

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE

Getting in shape to seek the Kingdom of God.

PART 3: SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES



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Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual Disciplines
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Spiritual Disciplines

Welcome to *Spiritual Disciplines*

Welcome to *Spiritual Disciplines*, part 3 of a 7-part series on the disciplined life. Seeking the Kingdom of God is full-time work, and we need to be in shape if we're going to make progress in this effort. Living a disciplined life is crucial to realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God

Spiritual Disciplines introduces those foundational practices which are so important to the nurture and wellbeing of our soul. Prayer, Scripture, meditation, solitude, fasting, and keeping the Lord's Day – these are the building blocks for a strong and growing soul, and an obedient and fruitful life.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Focus of Spiritual Disciplines

And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls... 2 Corinthians 12:15

The end of the soul

These days talking about the soul is considered either ignorant, naïve, or just not in good taste. Secular and naturalistic thinkers since before the turn of the 19th century have tried to distance humankind from the idea of the soul, insisting that, since everything that matters is material in composition, talking about the soul as some kind of an explanation for human behavior is an exercise in futility.

In our day certain neuroscientists are on a quest to demonstrate that every action of our bodies, every thought or feeling or decision or impulse we experience, can be traced to electro-chemical movements within our brains. What we call “consciousness” or “affection” or “thinking” or “the soul” is really just the materiel of our brains, doing what it’s supposed to do in looking out for the wellbeing of the rest of our bodies.

On some college campuses, talking about the “soul” or “self” or the “person” is considered out of bounds and a mark of inferior intelligence. You can go to college for four years, study for all you’re worth, and come away without ever having considered the soul as a something other than an aspect of human life people used to believe way back in the dark ages.

So, is this the end of the soul? Is talking about spiritual disciplines really just a waste of time?

Soul and body

Not for those who embrace a Christian worldview, and who understand that the secular conceit about the full and final composition of things is just a convenient way of getting around the moral obligations of believing in God.

For the Christian, few things could be more important than to understand and exercise proper stewardship over our soul. So important were the souls of believers to the Apostle Paul that he spent himself in long days and short nights, and in many trials and troubles, seeking the wellbeing and edification of the souls of those entrusted to his care. And he did so, and resolved to continue doing so, gladly, for he understood just how important a healthy soul is for fruitful living in the Kingdom of God.

From the Christian perspective, human beings are creatures of two components, one material and one spiritual. We are body and soul, each person being endowed with a unique expression of the various respective components of each. What God is to the world – architect, sustainer, redeemer, molder, keeper, guide, and power – the soul is to the human body. A healthy soul means a body that will know God’s presence and carry out His purposes in a life of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The soul animates the body and gives it its peculiar character, expressed in words and deeds. When our souls – our mind, heart, and conscience – are aligned with God’s purposes, shaped by His counsel and plan, and filled with His presence, then our bodies will refract the presence of Christ into the world and demonstrate the Christian’s claim that Jesus Christ has, indeed, risen from the dead.

Nurturing the soul

Who we are, what we’re like and how we talk and act, comes to expression in all our waking moments, no matter where we are, what we’re doing, or whom we’re with. It is the declared purpose of the Lord Jesus Christ to fill us with Himself and to spill out through us to flood the spaces of our lives with the life-giving spiritual water of His Spirit, full of grace and truth (Eph. 4:10; Jn. 7:37-39; cf. Ps. 46:4-6). Our bodies will only

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be capable of the words and deeds this high and holy calling requires if our souls are in proper spiritual condition, strong, growing, and at the ready in every situation.

This is the work of spiritual disciplines. Through spiritual disciplines we reserve a portion of our time to the direct and concentrated effort of training our thoughts, feelings, and priorities to get in step with the Lord Jesus Christ. We learn to think with the *mind* of Christ, to feel with the *heart* of God, and to *choose*, in the power of the Spirit, whatever course of action – whether words or deeds – will express the pleasure and redound to the glory of God. In order for this to be consistently the case, we have to work hard at those exercises and protocols which actually have the power to shape our soul so that it becomes more like the mind, heart, and conscience of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Which makes spiritual disciplines *the* place to begin in thinking about how to make the best use of the time of our lives in training, shaping, and qualifying our bodies for life in the Kingdom of God. The world may deny the existence of the soul, but the Christian cannot. As the inward vital life-springs of our unbelieving neighbors run dry, we Christians, our souls fresh-filled with the grace and truth of Christ, must be always ready to offer true spiritual water to quench their thirst.

