Exploring the Classic Disciplines of the Faith Spiritual Disciplines

What are Spiritual Disciplines?

Understanding the power of sin over us will help us grasp the meaning and necessity for spiritual disciplines.

Sin

The Bible explains sin with several metaphors. Sin:

- · Captures (Prov. 5:22; Heb. 12:1)
- Enslaves (Gen. 4:7; John 8:34; Rom. 7:14, 23; Gal. 3:22)
- Is deadly (Rom. 6:23; 5:12; Eph. 2:1)
- Is a sickness (Ps. 32:1-5; Isa. 53:5; Matt. 9:2, 5; 1 Peter 2:24).
- Is impurity (Zech. 13:1; Ps. 51:2; Isa. 1:18)
- Separates (Isa. 59:1-2; Eph. 2:12-16; 4:18)

Sin disguises itself as habits—that is, behaviors and thoughts that have become "second-nature." Many of the sins we commit come so naturally to us that we hardly notice them—whether they occur while driving on a busy freeway, having conversations about other people, abusing substances or other harmful things that may temporarily make us feel better. Habits require time and repetition to become entrenched. These habits enslave us, lead us to deadly consequences, make us sick, corrupt us, and ultimately separate us from God. We have to unlearn many of these behaviors and learn behaviors that are fit for the citizens of God's kingdom.

Spiritual disciplines are practices we do regularly that can help us change, with the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, our sinful habits into good habits that make us more like Christ and connect us closer to God.

Spiritual Disciplines and Salvation

We are saved by and through God's grace alone. We can do nothing to earn our salvation. Spiritual disciplines are not behaviors or practices that make us right with God in any way. They are tools that the Holy Spirit can use to renew our hearts. When we practice spiritual disciplines:

- · We recognize that Jesus is the King of our lives.
- · We acknowledge that we belong to him alone.
- We also seek to live out the fruit of the Spirit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

Spiritual disciplines do not help God to make our lives holy. Instead:

- They help us recognize God's callings and promptings in our lives, and identify
 those areas in our lives that still need to be renewed.
- · They make us sensitive and humble to follow God's leading.
- They help us realize that we depend completely on God's grace at every moment and for everything.
- They train and equip us to respond in a worthy manner when life throws problems and storms at us.

Spiritual Disciplines Should and Should Not Be

Spiritual Disciplines Should Be

- Instruments of God's grace which, through the Spirit, transform us daily into people who reflect Jesus' love, obedience, humility, and connection to God
- Activities that connect us deeply to other believers in our common desire to follow God's will
- · A source of humility and dependence on God
- Experiences that enrich our lives and the lives of those around us
- Activities that occur in the context of God's whole body; spiritual disciplines, although often practiced alone, are not individualistic activities
- · As much focused on building up God's body as building up each believer
- Practices that give us hope, despite our failings and limitations. We can hope
 that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until
 the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).
- · Practices that permeate every area of our lives
- Disciplines that help us train for the life of faith, hope, and love to which lesus has called us

Spiritual Disciplines Should Not Be

- · Heavy loads of impossible, unrealistic, or unfair expectations for people
- · Benchmarks to judge people's Christianity or maturity
- · Individualistic attempts to be holy or perfect
- A measure of one's spiritual stature and strength
- · A way to separate our "religiosity" from the rest of our lives
- · A way to hide our sins with good works



Spiritual Disciplines and the Bible

Contemporary society is fascinated with spirituality. One can find all kinds of books about self-help or spiritual guidance and practices. How are Christian spiritual disciplines different from those offered in such books? The difference is simple, though profound.

POPULAR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES ARE:	BIBLICAL SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES ARE:		
For self-improvement	For the spiritual maturity of each person and the community as a whole		
For self-realization—the fulfillment of one's abilities and potential	For realization of the fruit of the Spirit in one's life		
For self-sufficiency	For dependence on God an interdependence with othe believers within God's bod		
Based on one's own work and dedication	Based on the work of the Spirit in our lives, the support and encouragement of all believers and the effort of each believer.		

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.... For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.—2 Peter 1:3, 5–8

The Apostle Peter is clear: God has given us all we need, and we must make every effort to grow.

Spiritual Practice

Practicing spiritual disciplines is not easy. Jesus reminded the disciples that believers would experience hatred and persecution (John 15:18–25). Spiritual disciplines help us get ready for difficult moments; moments of persecution, temptation, doubt, and grief.

Moreover, spiritual disciplines help us to deepen our relationship with God. God does not wish a shallow, "good morning-see you later," type "A disciplined person is someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit."

