

Celebration of Discipline

The Path to Spiritual Growth

Richard Foster

(HarperSanFrancisco, 1978, 1998. Twentieth Anniversary Edition)

Introduction

Cover Blurb.

- “Hailed by many as the best modern book on Christianity spirituality, *Celebration of Discipline* explores the ‘classic Disciplines’, or central spiritual practices, of the Christian faith.... [I]t is only by and through these practices that the true path to spiritual growth can be found.”

Forward by Elton Trueblood.

- “There are many books concerned with the inner life, but there are not many that combine real originality with intellectual integrity.” [x]
- The greatest problems of our time are not social, economic or political – they are moral and spiritual. [xi]

Richard Foster (b. 1942).

- Richard Foster is a former Quaker pastor and seminary professor.
 - ▶ In 1988 Foster founded Renovaré, a ministry devoted to Christian “spiritual formation.”
- In 2001 *Christianity Today* listed *Celebration of Discipline* as one of the 10 most significant/influential books of the 20th century.
- Significant influences that enriched his life and ministry.
 - (1) “An influx of genuinely needy people into our small congregation”... who were “hungry for spiritual substance.”
 - RF: “I began desiring this kind of life for myself. And desiring led to seek and seeking led to finding.” [xiv]
 - (2) The influence of philosopher Dallas Willard.
 - Willard’s teaching “gave me the *Weltanschauung*, the worldview, upon which I could synthesize all my academic and biblical training.”
- Foster’s “quiet [spiritual] revelation.”
- RF: “This book is for all of those who are disillusioned with the superficialities of modern culture, including modern religious culture.” [xix]



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- The discipline of *hesychasm*: voluntary stillness (rest or quietness) so as to commune with God.
 - ▶ The “Jesus Prayer”: “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*”
 - ▶ Meditation allows the Holy Spirit to construct an “inner sanctuary” in our heart.
 - ▶ Theophan the Recluse: “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart.” [19]
- Meditation confirms the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Meditation and Imagination.

- Assessing our impressions by the standards of Scripture.
 - ▶ RF: “Some object to using the imagination out of concern that it is untrustworthy and can even be used by the Evil One. There is good reason for concern, for the imagination, like all our faculties, [has been affected by] the Fall. But just as we can believe that God can take our reason (fallen as it is) and sanctify it and use it for his good purposes, so we believe he can sanctify the imagination and use it for his good purposes. Of course, the imagination can be distorted by Satan, but then so can all our faculties.” [26]

Dealing with Distractions.

- Our over-stimulating and unhealthy society and culture.
- RF: “[T]o move beyond the superficialities of our culture, including our religious culture, we must go down into the recreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation.” [15]

The Value of Meditation.

- Christian meditation is practical:
 - ▶ Meditation helps us to focus and discipline our mind in such a way as to live and interact with the world more effectively.
 - ▶ Meditation helps us absorb and practice the Greatest Commandment(s).
 - ▶ Meditation is spiritually restorative and has practical benefits mentally, emotionally and physically.
- RF: “How sad that contemporary Christians are so ignorant of the vast sea of literature on Christian meditation.” [19]

How to Meditate.

- RF: “We learn to mediate by meditating.” [26]
- Contemplative prayer as a way of life.
 - ▶ Apostle Paul: “Pray continually” (I Thes. 5:17).
- A time and place.
- What about posture?

Forms of Meditation.

- *Lectio devina* (or *meditatio scripturarum*).
 - ▶ Meditation on Scripture.
 - ▶ Personalize and internalize a passage, a verse, or even a single word and “allow it to take root in you.” [29]
 - ▶ Meditation and creative visualization.

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- Other options:
 - ▶ Meditate on particular sins and/or challenges.
 - ▶ Meditate on relationships with others.
 - ▶ Meditate on the character of God and the wonders of creation (Ps. 19:1).
 - ▶ Meditate on the events and challenges of our time.

Eastern v. Christian meditation.

- Ref. Jeffrey Breshears, “Christian and Eastern Spirituality: The Fundamental Differences.”
 - (1) Theology;
 - (2) Psychology;
 - (3) Christianity’s Christocentric focus; and
 - (4) The ultimate goal.
- The goal of Eastern mediation is self-centered: to empty one’s mind through the repetition of a nonsense mantra so as to become detached from the world.
- The goal of Christian mediation is God-centered: to clear one’s mind so as to fill our heart with the word of God and become a source of Light, Love, Hope and Truth in the world.

Reconciling contemplative prayer with Protestant Christianity.

- Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mysticism.
- The influence of Martin Luther.

3. Prayer

Discursive Prayer: The Central Practice of the Christian Life.

- RF: “Of all the Spiritual Disciplines prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with [God] the Father.... Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us.”
 - ▶ RF: “In prayer we begin to think God’s thoughts after him, to desire the things he desires, to love the things he loves, to will the things he wills.” [33]

What is Prayer?

- In discursive prayer, we praise and thank God for his greatness and goodness.
- In discursive prayer we pour out our plans, cares and concerns, hopes and fears before God because we believe that he cares.
- Learn to be a spiritual warrior who prays against evil.
 - ▶ I Peter 5:8 – Pray against the evil “principalities and powers” that seek to devour our mind, soul, and body.
- The role of imagination in prayer.
- Practice praying for everyone you encounter.
- As we grow more spiritually mature, our will becomes more aligned with that of Christ.

Q: If God is sovereign, omniscient and omnipotent, why pray?

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- Voluntary submission applies to all our relationships.
 - This applies to the laws of our nation – provided that they are ‘just’ laws (Acts 5:29).

A Hierarchy of Allegiances.

- (1) Submission to God.
 - Matt. 22:37-38.
- (2) Submission to Scripture.
 - Psalm 119:11.
- (3) Submission to our family.
 - Phil. 2:4.
- (4) Submission to “neighbors” – friends, etc.
 - Matt. 22:39.
 - Rom. 15:2.
- (5) Submission to other Christians.
 - Eph. 5:21.
 - I Thes. 5:11.
 - I Cor. 14:12.
- (6) Submission to those who are needy and struggling in this life.
- (7) Submission to the people of the world.

A Warning to Those in Positions of Authority.

- RF: “Of all the Spiritual Disciplines none has been more abused than the Discipline of submission.” [110]

9. Service

The Gift of Service.

- The values of the Kingdom of God are radically different than those of “the world”.
- The example of Jesus: “I have set you an example that you should do what I have done for you” (John 13:1-17).
- The Kingdom of God is about service to others, not power over them.
 - RF: “Jesus completely redefined leadership and rearranged the lines of authority.... [127]
 - Jesus: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you.... Whoever would be great among you must be your servant... even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:25-28).
 - Jesus: Treat everyone equally regardless of their condition or status in society – be a “servant of all” (Mark 9:35).
- Some people ‘serve’ in order to enhance their own self-esteem and impress others.
 - True serve is humble and meek, and does not seek the attention of others.
 - Self-righteous service is selective in terms of who and when it serves. [129]

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- ▶ Phil. 4:4-7 – “Rejoice in the Lord always.... Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
- A commitment to joy helps us transcend our own ego-centeredness.

The Path to Joy.

- RF: “In the spiritual life only one thing will produce genuine joy, and that is obedience.” [192]
- Joy as a by-product of setting the right priorities in life.
 - ▶ Phil. 4:8 – Concentrate on “whatever is true,... noble,... right,... pure,... lovely,... admirable,... excellent or praiseworthy....”

12. Guidance

Corporate Discernment.

- Everyone has his/her own unique calling in life.
 - ▶ Acts 17:25: “The God who made the world and everything in it gives us life and breath and everything else. From one man he [made us all];... and he determined the times set for us and the exact places where we should live. God did this so that we would seek him... and find him... for in him we live and move and have our being.”
- How do we hear God’s voice, respond to his calling, and fulfill our purpose in life?
- The importance of involvement in an intentional group that is committed to spiritual growth.
 - ▶ God does guide us individually, but he can also guide us through our association with other like-minded Christians. [176]
 - ▶ Dallas Willard: “The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons” under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who are “determined to live out the demands of the gospel in a secular world.” [189]
 - ▶ Acts 13:1-3 – Through corporate guidance, Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to take the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

The Role of the Spiritual Director.

- Our spiritual lives can be greatly enhanced throughout regular interaction with a spiritual director – one who is wise, perceptive, honest, and trustworthy who can encourage us and help us think through the issues and challenges of our life.
 - ▶ C. S. Lewis: “Our real protection [from selfish and trivial distractions] is to be sought... in moral theology, in steady rational thinking, in the advice of good [wise] friends and good books, and in a skilled spiritual director.” [“A Slip of the Tongue” in *The Weight of Glory*.]

Spiritual direction is a wholistic ministry concerned not only with one’s spiritual/ religious life but with all the important issues and relationships in life.

- ▶ A spiritual director need not have professional training in psychology and counseling.

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