And making sure we're ready for such opportunities, becoming the kind of person who is able to respond like this, is the work of spiritual disciplines.

For reflection

1. What is the soul? What role does it play in the Christian life? What does it mean to nurture the soul?
2. What disciplines or other practices are you currently pursuing to nurture your soul? On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 = Very confident, how confident are you that your practice of spiritual disciplines is where it ought to be? Why did you select that number?
3. With which of the spiritual disciplines do you struggle most? In which of them would you most like to see immediate improvement?

Next steps – Preparation, Conversation: Summarize the state of your spiritual disciplines at this time. What are you presently doing to “get your soul in shape” for ministering God’s grace and truth to others? How confident are you that this is everything you should be doing for the proper nurture of your soul? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

2 Disciplines of Prayer

So Jesus answered and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.” Matthew 21.21, 22

Begin – and stay – here

In the practice of spiritual disciplines, prayer is the foundation *from* which, the springboard *by* which, and the envelope *in* which Jesus sends us to the world. If we don’t get prayer right, and make use of it as the Lord Jesus intends, all our other disciplines will be little more than exercises in self-vaunting, full of sound and fury, perhaps, but signifying – and accomplishing – nothing of lasting value for Christ and His Kingdom.

It is the consistent witness of Scripture that engaging with God in prayer is the *sine qua non* of spiritual life. Therefore *learning* to pray and maintaining a vital *practice* of prayer must receive our most earnest attention. Prayer lays down a foundation that can give shape to all our thinking, adorn our hearts with the proper affections, and re-organize all our priorities for effective Kingdom living. From that foundation, prayer springs us into our daily lives, filled with the Spirit of God and poised to follow His lead and promptings in every situation. And prayer is the envelope, sealed with the Spirit and addressed to the parched world, that can bring grace and truth into every situation and person in our lives.

Learning to pray

Since prayer is so important in the life of faith, it’s not surprising that it’s difficult to learn, and even more difficult to practice the way we should.

Prayer being a form of conversation, it can be difficult to keep it going for very long with Someone we cannot see. Prayer takes time. In this generation of the followers of Christ, we tend to equate time with activity, and prayer can be a difficult activity to sustain for very much time. Many believers will say they’ve “tried prayer” and have not found it to be especially helpful. Others will protest they don’t have time to pray – there’s just too much to do in serving the Lord, I suppose – or that they don’t know how to pray.

But the disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ understood the importance of prayer. So much so, in fact, that they asked the Lord to teach them how to pray (Lk. 11.1), and He obliged, over and over again during the course of His earthly sojourn.

We can always improve our practice of prayer, and doing so will involve our continually striving to understand prayer better, and to make good use of it as foundation, spring board, and envelope for our lives.

Improving your prayers

Here is not the place for a full-blown explanation of the nature, purpose, and practice of prayer. Instead, let me offer something of a propaedeutic on the subject, which might point you in some directions for improving your own practice of prayer.

First, *always begin your day with prayer*. At the beginning of the day, prayer can help you to reorient yourself to the Kingdom and your calling in it. Your morning prayers should contain much thanksgiving and praise, being specific in each category, so that you remind yourself of the abundant goodness, wisdom, and power of God as you start each new day in Him. Don’t be too quick to get into prayers of supplication and intercession for yourself and others. Linger before the Lord in praise and thanks, wondering at the grace and power that sustain and bless you, and that await you during the coming day. Begin your days in prayer, and make to sure to end them in prayer as well.

Second, *make time for prayer during the day*. You schedule the things that matter most to you each day – eating,

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appointments, tasks or projects, and the like. Try scheduling additional meetings with God for prayer at several times during the day. These don't have to be lengthy, drawn-out times of prayer, just a few minutes to celebrate God's goodness and prepare for whatever comes next. Setting aside times for prayer allows you to hang your day on prayer and make progress through it in the strength of the Lord, much like crossing a "monkey bar" when you were a child.