— John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People

of relationship. God wishes to be in deep, satisfying, loving, transforming, and challenging relationships with us, individually and as a community of believers. Spiritual disciplines build in us the attitudes, emotions, thoughts, and actions that will promote the kind of relationship that our hearts yearn for.

Below is a list of common spiritual practices, by no means comprehensive, which many Christians have practiced throughout the centuries.

- 1. Bible Reading/Study
- 2. Prayer
- 3. Fasting
- 4. Worship
- 5. Service
- 6. Solitude
- 7. Discernment
- 8. Evangelism



"God has given us the Spiritual Disciplines as a means of receiving His grace and growing in Godliness. By them we place ourselves before God for Him to work in us."

⁻Donald S. Whitney, Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life

I. Scripture Reading and Studying

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- Moses read the word of God to the people and commanded that it be read publicly

 —Ex. 24:7; Deut. 31:9–13
- Joshua was commanded to meditate on God's word day and night—Josh. 1:8
- . Kings of Israel were to study the Scriptures-Deut. 17:18-19
- . The longest psalm is a psalm about the value of knowing God's word-Ps. 119
- Paul required his letters be read publicly—Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27
- Paul urged Timothy to study the Word of God and handle it with care—2 Tim. 2:15
- The Ethiopian was reading God's Word and he became a follower of Jesus—Acts 8:27–40
- Jesus read the Bible and taught it to the people—Luke 4:16-21
- . Jesus said the value of studying the Bible was to see that it spoke about him-John 5:39
- God's word is supposed to be close to the mouths and hearts of believers—Deut. 30:11–14;
 32:47; Ps. 1:2; Rom. 10:8–11; Col. 3:16

THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

Jesus said: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

- Reading the Bible is the best way to stay connected to God.
- Scripture reading is the lifeblood of the church. The Bible equips, trains, and empowers believers to fulfill God's calling (2 Tim. 3:17; 2 Peter 1:3–11; Heb. 13:21).
- Scripture reading and studying involves different activities: memorization, reflection, and transformative study.

Memorization

- When scuba divers face problems under water, they rely on their previous training to find a way out. When we face temptation or sudden grief, our "training" will kick in.
- All those verses we have memorized will come back; God will speak to us through them in unexpected ways.
- One of the best ways to memorize something is by finding partners who help and challenge you to work together.

Reflection

 It is often called meditation. It means that we allow the Bible to settle in our minds and hearts.

- We do this by thinking about it all day long, wondering what a passage or a verse means for us throughout the day's activities.
 - Write a verse, or passage, on a small piece of paper and carry it along with you. If you are standing in line, waiting at a restaurant, or another short moment, take the paper out and think about how the text connects to your life at that specific moment.

Transformative Study

- Studying the Bible does not mean one becomes an expert in one passage or book. Studying the Bible means we dig deeply so we can be deeply transformed.
- The more we know about God, the more we can love him.
- God gave the Bible to the church. Reading and studying the Bible in community is most profitable.
- Traditionally, Christians have practiced this discipline by reading early in the morning, after meals, or before going to bed.
- Today there are many other opportunities for Bible reading, memorizing, and studying.
- The many hours we spend in transportation can be useful for listening to an audio recording of the Bible.
- The Internet is full of tools and helps for Bible reading and studying.

2. Prayer

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- · Many of the Psalms are prayers—for example, see Psalms 10, 59, 83, 86, and others
- The believer is to constantly be in an attitude of prayer—Luke 18:1; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:8
- · Access to God through Jesus belongs to the believer-Heb. 4:16
- The manner of prayer calls for honest communication, not showy pretense or empty repetition—Eccl. 5:1-3; Matt. 6:5-7
- · Prayer should not be done with an unforgiving attitude—Mark 11:25
- Prayer should be made in confident hope that God hears and knows our real needs
 —Matt. 7:7–11; Heb. 11:6

THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

- Prayer is commanded in the Bible. The discipline of prayer is a way to be obedient to this commandment.
- Often learning about the heroes of the faith is intimidating. Instead of being motivated, we might feel discouraged with the enormous challenge of their example.
- Who could fly a jet or run a marathon without much previous and rigorous training? No one is born knowing how to pray and being great at it.
- Learning to pray is a bit like learning to swim. It can only happen in the water, despite fears, insecurities, and doubts.
- · Prayer requires concentration and focus.
 - Teaching ourselves to concentrate is one of the reasons we close our eyes.
 - But we need to close our ears and minds as well to the many distractions around us
 - Spending a few minutes just to quiet mind and heart will help us achieve better concentration and focus.
- Prayer builds up our humility, dependence on God, and compassion for others.
- If praying on your own is difficult, make a "prayer date" with a friend you are comfortable with.
- Start by praying simple, short prayers—pray one minute, take a break and read or sing, then pray again.

