

Introduction – What are the Disciplines

At the beginning of the Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster writes:

Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.

The classical disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths. The primary requirement [of practicing a discipline] is a longing after God. "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God," writes the psalmist (Psalm 42:1-2).

Change within ourselves is God's work, not ours. We can't fix ourselves! But God has given us certain disciplines as a means of receiving His gracious change. The disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us. Here are some of the disciplines that I personally practice.

The great men and women of the faith through the ages have engaged in a set of practices which have mediated the grace of God to them consistently throughout their lives. They were nourished spiritually, overcame life's obstacles, and accomplished exploits of faith through the grace of God made available to them by these means that would have not otherwise been possible.

These practices are often referred to as "The Disciplines of the Faith." The spiritual disciplines are vital to a Christian's spiritual life, but are not in themselves to be what is desired; they should rather be seen as conduits that carry God's grace into a believer's life. They are ditches that we dig with the intent of receiving God's living water in greater quantity and with greater consistency. The disciplines can be abused when seen as a means of meriting forgiveness, favor, or acceptance from God; a hunger strike is a completely different thing than a fast.

A healthy focus or perspective must be maintained when pursuing God's grace through spiritual disciplines. Jesus is not only the best model of the disciplines, but His practice of them is also the strongest argument for our need to do them.

Can you be an authentic follower of Jesus and not practice the spiritual disciplines? What would be the effect of not doing them...Short-term...Long-term? What do you think motivated Jesus to have such a disciplined life?

Why is it that so few Christians excel at these or are even at a place of being content with their normal routine? Dallas Willard puts it this way,

"The general human failing is to want what is right and important, but at the same time not to commit to the kind of life that will produce the action we know to be right and the condition we want to enjoy." The Spirit of the Disciplines

D. L. Moody said:

"A man can no more take in a supply of grace for the future than he can eat enough for the next six months, or take sufficient air into his lungs at one time to sustain life for a week. We must draw upon God's boundless store of grace from day to day as we need it." Practice of the spiritual disciplines is not only something that we need to do; it is something that we need to do often.

And Richard Foster wrote:

"In our day heaven and earth are on tiptoe waiting for the emergence of a Spirit-led, Spirit-intoxicated, Spirit-empowered people. All of creation watches expectantly for the springing up of a disciplined, freely gathered, martyr people who know in this life the life and power of the kingdom of God. It has happened before. It can happen again."

All followers of Jesus need to be in the habit of using the disciplines, but the need is even greater for those who are in leadership. The reason for this is simple; leaders give away more spiritually. As a leader if you want to be healthy and balanced, and not get burned-out, the amount spiritually going out has to be equal or less than the amount coming in.

A Brief Summary of the Spiritual Disciplines

The Inward Disciplines

Listing to the Word of God. The forms of the Word of God come to us and act upon us: through proclamation (meditation of a preacher, believer, neighbor), through scripture, and through the Holy Spirit. This is needed continually: Faith comes where Christ is proclaimed (Ro. 10:17), "Attend to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, to teaching." (1 Tim. 4:13), the biblical example of gathering manna (Ex. 16, Mt. 4:4)

Study. "Study is a specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction...[taking] on an order conforming to the order upon which it concentrates." (Foster)

Meditation. Meditation is the discipline in which we reflect, rehearse, and or ruminate on God's Word. Meditation is the link between hearing, reading, or studying the Bible and prayer. After the input of Scripture, meditation allows us to take in what God has said to us, think deeply on it, digest it, and then speak to God about it in meaningful prayer. As a result, we pray about what we have encountered in the Bible, now personalized through meditation.

Prayer. This was a discipline exercised by Jesus regularly. In Luke 5:16 the word used for the verb "withdrew" is actually an imperfect (the continuous past of the verb). With this in mind the verse can be rendered as, "He was in the habit of withdrawing into the wilderness and praying." Other examples of Jesus praying in Luke are - 3:21, 4:42, 6:12, 9:18, 9:28, 10:18, 11:1, and 22:41. "A primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that, by the power of the Spirit, we are increasingly conformed to the image of the Son." (Foster)

Fasting. Fasting is a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. As Christians living in a gluttonous, self-indulgent society, we may struggle with accepting this practice, but we cannot deny its significant role in the Scripture (Fasting is mentioned at least 77 times in the Bible). Fasting can be private (between you and God), congregational (the whole church), or national (in U.S. history National fasts were called for by congress under the presidency of John Adam, James Madison, and by Abraham Lincoln twice).