Third, *maintain an attitude of prayer* at all times. Let prayer launch you into every new activity. Think in a prayerful mode as you work or meet with others. Simple phrases like, "Thank You, Lord Jesus," or "Help me, Lord," or "Your Name be praised, O Lord," uttered to yourself amid the everyday activities of your life, can keep that prayer line open and working to supply you with the orientation and strength you need to think, feel, decide, and act in consistent Kingdom ways. Add to this singing to the Lord when you can – just a few bars of a favorite hymn – and you'll find you're making real progress in Paul's instruction that we should pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17).

Finally, *learn to pray the psalms*. Believers in every generation have found the book of Psalms to be a powerful resource for coming to the Lord in prayer. We don't know how to pray as we should, and God has gone to considerable trouble to make these prayers available to us. It only makes sense that we should learn to use them as He intends.

Here are no new insights on learning to pray and improving your practice of prayer. We've all known them. But it's good to be reminded so that we take seriously this most foundational of all spiritual disciplines, and devote ourselves to praying and improving our prayers every day of our lives.

For reflection

1. What are the biggest obstacles to improving your prayer life at this time? How might you begin to overcome these?
2. T. M. says that prayer is a foundation, springboard, and envelope for our lives. Explain each of these. Do you find prayer to be like this in your life? Why or why not?
3. In your experience, what has been most helpful in bringing more consistency and power to your prayer life?

Next steps – Transformation, Conversation: What will you do, starting today, to make better use of the discipline of prayer? Share your plan with a Christian friend, and ask him or her to pray for you and check with you from time to time to see how you're doing.

3 Disciplines of the Word

*But He knows the way that I take;
When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.
My foot has held fast to His steps;
I have kept His way and not turned aside.
I have not departed from the commandment of His lips;
I have treasured the words of His mouth
More than my necessary food. Job 23.10-12*

Food for the soul

In his wonderful poem, “On A Theme from Nicholas of Cusa,” C. S. Lewis makes brilliant use of the metaphor of eating as a way of thinking about nourishing our souls. Here’s the poem:

When soul and body feed, one sees
Their differing physiologies.
Firmness of apple, fluted shape
Of celery, or tight-skinned grape
I grind and mangle when I eat,
Then in dark, salt, internal heat,
Annihilate their natures by
The very act that makes them I.

But when the soul partakes of good
Or truth, which are her savoury food,
By some far subtler chemistry
It is not they that change, but she,
Who feels them enter with the state
Of conquerors her opened gate,
Or, mirror-like, digests their ray
By turning luminous as they.

Did you hear all those smacking and eating sounds in the first stanza? Then the smooth, spirant sounds of the second? Lewis is saying that feeding the soul is like feeding the body, except that, when the body eats, the food of which it partakes becomes the body. When the soul eats “of good/Or truth” then the soul itself is transformed by strong spiritual action, like conquerors or laser beams, into the form of the nourishment of which she partakes.

This is an excellent way of thinking about the nurture of our souls on the Word of truth. Job evidently thought this way, as did Jeremiah, Paul, the writer of Hebrews, the Apostle John, and Christian thinkers and theologians throughout the ages. The Word of God is the staple of our spiritual diet, the “savoury food” of which our “soul partakes” in order that our souls, in all their parts, might “turn luminous” as that on which they feed.

The power of the Word

The Bible is the Word of God, that powerful, glory-filled, transformative weapon of righteousness by which God shapes our souls into the image of Jesus Christ. The more we partake of His Word, reading and studying and meditating to find Christ and His redemption throughout, the more our souls will “turn luminous” and light-filled to refract the glory of Christ into our everyday lives.

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There is no substitute for reading the Word of God. It must be a daily priority. We can find great delight and much benefit if we will devote extended and concentrated time to the Scriptures. And we must never forsake this discipline, lest our starving souls turn to the junk food of this world, and end up sick unto death.

Some guidelines

Here are a few guidelines by which you can check your present use of the Word of God:

First, *feed daily*. Never let a day go by, if you can help it, in which you do not spend time reading and meditating in the Word of God. Then, *feed on the whole menu*. Don't let yourself get stuck on the "easy" or familiar parts of Scripture. *All* Scripture is profitable for us, Paul insisted (2 Tim. 3.16, 17), and so we need to cultivate our taste to feed on and delight in the full banquet of God's Word.