- When you feel stuck, unmotivated, or without words—all very normal occurrences—pray a prayer from the Bible: a psalm, the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), Nehemiah's prayer (Neh. 1:5–11), Solomon's prayer (1 Kings 8:22–61).
- Your prayers do not have to be pretty—the Holy Spirit takes all of our prayers, pretty or not, and brings them before God the Father (Rom. 8:26–27).
- Make sure your prayers include, among other things, praise for God's greatness, gratitude for God's gifts, petitions for you and others, confession of your struggles and sins, and whatever the Spirit brings to your mind.
- The apostle Paul tells us to "pray continually" (1 Thess. 5:17). Is this even possible? Not immediately. Just as no one can run a marathon without training, no one can pray continually without training.
- Sometimes prayer is a "battleground."
 Prayer can be difficult and produce anxiety.
 Sometimes it is while praying that God
 reveals to us what needs changing, what
 needs to be done. Sometimes, prayer can be
 a painful mirror.
- Finally, our prayers are not primarily for changing God's mind about something; prayer changes our mind about who we are, what we need, and how we please God.
 Prayer is transformational.

3. Fasting

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- The nation Israel fasted asking God's forgiveness— Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 7:6; Jer. 36:9; Ezra 8:21–23
- The city of Nineveh fasted asking God's forgiveness— Jonah 3:5–10
- Moses fasted when he received God's commandments— Ex. 34:28
- David fasted seeking God's forgiveness and guidance— 2 Sam. 1:12, 3:35, 12:16–22
- · Ezra fasted to ask God's forgiveness-Ezra 10:6
- · Nehemiah fasted seeking God's favor-Neh. 1:4
- · Daniel fasted seeking God's favor-Dan. 9:3, 10:2-3
- Anna fasted seeking God's favor and guidance—Luke 2:37
- · Cornelius fasted seeking God's favor-Acts 10:30
- · Paul fasted seeking God's guidance—Acts 9:9
- · Jesus fasted in the wilderness seeking God's guidance-Matt. 4:2
- . The manner of fasting is to be sincere, dedicated to God, without a public show-Matt. 6:16-18

THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

- Fasting may be the most neglected of all the spiritual disciplines today. It is easy to dismiss it as an old and quaint practice. But we miss an important and meaningful opportunity for spiritual growth.
- The central point of fasting is training for self-control (2 Peter 1:6; Gal. 5:23; 1 Peter 1:13).
- If we are to break the hold of habits—sin—in our lives, training for self-control is essential.
- Fasting is an effective approach to developing self-control because it deals with a very fundamental necessity of human existence: food.
- We need food to live; however, we can become enslaved by food—or other things we may need or simply want for our lives.
- If we are able to control things essential for life, we will be able to keep in check the things that are not essential for life.
- The practice of fasting fosters humility, reliance on God, compassion, gratitude, and self-control.
- Begin by fasting from food for a short period, such as skipping a meal. Build your fasting time up from there.

"First, let [fasting] be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven."

—(John Wesley, as found in the collection Sermons On Several Occasions)

- As much as possible, use the time it takes to get or prepare food and eat it for prayer and Bible reflection.
- Fasting from food is the most obvious way to do it. However, you can also abstain from other things. For example, watching television (or other media) often consumes too much of our lives. That central place belongs to God alone.
- If you find you rely too much on caffeine to stay awake or for energy, it may be a good idea to fast from caffeine and be reminded that our dependence on God is sufficient.
- We can extend the same principle to many things around us: technology, music, sports, and so on.
- Internet, although a wonderful tool of communication, can absorb our time and attention in ways not even television could.
 Try a "media fast." Turning the computer off in order to be completely present in the lives of others has become a wonderful spiritual practice for many people today.

5. SERVICE

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- Jesus taught that true greatness is serving others— Matt. 20: 26–27; Mark 9:35
- Jesus illustrated the importance of service when he washed his disciples' feet—Mark 10:43-45; John 13:4-17
- Paul followed Jesus' example and taught the same—Acts 20:35;
 Rom. 15:1–3; 1 Cor. 10:24; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 6:10
- Believers are to follow this example—Phil. 2:3-8; Eph. 2:8-10
- "... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17)



THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

- The discipline of service is not self-serving.
 Serving others to feel better, or to gain people's gratitude, becomes a self-serving activity. We give expecting nothing in return.
- Serving arises from our identity in Christ: we are his servants. Service is not what we do; it is who we are.
- Calling Jesus Lord means that we are his servants. Being a servant means that God called us to be of service.
- One of the ways to serve God is by serving people.
- Service is born of love and gratitude. It requires humility, strength, and love.
- Serving others can be exhausting and draining. One way to minimize this problem is by allowing the spiritual disciplines above to be the basis for our service. In addition, service in community also helps to minimize the problem of exhaustion and feeling burnt out.
- Like the other disciplines, training for service is a gradual process. The more we serve others, especially those with great need, the barriers that stay in our way of spiritual growth—pride, arrogance, indifference, fears, and insecurities—will slowly crumble.
- The practice of service begins by caring for one's own family (1 Tim. 5:8).

