

LESSON 8: THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH (Part 1)

"The Disciplines are God's way of getting us into the ground; they put us where He can work within us and transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God's means of grace. The inner righteousness we seek is not something that is poured on our heads. God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we are placed where He can bless us."

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

Introduction

- The Christian life has been described as a battle to be fought, a race to be run and a building to be constructed. In each of these cases, certain disciplines must be followed if the goal is to be reached.
- One cannot be a disciple without learning discipline!
- If I am going to develop Christ-like character in my life, there are certain disciplines, or habits I need to practice as part of my lifestyle.

"... Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." (1 Tim 4:7b)

- Discipline was the key to our Lord fulfilling the will of His heavenly Father.
"... even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience." ~ Hebrews 5:8

The goal: For us to become more like Jesus.

The Holy Spirit's part: He is the change agent, acting with power and purpose to grow us up into Christ.

Our part: We need to be changed but we cannot change ourselves. We can, however, cooperate with the Holy Spirit in changing us by choosing to put ourselves in places and staying put in places where the Holy Spirit can transform us.

The means: The disciplines are the conduits/channels for the Holy Spirit's power, the God-given means we are to use in our pursuit of growing into the heart of God.

In-Depth Study

- a) *To become like Jesus, we must "learn obedience" through developing disciple habits.*
 - 1Corinthians 9:25-27
Paul says that just as an athlete gives priority to habits that will develop him as a champion, a disciple gives priority to habits that develop Christ-like character.
 - A disciple is one who disciplines himself to do the right things!

We have to be:

- discriminating in what we do. (v 25)
- deliberate in what we do. (v. 26)

- A disciple is one who disciplines himself to do the right things, the right way!

We must be:

- determined in what we do. (v. 27)

- Paul understood the level of commitment that Jesus requires of those who would be a true disciple.

"Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.'" Luke 14:25-27

- Jesus made it clear that the nature of the commitment required of a disciple is two-fold:

i) Our supreme delight must be our relationship with Jesus. (v. 26)

- Paul says that since he was spiritually alive, he was not going to allow his flesh to determine the course of his life.

- He was going to make sure that his body was the servant, and his inner man was the master.

- The desires of his body were not going to rule over himself!

ii) Our supreme desire must be to become like Jesus. (v. 27; Luke 9:23)

- Paul expressed this commitment when he declares that he was determined not to be "disqualified for the prize."

"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."(Phil 4:13)

- Paul was committed to win the prize – the prize of being just like Jesus.

- The primary requirement to spiritual discipline is a longing after God.

There is a temptation to take on the disciplines with a legalistic approach. You begin to think that it is an act of work; it is something that you can accomplish.

- We will look at three basic types of spiritual disciplines:

1) The inward disciplines cultivate the inner spiritual life.

2) The outward disciplines govern the individual activities we pursue to encourage spiritual growth.

- 3) In corporate disciplines, we join other Christians in mutual ministry for spiritual growth.

Inward spiritual discipline: Meditation

a) *Meditation is one of the ways that you can open the door to God, to have that intimate relationship with him, to know him better, to let him take your worries and bless your life.*

- Meditation allows the Holy Spirit to renew the mind and provide deep illumination of spiritual truth.

b) *Meditation is pondering over Scripture verses or passages in such a way that the Written Word of God becomes a living Word of God applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit.*

- The two primary words for meditation in the Bible mean “to murmur or mutter” and “to speak to one’s self”.
- The truth being meditated upon moves from the mouth (murmuring), to the mind (reflective thinking), and finally to the heart (outer action).
- The person meditating seeks to understand how to relate Biblical truth to life.
- Meditation is listening deeply to the Scripture with the ears of our heart, attuning ourselves to God’s presence in Scripture.
- Once a word/passage speaks to us in a personal way, we can take it and ponder it in our hearts, soaking ourselves in the passage. We can ask:
 - What is happening here?
 - What are the sounds, smells and feelings?
 - Why is God focusing me on this verse or idea?
 - What does he want me to understand?
 - Why do I need this word from God?
 - How do I respond?
 - Is there an example for me to follow, a sin to avoid, a command to obey, a promise to claim?