Third, *follow a schedule* for getting through the whole Bible regularly. It might take two years or so to do it, but set one up and plow ahead through it day after day. Then, when you've finished reading the whole Bible, start the regimen all over again.

Fourth, *make notes as you read*. Making notes will slow down your reading, lead you to think through God's message for you, and help your observations and impressions to "stick" in your mind.

Fifth, *pray the Word back to God each day*. What you read each day, bring onto the foundation of prayer. Carry it with you into the spring board of prayer, and make it a touch point in the message Christ is sending you, in the envelope of prayer, to be for that day.

Finally, *talk with others about the Word*. You will grow and so will your Christian friends if you'll make conversation about the Word a regular part of your time together. And talking with your non-Christian friends about the Word doesn't have to sound like preaching. Let them see your love for God and His Word as you share freely, honestly, and naturally about the good food you're finding each day in the Bible.

When the Word of God is more important to us than the food that sustains our bodies, we'll know the strength of mind, heart, and conscience which can sustain us, even in times of weakness or trial, and prepare us for every good work, no matter the situation before us.

For reflection

1. Why is "feeding" such an apt analogy for thinking about our relationship to the Word of God?
2. How would you describe your practice of feeding on the Word at present? Can you see any areas where you would like to improve in this?
3. In what ways have you experienced your soul "turn luminous" as a result of your time in God's Word?

Next steps – Transformation: Can you think of one thing you might do to improve your time in the discipline of the Word? Ask a Christian friend to help you review your time in the Word and to think through an answer to this question.

4 The Discipline of Meditation

*I will stand my watch
And set myself on the rampart,
And watch to see what He will say to me,
And what I will answer when I am corrected.* Habakkuk 2.1

Learning to see and hear

The discipline of meditation fits nicely into almost every other discipline, especially prayer and the reading and study of God's Word.

I want to say a further word about meditation, for it is through meditation that we learn to "hear" the voice of the Spirit as He teaches, convicts, and guides us. And it's in meditation that we can "see" the glory of God manifesting in the various places and ways He is wont to do so. Meditation is key to engaging God in His self-revelation, whether in Scripture or in the creation around us.

Insights on meditation

Here are some choice insights on meditation from Christian leaders of the past.

Anglican theologian Charles Bridges (1794-1869) reminds us that meditation is an important exercise for the soul: "The habit of meditation is the exercise of the mind on spiritual objects for spiritual purposes, fixing a clear and permanent impression of truth."

Meditation can help us to improve the art of Christian living, as Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) observed: "No one presumes to teach an art till he has first, with intense meditation, learnt it."

Here's a little longer quote from Bohemian philosopher John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), reminding us that meditation is a means to see and an impetus praise the Lord: "...all will regale themselves, even in the midst of their work and toil, by meditation on the words and works of God, and, by the constant reading of the Bible and other good books, will avoid that idleness which is so dangerous to flesh and blood. To sum up, they will learn to see, to praise, and to recognize God everywhere..."

John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote of meditation that we should seek to continue in it at all times: "[Now] by this we are admonished that it is insufficient to give one day's attention to what our Lord willed to be published in his name, rather our meditation must continue on it. Consequently, let each one [of us] so engage our life, both morning and evening, that we might not cease to call to mind what our Lord reveals and explains to us."

And, finally, this concise definition from Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141): "Meditation is sustained thought along planned lines...Meditation takes its start from reading but is bound by none of reading's rules or precepts. For it delights to range along open ground, where it fixes its free gaze upon the contemplation of truth, drawing together now these, now those causes of things, or now penetrating into profundities, leaving nothing doubtful, nothing obscure. The start of learning, thus, lies in reading, but its consummation lies in meditation."

The practice of meditation

OK, let's pull out a few practical applications from these great teachers so that we can think about how to make meditation a more consistent part of disciplining our bodies for Kingdom living.

First, meditation involves *focused observation and thought*. You have to slow down, think deeply, observe closely, and let your thoughts and observations sink into your mind and connect with whatever they can there. Ask lots of questions, and look for more things to observe. You'll need time for this, and skill in blocking out

distractions, whether of your surroundings or your own mind.