- Begin by serving those around you in small and unexpected ways. When they notice your service, be sure to give God the honor and the glory. Enjoy being a faithful servant (Matt. 25:21).
- Find ways to serve those with the greatest need in our society.
- Serving the people we like or feel comfortable with is easy. However, Jesus urges us to serve even if we are treated unfairly or unkindly.
- The apostle Peter (1 Peter 4:10-11) urges us to serve other believers in order to share in God's goodness. Service begins among Christians and extends to others as a way to show gratitude for God's own grace.
- In serving others, we become channels of God's love and compassion.
- When we serve others, we get to see Jesus' heart of love and compassion. Service becomes a spiritual experience beyond ourselves.

"Resolved: that all men should live for the glory of God.

Resolved second: that whether others do or not, I will."

- Jonathan Edwards

6. Solitude

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- The prophets Moses, Elijah and Habakkuk retired to the wilderness to seek God's guidance

 —Ex. 3:1–6; 1 Kings 19:11–13; Hab. 2:1
- Jesus often withdrew to a solitary place to pray—Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:12, 35; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28
- . Jesus taught the value of praying in private-Matt. 6:6
- Jesus advised the disciples to retire to a lonely place and rest—Mark 6:31
- . The Apostle Paul went away to prepare for his ministry-Gal. 1:17

THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

- We live in a time of continuous visual and auditory stimulation: images and sound constantly come at us from many different sources.
- Often we miss God's voice and signals because we are distracted. We are busy people with busy lives.
- Just as our bodies need physical rest, our minds, hearts, and souls need intellectual, emotional, and spiritual rest.
- The problem with intellectual, emotional and spiritual rest is that they often require solitude and silence. We have grown so used to being surrounded by busyness, noise, and stuff that it is a great challenge to be in true solitude and silence.
- Like all disciplines, the habit of solitude takes time to form. It requires one step at a time.
- Begin by setting apart moments of quiet and reflection.
- Turn the radio off while driving in traffic. Allow that stressful time to be a moment of solitude, prayer, praise, and reflection.
- Solitude can be practiced by setting aside an hour, a day, a week, or any period of time that allows you to focus on God.
- Share with others the insights you gain during your moments of solitude. It will be an inspiration and example to others.



"Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone; only God is here."

-John Wesley (1703-1791)

7. Discernment

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- · Discernment may include wisdom to understand the times-1 Chron. 12:32
- It may include wisdom to understand dreams—Gen. 41:25-39; Dan. 2:27-48
- It may include wisdom to make moral or judicial decisions—1 Kings 3:9–12
- Jesus told his followers to be wise but gentle—Matt. 10:16
- · James tells believers to ask God for wisdom-James 1:5
- Discernment may at times run counter to prevailing human wisdom—1 Cor. 1:18–25
- It is useful to distinguish truth from falsehood and grow mature in the faith—Eph. 4:14;
 2 Peter 2:1–22

THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

- Discernment is primarily a spiritual gift.
 However, all believers are called to be wise and discerning (Phil. 1:9–10).
- While some people in the church have a special gift for discernment, everyone in the church ought to be able to use discernment for at least two purposes:
 - To understand God's calling and will for our individual and collective lives.
 - To perceive and distinguish truth from falsehood.
- Discernment develops alongside the practice of all the previous spiritual disciplines.
- At a time when religions and pseudo-Christian cults are drawing away young people and uneducated Christians, correctly defining and recognizing beliefs is key.

- As a spiritual discipline, discernment depends entirely on the work of the Holy Spirit.
- We develop our ability to discern through prayer, Bible study and meditation, and fasting. As we become more sensitive to God's voice and promptings, our ability to discern God's plans and desires for our lives will increase.
- Discernment benefits greatly from the joint search for God's will within Christ's body.
 We are limited and imperfect beings; we are also skilled in self-deception. We may be convinced that God is leading in a specific direction. However, we could be deceiving ourselves. Having the joint discernment of God's people can keep us from this error.