“No habit is more invigorating for Christian living than regularly plunging into Scripture. No discipline provides more power and direction for spiritual growth than study and meditation on God’s Word.” Siang-Yan Tan and Douglas Gregg, *Disciplines of the Holy Spirit*

c) To meditate does not mean to think about nothing or to let the mind go blank.

- The biblical meaning of meditation is “deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture for the purpose of understanding, application and prayer”.
- Joshua 1:8 “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; **meditate** on it day and night, so that you may **be careful to do** everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

- Psalms 1:1-3; Psalms 119: 98-99

- The Holy Spirit does not reward superficial relationship. The Lord does not bless carelessness, mediocrity, ignorance or busyness.

- We learn to meditate by meditating.

d) *The Benefits of Meditation*

- It grounds you.

“Meditation sends us into our ordinary world with greater perspective and balance.” Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

- It creates space for God.

“What happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart” Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

- “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” Revelations 3:20 -21

- It changes you.

- The way that we think is transformed into how God thinks. The fruits of the spirit replace our corrupt sinful ways of thinking.

- If you meet with God, you will be changed. If you give him the time, he will make it well worth your while.

“We cannot burn the eternal flame of the inner sanctuary and remain the same, for the Divine Fire will consume everything that is impure.” Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

Application (Source: Siang-Yan Tan and Douglas Gregg, *Disciplines of the Holy Spirit*)

Part A

Simple steps for meditation

- Pray for the Holy Spirit to speak to you and guide you as you read a passage of Scripture. Without his ministry as teacher of God's truth and and revealer of God's mind, we will not be able to know or understand God or spiritual things. (1 Cor 2: 6-16)
- Read through the passage you are meditating on several times, listening for the still, small voice of God and waiting upon the leading of the Spirit.
- Ponder the verse or two that grabs your attention or touches you in some way. Picture what is happening as though you are behind the lens of a camera looking at the scene. Eg: Jesus feeding the five thousand with two loaves and fish. See the little boy give his lunch to Jesus. Picture and hear Jesus' conversation with the disciples.
- Come out from behind the camera and put yourself in the picture –in Jesus' shoes, or in the shoes of the disciples or the people gathered around. Ask questions. What is Jesus thinking? Why is He acting this way? Allow a dialogue to unfold inside you; let your imagination and senses be instruments for revelation from the Holy Spirit.
- Be open to the ways God may want to speak to you directly through His Word: through a personal encounter as you stand beside one of the disciples; as you ask questions; perhaps as Jesus comes directly to you in the scene in which you have entered.
- Write down what you have heard from God or what you have learned through your meditation on His Word.
- Take time to share what God has said to you with an accountability partner or wise friend. This provides protection by checking what comes from your time of meditation, helps to reinforce God's Word to you, and encourages and blesses others in their journey of faith.

Part B

1. Decide to read the Bible on a daily basis.
 - Start by reading a chapter a day, pausing to meditate on a verse or two that the Spirit brings to your attention. Use the steps for meditation outlined above.
 - You could also use 'The One Year Bible' published by Tyndale and read 3-4 chapters assigned daily so that you can read through the whole Bible in a year.
2. Combine Bible reading and meditation with prayer time. Meditation and prayer are crucial means of knowing God and the Holy Spirit's power.
3. Make a commitment to memorize at least one verse or text of Scripture a month.
4. Set aside one or two hours weekly for personal study and interpretation of the Bible. You can use study aids like commentaries, Bible handbooks or dictionaries.
5. Join a Bible study small group or cell group to study and share God's Word with others.
6. Attend adult Sunday school and Sunday services at your church so that you are regularly hearing God's Word.
7. You may want to take a Bible or theology course at a nearby seminary or Bible college to help you into deeper study of God's Word.

*India Christian Assembly
Spiritual Growth Study Series
Pr. Alexander John*