Second, *the focus of meditation should be on God, as He reveals Himself in Scripture and creation*. Since God is always revealing Himself to us, we can learn to practice aspects of meditation while we're taking a walk, working in the yard, or having a meal. God is always at hand; we just need to focus, observe, and think about what we're seeing of Him. Meditation is not about discovering something deep within ourselves. Meditation is about seeing the beauty and power of the Lord, as He makes Himself known to us throughout the day.

Third, meditation is *a powerful aid to learning*, especially when it comes to learning spiritual truths with a view to bearing spiritual fruit. When we're meditating we must try to think our way all the way through to changes God might want to work in our souls. Look for "next steps" to take immediately that can firm up your learning and begin a trajectory for continual growth.

Fourth, learning to meditate can *keep us from ever being idle*, so that all our moments, even when we're relaxing or recreating in some way, can lead us into the presence of God, to praise, adore, and give Him thanks.

As Hugh of St. Victor observed, true learning begins with the reading and study of Scripture. But real learning, learning that sees us being transformed increasingly into the image of Jesus Christ, is consummated in meditation. Learn the practice of meditation, and wait on the Lord in meditation, until He shows you His beauty and power. You'll learn more and learn better when meditation becomes an active and ready discipline in your spiritual life.

For reflection

1. In your own words, how would you explain the practice of meditation?
2. Meditation can be thought of as an extended period of prayer and reflecting on the Word of God. Is this part of your regular regimen of spiritual disciplines? Can you see where this might fit in more consistently in that regimen?
3. What are the greatest obstacles to more consistent meditation? How can we overcome these?

Next steps – Transformation: Look around you. Notice the things in the room where you are right now, or outside a nearby window. On a card or sheet of paper, jot down three things you'd like to think about more deeply during the day. Take some time out right now, then again several times during the day, to meditate, using the guidelines above, on these items. Make some notes. Pray your meditation in. At the end of the day, share the fruit of your meditations with your spouse or a close friend.

5 The Discipline of Solitude

Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed. Mark 1.35

Alone with the Lord

You may have noticed, as we have been working our way through the various disciplines designed to strengthen and shape our souls, that the demands of time and effort tend to increase. Prayer is hard enough to sustain, especially throughout the day. But add to that reading and study of Scripture, and even more time and effort must be invested. Then meditation demands more of us still, that we slow down, go deeper in prayer and the revelation of God, and wait for Him to teach and transform us by His Word and Spirit.

Is it really possible to carve out the time, learn the skills, and make the ongoing investment necessary to benefit from these disciplines?

Of course it is, as believers throughout the ages have shown. But we will have to work at it. Learning disciplines such as these requires that we wrest our bodies out of their wonted ways and subject them to new regimens of attention and effort. If we really want our bodies to become living temples of the Lord, focal points of His Kingdom mission and glory, then we'll have to give ourselves to this effort diligently, and with the help and encouragement of Christian friends. It won't be easy – all discipline has a note of unpleasantness to it – but it can be very rewarding.

And the discipline of solitude can help to reinforce and improve all these other disciplines by which we shape our souls for Kingdom living.

Definition

What do we mean by the “discipline of solitude”? In brief, solitude is just what it suggests – being alone with the Lord for an extended period of time, time in which you have nothing else to do but wait with and on the Lord.

Jesus practiced this discipline, but not with the kind of frequency He did other disciplines. On occasion Jesus would slip away, often before the break of day, in order to be alone with His Father in some out-of-the-way place and time. We don't really know what He did then, but we can imagine that, in these times of being alone with the Lord, Jesus must have reviewed His calling and plans, and refreshed Himself in the presence and promises of God.

The discipline of solitude provides an opportunity to bring all our other spiritual disciplines together in one extended period of waiting on the Lord, free of distractions, so that He can speak to us to affirm, clarify, redirect, and refresh us in His will.

Let me share a few practices which I have found helpful for gaining the benefit of this important spiritual discipline.

Guidelines

First, times of solitude should be infrequent, but regular. Plan for an extended time alone with the Lord at least once a quarter. Set aside a morning or an afternoon, and find a place other than where you usually meet with the Lord. I have found being outside to be a most welcoming environment for solitude, although inside in a comfortable setting can also work. The important thing is to set aside at least an hour, and, hopefully, more than that, for being alone with the Lord.