Discernment: The Spiritinspired ability to separate our imperfect will from God's perfect will in recognizing, judging, and choosing what is right, good, and pure from what is wrong, evil, and impure.



8. Evangelism

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- Jesus charged his followers with the duty of spreading the gospel—Matt. 28:19–20
- The special ministry of evangelism is given to some—Eph. 4:11
- Peter tells believers to be ready to give a reasonable answer concerning the hope of the gospel—1 Peter 3:15



THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

- Evangelism is a command for every person in the church.
- However, speaking about one's faith is not always a natural thing for many people.
- Practicing evangelism as a spiritual discipline will allow many Christians to grow more comfortable in sharing their faith.
- Just like our lives, all the spiritual disciplines are intimately related. They enrich each other and work in harmony.
- Evangelism feeds on all the spiritual disciplines mentioned above:
 - Scripture study: The more we know God, about God, and God's plans for humanity, the better we can share what God has done for us.
 - Prayer: Abundant life overflows our hearts and minds. The closer we are to God, the more life we can share with others.
- "Evangelism is a natural overflow of the Christian life.... But evangelism is also a Discipline in that we must discipline ourselves to get into the context of evangelism, that is, we must not just wait for witnessing opportunities to happen."
- —Donald S. Whitney, Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life

- Worship, fasting, and service can open doors to engage people in conversation about spiritual matters.
- We must also train ourselves to be God's
 instruments. It can be difficult to remember
 that we are not the ones convincing,
 transforming, or converting people. That
 is God's job. Our mission is to share with
 others what God has done. We do not "close
 the deal." Only God can do that.
- There are many evangelistic tools and programs that help believers obey Jesus' command to evangelize.
- Often, however, the best way to evangelize is by developing close relationships with people around us.
- Spiritual conversations are most natural in the context of close, intimate relationships.
- A spiritual conversation can be simply telling others your own story about when you first realized the importance of Jesus Christ in your life.

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

—Abraham Kuyper, inaugural address at the dedication of the Free University of Amsterdam

From Bad to Good Habits



- 1. Know your bad habits.
- Pray that God will help you see the specific areas of your life that need changing;
- Pray that God will give you the courage, strength, and help to face those areas.
- 2. Confess your weaknesses to God with a humble and hopeful heart.
- 3. Submit to God's call to change. Surrender your efforts and receive God's grace. Trust that God is with you and is helping you.
- 4. Be accountable.
- Find one or more people you trust and ask them to pray with and for you about a specific area in your life that needs changing;
- Allow them to be God's instruments in your life for that specific area.
- 5. Train to substitute a bad habit—sin—with a good habit—virtue.
- If prayer is difficult for you, find a person who will pray with you, or begin a
 praying group that meets once a week.
- 6. Be persistent. Bad habits take a long time to form; it takes an equally long time to break them and acquire new habits.
- 7. Be graceful toward yourself and others.
- . It is highly possible that you will experience failure.
- Remember, you are not changing just for your sake; you are allowing God's Spirit to work in your life.
- Jesus gave his life for you. You are that valuable; God will patiently wait for you
 to get up and continue walking every time you stumble and fall.
- Do not obsess over the actual change; it is not your job. The Holy Spirit is the
 one who renews and transforms us. Focus on the growing relationship with
 God. Let God be God and do what he does best: give you new life.
- 8. Be grateful for all the things you already are and have.
- · Thank God for every small change that occurs;
- · Thank God for every time you get up after a fall;
- · Thank the people around you for helping you along.



© 2009 Bristol Works, Inc.
Rose Publishing, Inc.
17909 Adria Maru Lane
Carson, CA 90746 U.S.A.
email: info@rose-publishing.com
www.rose-publishing.com

Rose Publishing has more than 100 Bible reference pamphlets.

Authors: William Brent Ashby, BT; Benjamin Galan, MTS, ThM, Professor of Old Testament Hebrew and Literature.

Other products available from Rose Publishing:

653X The Beatitudes pamphlet 339X Knowing God's Will pamphlet 588X The Lord's Prayer pamphlet 492X Following Jesus pamphlet 710X One-Year Reading Plan pamphlet 458X How to Study the Bible pamphlet All rights reserved, it is illegal to copy, transmit electronically, or reproduce this pamphlet in whole or in part in any form. 090916SCG Printed in the USA. May not be posted or transmitted on the internet.

RELIGION/Biblical Studies/General



Stock #732X Spiritual Disciplines pamphlet
Retailers: Package of 5 pamphlets = Stock #733X (ISBN-13: 978-159636-355-7)