "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:15).

## A PLACE TO START

1. Is there a sin in your life that you haven't told anyone about? What mature believer could you share that with and ask for prayer and help? Do that this week.

2. Pray and ask God's Spirit to reveal to you the ways you've missed the mark and sinned against God or another person this week.

a. Spend time reflecting on the past week. Look over your calendar as a reminder) and write down what comes to mind. Confess those things to God in prayer and ask for forgiveness.

b. Is there anything on there you need to make right? Anything you need to confess to a Christian brother or sister?

## Service

Philippians 2: 5-11

*"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God,*

*did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*

*rather, he made himself nothing*

*by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.*

*And being found in appearance as a man,*

*he humbled himself*

*by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!"*

John 13: 13-17

*"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."*

*"You want to be like Christ? Find the least desired position, the task no one else wants, the worst seat in the house, and claim it. Make it yours."*

- Charles Swindoll

Matthew 23: 11-12

*"The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

*"We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed."*

Brother Lawrence

If self-interest is at the core of so many of our problems, how else shall we kill it but by purposefully denying it?

If ego destroys relationships and stunts spiritual growth, how else shall we overcome it but by taking the lowest position available?

If our King was found, not on a throne, but on his knees in the dirt, how else can we look like him but by kneeling before our brothers and sisters?

If every breath we suck into our lungs is a gift from God, how can we cling to any notion of entitlement? Won't we instead give generously from what has been given?

Charles Swindoll wrote, echoing Jesus' words in Matthew 23, "The path to greatness in the kingdom of God will lead you through the valley of selflessness." The trail has been blazed by Jesus, and the closer you follow him, the lower you will find yourself.

God's promise to care for us, just as He does the flowers of the field and the birds of the air (Matt 6), frees us to care for others. We trust that we will have all we need, and that loosens our grip on what we have. Can you imagine a world driven by mutual concern and care instead of the "look out for number one" mantra our culture subscribes to?

Serving others can be considered a spiritual discipline because it takes just that--discipline. Putting the needs of others before our own doesn't come naturally. Looking for ways to bless and lighten the load of others doesn't come naturally. Showing honor to others above ourselves doesn't come naturally. But all of it will help us know and understand Jesus more deeply as we follow His way.

From our origin in Genesis, the role given to us was one of cultivating good. Everything needed for life to flourish has been given by God, and we have been entrusted with it's care. What will you do with that responsibility? What will be the fruit of your service?

Make it your goal to leave everything and everyone better than you found them, and be willing to humble yourself to make that happen.

## A PLACE TO START

1. Start with your roommates, your parents, and your siblings. Do the dishes, take out the trash, clean their toilets, and put away their clothes. What's the grossest job? The most boring one? The one no one expects you to do? Do that, and don't bring attention to it. And if they notice? Thank THEM for how they bless you.
2. Going to an event or a party at someone's home? Plan to be the last one to leave. Don't ask if they need help; just look for something that needs to be done and start doing it.
3. Look at the prayer list for your church, or ask a church leader who you could serve. Is there someone sick who needs a visitor or a meal? Is there an elderly shut-in whose lawn needs mowed or kitchen needs to be cleaned? Is there a couple who could really use a free babysitter?

4. Want to REALLY be like Jesus? Serve the people that you don't think deserve it. Serve the people that have treated you poorly. And serve in secret.

## Prayer & Fasting

*"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."*

Martin Luther

*"Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays."*

Soren Kierkegaard

*"You need not cry very loud: He is nearer to us than we think."*

Brother Lawrence

*"Prayer is reaching out after the unseen; fasting is letting go of all that is seen and temporal. Fasting helps express, deepen, confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, even ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God."*

Andrew Murray

It's a mysterious thing, this prayer. We speak into the unseen, into the silence. Sometimes out loud, sometimes in our heads. We trust that Someone hears us, that Someone cares.

We cry out in desperation for a dying friend. We sigh a prayer of thanks that something turned out the way we'd hoped. We ask for mercy when we know we've failed. We bless a meal before we take the first bite.

But why do we do it, and who taught us how? How much is enough, and how formal should it be? Do I speak as a friend, as a servant, or as a child?

Can I change God's mind or make Him alter His plan? And why would I pray if He already knows what I'll say?

Well, I have some thoughts, but I'll be up front with you--I don't have great answers to those questions. I want so badly to get a handle on all these things of

God, because the more I feel like I understand them, the more I feel in control.

But again and again, despite my preference, God calls me into a life of faith; He calls me to trust that He knows what's best for me. And, in this case, maybe what's best for me is not to have a formula explaining exactly what to say, what to do, and how much to do it. Because what kind of relationship would that be, anyway?

- What I do know is that God has called me to come near to Him with confidence and a sincere heart (Heb 10:22).
- I know He cares about the anxiety that I feel (1 Pet 5:7).
- I know I don't have to speak with lots of impressive words (Matt 6:7), but that simple is just fine (Luke 11:2-4)
- I know prayer will strengthen me against the temptation of sin (Matt 26:41).
- I know the Spirit intercedes for me when I don't know what to pray (Rom 8:26).
- I know that He hears me, and I know that He only gives His children good gifts (1 John 5:14-15, Matt 7:9-11).

So while there's a lot I don't know, I know enough. And God's grace covers me as I fumble around in my efforts to know Him.

## A PLACE TO START

1. If you're brand new to prayer, read Jesus' teachings on prayer in Matthew 6. Start simply. What kinds of things did Jesus pray for?
2. Many people use the A.C.T.S. acronym as a guide for how to pray: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication (petitions and requests). This simple model can give shape to our prayers and round out our relationship to God.
3. If you've been praying for much of your life, try to get out of your usual routine.
  - Do you tend to pray for yourself? Pray some only for others.
  - Do you tend to pray for only the

present? Pray for the future.

- Do you tend to talk to God as if He were your boss? Talk to Him as your friend or father.

- Do you tend to pray sitting or standing? Get down on your knees in reverence.

4. Resist making conclusions about prayer in the short-term. Relationships take work to cultivate, and sometimes it's only in looking back that we're able to see the fruit. But rest assured, the Father is always working (John 5:17)

Fasting, while not explicitly explained in the scripture, is the practice of abstaining from food for a time, specifically for spiritual reasons.

- It has been used to produce and show humility (Ezra 8:21, Psalm 35:13, Joel 2:12) as it reminds us and expresses our total dependence on God. It is He who provides, it is He who sustains, and it is He who has the sovereignty and power necessary to answer our prayers.
- It has been used for confession and repentance, and to show the weight of our prayer and concern (Nehemiah 1).
- The Early Church fasted and prayed as they sought guidance in appointing elders and leaders (Acts 13:2, 14:23).
- David fasted as he pleaded with God for miraculous healing of his child (2 Samuel 2).

So, while we receive little in terms of specific instructions, we certainly witness a pattern of God's people engaging in the practice. In fact, Jesus' words below seem to assume it will be part of his disciples' lives.

*"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*



You can find a more thorough treatment of this topic in Cru's article, "How to Do a Biblical Fast," and it's not hard to find using Google. They discuss everything from getting our hearts in the right place to the practicals of getting in and out of the fast itself.

## A PLACE TO START

1. Read Cru's article mentioned above, and make plans for your first fasting experience. Pay particular attention to Section 6, "Getting into a Fast," as it gives some great advice for beginners.
2. Read Isaiah 58. In this chapter, God gives us great insight into what he's most concerned about and what kind of fast He desires.