Second, focus on something ordinary and familiar, with a view to discerning the upholding power and presence of Christ in it. It is the glory of God to conceal Himself in everyday objects – a cup of coffee, a tree, the changing landscape of clouds, a stand of wildflowers, the architecture of your backyard deck (Prov. 25.2). In focusing on such an object, try to discern what makes it distinct – its shape color, function or use, placement, inherent systems, and so forth. Turn the object over and over in your mind, examining it carefully as a gift and revelation of God. As you study the object, contemplate what it reveals about the wisdom, goodness, beauty, majesty, or power of God. Talk with Him as you do, asking Him to make Himself and His glory known to you.

Once you have begun to discern the stamp of the Lord in the object of your focus, call to mind Scriptures that further elaborate whatever you have discerned of God's glory. If it's the beauty of the Lord that most impresses you, for example, think on Psalm 27 or Psalm 45, or Jesus' transfiguration before the disciples on the Mount, in which the beauty of our King is extolled. Talk with the Lord about His beauty and how it makes you feel, and listen as He counsels you concerning the implications of His beauty for your daily walk with Him.

You might sing a hymn or praise song to the Lord during your time of solitude. Mostly, however, you'll simply observe, listen, search the Scriptures, commune with the Lord, and wait, wait, wait for Him to make His presence known. Take your time. Focus on your chosen object, and listen carefully to whatever the Lord wants to reveal or remind you of concerning Himself and His will for you. Your time of solitude will require you to use patient observation as well as the spiritual disciplines that pertain to prayer, the Word, and meditation. And if you're patient, and your time of solitude yields the fruit of God's presence, assurance, and direction, you'll find that each of these individual disciplines has been strengthened for their normal, daily use.

Make time to be alone with the Lord. In His presence is fullness of joy and at His right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16.11), and we can know a happy measure of these if only we are willing to take the time and wait.

For reflection

1. Have you ever practiced the discipline of solitude? If so, what did you do during that time?
2. Why is it so hard for Christians to practice the discipline of solitude? How can they begin to address this, so as to make better use of this discipline?
3. Meditate on Psalm 19.1-4 and Romans 1.20. What are some "everyday objects" that might be of interest to you as a focus for meditation and solitude? Why?

Next steps – Transformation, Conversation: Plan a time of solitude. Talk with a friend about your plans, and see what suggestions he or she has to help you in this effort. Share the results of your time of discipline with your friend.

6 The Discipline of Fasting

“But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” Matthew 16.17, 18

Not if – when

We notice that, in this passage, Jesus did not say, “If you fast...” His words are, “But you, *when* you fast...” Jesus assumed that His followers would practice the discipline of fasting. He even appears, in another passage, to *instruct* us to do so. In Matthew 9.15 Jesus plainly said that once He, the Bridegroom, had been taken away, then His “friends” would definitely fast.

Further, Jesus gave explicit instructions concerning how to practice the discipline of fasting, as our text indicates. He said we should not parade the fact that we’re fasting, but, instead, should simply go about our normal daily life so that no one but God would know that we are engaged in this important discipline.

Jesus clearly expects His followers to practice the discipline of fasting, and so we can only conclude that fasting is a useful resource for helping to bring our bodies into submission to our souls, so that we might follow the Lord and abide in Him.

The benefits of fasting

It’s safe to say that since Jesus commends the discipline of fasting, certain benefits must await those who practice this discipline. I can think of four.

First, fasting helps us in *teaching denial to the body*. We recall that all disciplines represent, in one form or another, an effort to direct our bodily members into behaviors more in line with our Kingdom calling as followers of Christ. This can be a difficult challenge, as old habits and behaviors die hard. Taming our tongue, eyes, and bodily strength for righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit is an ongoing struggle. In the discipline of fasting we stand up to the body head-on, denying its accustomed use in the consuming of regular meals and directing it to different and more clearly spiritual activities, such as prayer, meditation, or serving others.

If we can overcome the strong bodily inclination to eat, we can learn to discipline the members of our body in other ways as well.

Second, and related to this, in the discipline of fasting we *strengthen the soul to override bodily cravings*. As we are fasting we need to engage our minds in focusing on the purpose of our particular task. We should seek the Lord to help us take delight in that task, to strengthen our hearts to take joy in spiritual matters above material ones. And as we continue practicing the discipline of fasting, making fasting a regular part of our repertoire of spiritual disciplines, we strengthen our conscience and will as these work continuously to prefer default choices which are spiritual and Kingdom-oriented first of all.

Third, fasting allows us to *free time for serving others*. The Lord spoke through Isaiah to explain that the fasts He is pleased with bring benefit to others (Is. 58.6ff.). The time we might otherwise spend in eating can be invested in reaching out to others to serve, encourage, instruct, lend, or assist. By denying our bodies the time they normally take for eating, we teach them to think of the needs of others first, and to embrace disciplines of service along with those of self-denial.

Finally, fasting can be of great benefit in *reinforcing and intensifying prayer, the Word, and meditation*. Because fasting is not easy, and your body resists this discipline like few others, we will need to come into our fast armed with

the Word, instant in prayer, and focused on our purpose in taking up this important discipline.

“When you fast...”

So here are some practical guidelines to help you make better use of the discipline of fasting.

First, make sure you appear as outwardly normal in your time of fasting as possible. So you might try a one-day fast, beginning after dinner and lasting to dinner the next day. Or you might excuse yourself from your normal mealtime companions to walk alone or find a quiet place to meditate on your calling in Christ's Kingdom and glory. Above all, don't advertise your fast. I'm not an advocate of fasting pushes that call on folks to sign up and be part of some special effort of fasting for so many hours or days. That just seems totally contrary to what Jesus taught.

Second, have a focus for your fast, either in some work of service, a season of solitude, reviewing or planning your spiritual life, or a time for worship and singing. Don't just do nothing! As you deny your bodily members their wonted use, guide them in something that will reinforce your soul's effort to shape and direct all aspects of your life.

Third, take some Scripture with you to meditate and pray whenever the body begins to get “pushy.” Scriptures such as Jeremiah 15.16, Job 23.12, and Psalm 42.1 can remind you that your real food and milk are the Lord and His Word, not the bread and drink for which your stomach and throat implore you.

Finally, reflect on your time of fasting once it's over. What did you experience? Did you learn anything new about yourself? About the Lord? Have you experienced any strengthening of your soul in any specific ways?

Like all spiritual disciplines, fasting is designed to help our souls gain mastery over our bodies, so that both might be wholly devoted to the Lord for the cause of His Kingdom. Make fasting part of your spiritual regimen, and you will strengthen all your other disciplines and the components of your soul as well.

For reflection

1. Most Christians do not practice the discipline of fasting. Why do you think this is so?
2. How can strong disciplines of prayer, the Word, and meditation help you to make better use of the discipline of fasting?
3. Suggest some ways you might prepare for a season – say 24 hours – of fasting.

Next steps – Transformation: If you have not fasted much before, start with a one meal fast, once a week, each week for a month. From there try a one day fast twice a month. Pay careful attention during your times of fasting to see what you have learned or how you have benefited from the effort. Pray the lessons and benefits back to the Lord with thanksgiving.

7 Disciplines for the Lord's Day

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day... Revelation 1.9, 10

The use of spiritual disciplines

I'm sometimes asked if I don't think all this emphasis on spiritual disciplines is just a little legalistic. Of course, praying, reading and meditating in God's Word, practicing solitude and fasting, and any other spiritual disciplines *can* become ends in themselves, things we do to prove how spiritual we are compared with other people. Like the rich man in the temple, thanking the Lord for how much he fasted and prayed (Lk. 18.9-14).

But just because something good can be *abused* doesn't mean we should avoid it. Spiritual disciplines don't *have* to become exercises in self-righteousness. This is certainly not why the Lord gave and prescribes them. Spiritual disciplines are for the strengthening of our souls, by bringing us into more immediate and constant fellowship and communion with our risen Lord. In spiritual disciplines we are seeking the Lord – His presence, glory, will, and pleasure – by means that are specially designed to accomplish this end. When we practice spiritual disciplines as the Lord intends, we don't end up like some sort of Jack Horner Christian, sticking our thumb into the pie of spiritual disciplines and declaring, "My, what a good Christian am I!"

No. The practice of spiritual disciplines, rightly engaged, brings us into the presence of the Lord, to know His glory, delight in His beauty, immerse ourselves in His strength, rejoice in His love, draw on His power, be renewed in His mind and reformed with His heart, so that, as the Spirit works in us, we are increasingly transformed into the image of Jesus Christ in every aspect of our lives.

And if that's legalism, then I say give me more of it!

The Lord's Day

The trump card of legalism is most often played when it comes to defending our use of the Lord's Day. For most Christians, I suspect, the Lord's Day is really only the Lord's Half-Day – the time they're gathered with other believers for church. The rest of the day is a kind of "free day" for doing whatever we might like, as long as it's not work (although, for many believers, not even work is denied them on the Lord's Day).

We have persuaded ourselves that remembering and guarding the Lord's Day, to contemplate and celebrate our Creator and Redeemer, and to be renewed entirely in Him apart from our normal work or recreations – keeping the Lord's Day is a matter of personal interest and choice. We act, for all intents and purposes, as though that half-day is *not* in fact the Lord's Day, but *ours*, to do with what we choose, quite apart of any spiritual focus or interest.

And when such a view is confronted with all the many Old Testament texts instructing and warning and urging us concerning the sanctification of the Lord's Day, we often hear, "Oh, since keeping the Lord's Day is not repeated in the New Testament, we're no longer required to keep it like that."

Yet keeping the Lord's Day, one day in seven, is so integral to key aspects of the life of faith, that to fail to honor it as God intends is to lessen belief in cardinal Christian doctrines and to strengthen the members of our bodies for self-indulgence rather than self-denial.

A day for all spiritual disciplines

Since all spiritual disciplines, rightly engaged, bring us into the joy and pleasure of the Lord – and what's *not*

Spiritual Disciplines

to like about that? – then if we made the Lord’s Day a focus for spiritual disciplines, we might actually find more joy in seeking the Lord and resting in Him throughout that day than in all the frivolous, self-interested diversions with which we otherwise occupy this time.

Start your Lord’s Day with prayer and Scripture, just like every other day. But include a special focus on the gathering of God’s people for worship. Make sure you confess your sins. Think about people you’re likely to see, and prepare yourself before the Lord with words to encourage and edify them (Heb. 10.24). Get your soul ready to join other believers in worship, and give yourself entirely to the Lord during that time.

When you come home, practice a short fast – you might skip that Sunday afternoon snack, for example. Take up the discipline of reading from the classics of Christian literature, so that you enter into the life, vision, and walk of those who have gone before us in the faith. Schedule a time of solitude on the Lord’s Day. Get some needed physical rest. Review the morning sermon, sing the morning hymns again, talk with your spouse or family about your week with the Lord, and plan the week ahead so as to make sure your time is committed to the Lord, His wisdom, and His work before you actually begin the week (Ps. 90.12, 16, 17).

Make the Lord’s Day a day of spiritual disciplines – a day of entering more fully, for more extended time, and to a greater depth than you can on any other day of the week into the presence, joy, and pleasure of the Lord. If you do, not only will you strengthen all your practice of spiritual disciplines, but you’ll know such joy and refreshing in the Lord, that you’ll wonder why you ever did anything other than this on His Day.

For reflection

1. How would you describe your view and practice of the Lord’s Day at this time?
2. How can we guard against becoming “legalistic” in our use of the Lord’s Day and of all spiritual disciplines?
3. In what ways might keeping the Lord’s Day more consistently help to strengthen your practice of all the spiritual disciplines?

Next steps – Transformation: For one month, try devoting the Lord’s Day, well, to the Lord. Seek Him throughout the day in rest and spiritual disciplines. See if you don’t grow closer to Him as a result.

Spiritual Disciplines

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. What do we mean by *spiritual* disciplines? Why are these the most important disciplines to master and practice faithfully?
2. What can you do to improve your practice of prayer? Would adding some time for solitude help? Why or why not?
3. Do you find your time in the Word of God to be a time of true “nourishment” in the things of the Lord? Can you give some examples of how you experience this?
4. Why is the Lord’s Day so important? How might you add more focus on the Lord to your activities on that day?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you working to implement that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Additional thoughts, comments, questions, or items for prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.