- Types of Fasts
 - Normal – Abstain from all food, but not from water
 - Partial – Limitation of diet
 - Absolute – Abstain from all food and liquid
 - Supernatural – Abstaining from all food and water beyond the time it is possible for a person to live
- Purposes of Fasting
 - To strengthen prayer
 - To seek God's guidance
 - To express grief or loss
 - To seek protection
 - To express repentance and return to God
 - To humble oneself before God and worship God
 - To express concern for the work of God
 - To minister to the needs of others
 - To overcome temptation and dedicate oneself to God

The Outward Disciplines

Simplicity. Simplicity is the discipline that seeks to free believers from the bondage to material things. "We really must understand that the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic. It is psychotic because it has completely lost touch with reality. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like...This psychosis permeates even our mythology. The modern hero is the poor boy who purposefully becomes rich rather than the rich boy who voluntarily becomes poor... Covetousness we call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry." (Foster)

- Inner Attitudes of Simplicity

- To receive what we have as a gift from God
- To know that it is God's job to protect what we possess
- To have our goods available to others
- Outward Expressions of Simplicity
 - Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status
 - Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you
 - Develop a habit of giving things away
 - Refuse to be propagandized by custodians of modern gadgetry
 - Learn to enjoy things without owning them – share things
 - Develop a deeper appreciation for creation
 - Look with a healthy skepticism at all "buy now, pay later" schemes
 - Obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech
 - Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others
 - Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the Kingdom of God

Solitude. Solitude is the spiritual discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes. It may last minutes, hours, days, or weeks. It may take place in an isolated closet, room, attic, garage, basement, guest house, park, beach, retreat center, desert, mountains, etc. Jesus needed frequent retreats into solitude in order to do His work, yet we often think that we can do without what He deemed essential. "Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life." (Henri Nouwen)

Silence. The discipline of silence is to close oneself off from sounds, whether they are noise, music, or words. Moreover, silence is the way to make solitude a reality. Without silence solitude has little effect. "One reason we can hardly bear to remain silent is that it makes us feel so helpless. We are so accustomed to relying upon words to manage and control others. If we are silent, who will take control? God will take control, but we will never let Him take control until we trust Him. Silence is intimately related to trust." (Foster) Silence enables us to better hear the voice of God, gives us freedom from ingrained behaviors and from people, and teaches us to control our tongue.

Submission. "The obsession to demand that things go the way that we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society today. People will spend weeks, months, even years in a perpetual stew because some little thing did not go as they wished. They will fuss and fume. They will get mad about it. They will act as if their very life hangs on the issue. They may even get an ulcer over it... [Submission] is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way." (Foster)

Service. "In service we engage our goods and strength in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world." (Willard)

"Service enables us to say 'no!' to the world's games of promotion and authority. It abolishes our need (and desire) for a 'pecking order'...Whenever there is trouble over who is the greatest, there is trouble over who is the least. That is the crux of the matter for us, isn't it? Most of us know we will never be the greatest; just don't let us be the least...More than any other single way, the grace of humility is worked into our lives through the Discipline of service...When we set out on a consciously chosen course of action that accents the good of others and is, for the most part, a hidden work, a deep change occurs in our spirits. Nothing disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing transforms the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service." (Foster)

John Newton illustrated obedient service in the following way: "If two angles were to receive at the same moment a commission from God, one to go down and rule earth's grandest empire, the other to go and sweep the streets of the meanest village, it would be a matter of entire indifference to each which service fell to his lot, the post of the ruler or the post of the scavenger; for the joy of the angels lies only in obedience to God's will."

The Corporate Disciplines

Confession. As with all of the disciplines the act of confession is by God's grace so that we may receive more of God's grace. It is a discipline because we must take action in it. We must choose to be vulnerable and

transparent, choose to risk status and reputation, choose to take real steps in seeking freedom from the things that keep us bound.

“Confession is a difficult Discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We cannot bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven. Therefore, we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.” (Foster)

Worship. “To worship is to experience Reality, to touch Life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community...Worship is our response to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father...Singing, praying, praising all may lead to worship, but worship is more than any of them. Our spirit must be ignited by the divine fire...We can use all the right techniques and methods, we can have the best possible liturgy, but we have not worshiped the lord until Spirit touches spirit.” (Foster)

Celebration. Celebration is “The decision to set the mind on the higher things of life...The carefree spirit of joyous festivity is absent in contemporary society. Apathy, even melancholy, dominates the times...Celebration brings joy into life, and joy makes us strong...We cannot continue long in anything without it. Women endure childbirth because the joy of motherhood lies on the other side...Celebration is central to all the Spiritual Disciplines. Without a joyful spirit of festivity the Disciplines become dull, death-breathing tools in the hands of modern Pharisees. Every Discipline should be characterized by carefree gaiety and a sense of thanksgiving....In the spiritual life only one thing will produce genuine joy, and that is obedience.” (Foster)

Consider for yourself what practices you may want to add to your life this next year so that you can move beyond surface living into the depth of Christ. God knows we need Him. God knows He is the only one who can satisfy our thirst.

Ways to organize the disciplines:

- **The inward disciplines**
 - Meditation
 - Prayer
 - Fasting
 - Study
- **The outward disciplines**
 - Simplicity
 - Solitude
 - Submission
 - Service
- **The corporate disciplines**
 - Confession
 - Worship
 - Guidance
 - Celebration

- **Disciplines of Abstinence:**
 - Solitude:
 - Silence:
 - Fasting:
 - Frugality:
 - Chastity:
 - Secrecy:
 - Sacrifice:
- **Disciplines of Engagement:**
 - Study:
 - Worship:
 - Celebration:
 - Service:
 - Prayer:
 - Fellowship:
 - Confession:
 - Submission: