

## Spiritual Disciplines

*O God, I feel like Abraham must have felt when he started his journey to you, not knowing where he was going. I am uncomfortable not having control of my itinerary, not being able to choose the route. While my present state of brokenness and incompleteness is not always pleasant or comfortable, at least I am accustomed to it and know my way around in it. Help me to let you lead me out in the unknown; overcome my fear with your love, my hesitancy with your hope for my wholeness.*

### A. Disciples

1. “The word ‘disciple’ occurs 269 times in the New Testament, ‘Christian’ is found three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to the disciples in a situation where it is no longer possible to regard them as a sect of the Jews (Acts 11:26). The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for the disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup>
  - a. Disciplines are the practices of disciples, not spiritual punishment.
2. Training in Godliness
  - a. 1Timothy 4:7-8 “Train (*gumanze*) yourself unto godliness: for while bodily training (*gumnasia*) is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” RSV
    - 1) ...*gumnaze*, from which we get our term “gymnasium”.<sup>24</sup>
    - 2) “Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever.” *The Message*
  - b. Phil. 2:12-13 “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” NIV

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<sup>23</sup> Willard, D. p. 258

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 98

- 1) We have the paradox of “work out your salvation” and “it is God who works in you.”
3. “Am I a disciple, or only a Christian by current standards?”<sup>25</sup>

## B. The Purpose of the Disciplines

### 1. Forming Spiritual Habits

- a. “The question of forming habits on the basis of the grace of God is a very vital one. To ignore it is to fall into the snare of the Pharisees-the grace of God is praised, Jesus Christ is praised, the Redemption is praised, but the practical everyday life evades working it out. If we refuse to practice, it is not God’s grace that fails when a crisis comes, but our own nature. When the crisis comes, we ask God to help us, but He cannot if we have not made nature our ally. The practicing is ours, not God’s. God regenerates us and puts us in contact with all His divine resources, but He cannot make us walk according to His will.”<sup>26</sup>
- b. “Peter’s great revelation of Jesus being the Christ was genuine. But subsequent events proved that it alone did not transform his life. What he lived through did that, as was also the case even with our Lord, who “learned obedience by the things he suffered” (Heb 5:8-9).<sup>27</sup>
  - 1) “If you ask people who don’t believe in God why they don’t, the number one reason will be suffering. If you ask people who believe in God when they grew most spiritually, the number one answer will be suffering.”<sup>28</sup>
- c. “Spiritual disciplines are the act of releasing ourselves in a consistent manner to God, opening doors in a regular way to allow God’s transforming work in our lives.”<sup>29</sup>

### 2. Freedom

- a. “Your freedom gets limited by an internal reality that is a kind of brokenness or weakness or dividedness inside you. You want to stop drinking, but you can’t. You want to live with a happy, cheerful, optimistic attitude, but you don’t. You want to quit yelling at your kids, but you fail. You want to be the kind of person who manages

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<sup>25</sup> Willard, D. p. 265

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 118

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 111

<sup>28</sup> Ortberg, J. p. 179

<sup>29</sup> Mulholland, R. p. 38

anger really, really well, but you aren't. You'd like to think you have become unselfish, but you haven't. You are not free. The freedom you lack is an internal freedom, and this inner lack of freedom is much more dehumanizing, much more tragic than external constraints. This kind of freedom is internal, and it is precious. It is 'soul-freedom.'"<sup>30</sup>

- b. "The purpose of the Disciplines is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear."<sup>31</sup>

### C. The Practice of the Disciplines

#### 1. Living Like Jesus

- a. "Our mistake is to think that following Jesus consists of loving our enemies, going the 'second mile', turning the other cheek, suffering patiently and hopefully- while living the rest of our lives just as everyone else around us does."<sup>32</sup>
- b. "Asking ourselves, 'What would Jesus do?' when suddenly in the face of an important situation simply is not an adequate discipline or preparation to enable one to live as he lived."<sup>33</sup>
- c. "True Christlikeness, true companionship with Christ, comes at the point where it is hard not to respond as he would."<sup>34</sup>

2. "The disciplines promised to give our lives a form that would serve as a receptacle for the substance of the Christ-life in God's present Kingdom. To undertake the disciplines was to take our activities-our lives-seriously and to suppose that the following of Christ was at least as big a challenge as playing the violin or jogging...And so it was, more than anything else, the religious *seriousness* the spiritual disciplines injected into the whole of our lives that made them attractive."<sup>35</sup>

3. "God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 145

<sup>31</sup> Foster, R. p. 2

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 5

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 9

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 8

<sup>35</sup> Willard, D. p. 24

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 6

4. “A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plants, and then the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines— they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. 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.”<sup>37</sup>

#### D. The Motive

1. “A genuine spiritual discipline is a discipline of loving obedience offered to God with no strings attached. We put no conditions on it. We put no time limits on it. We add no expectation of how we want God to change us through it. We simply offer the discipline to God, and keep on offering it for as long as God wants us to keep on.”<sup>38</sup>
2. “The soul that rises from sin to devotion may be compared to the dawning of the day, which at its approach does not expel the darkness instantaneously-but only little by little.” Francis de Sales<sup>39</sup>

#### E. The Avoidance of Legalism

1. “Sometimes the church has tried to inflict its rules on broader society. Historian William Manchester records some of the ‘no’s’ of John Calvin’s Geneva: no ‘feasting, dancing, singing, pictures, statues, relics, church bells, organs, altar candles, “indecent or irreligious songs,” staging or attending theatrical plays, wearing rouge, jewelry, lace or “immodest” dress . . . naming children after anyone but figures in the Old Testament.”<sup>40</sup>
2. The spiritual life is more about what you do than what you don’t do.
  - a. “Walk in the Spirit and you won’t fulfill the lusts of the flesh.” Gal. 5:16

#### F. The Avoidance of Asceticism

1. Col. 3:20-23 “You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, <sup>21</sup> ‘Don’t handle!

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p. 7

<sup>38</sup> Mulholland, R. p. 131

<sup>39</sup> Willard, D. p. 70

<sup>40</sup> Ortberg, J. p. 142

Don't taste! Don't touch!?'<sup>22</sup> Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them.<sup>23</sup> These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires." NLT

2. "No one who has looked squarely upon the life of Jesus and the apostles can imagine them engaging in the strange behavior of a Macarius of Alexandria, or a Serapion, or a Pachomius: eating no cooked food for seven years, exposing the naked body to poisonous flies while sleeping in a marsh for six months, not lying down to sleep for forty or fifty years, not speaking a word for many years, proudly keeping a record of the years since one has seen a woman, carrying heavy weights everywhere one went, or living in iron bracelets and chains, explicitly vying with one another for the championship of austerities...Simeon Stylites (AD 390-459) for instance, built a column six feet high in the Syrian desert and lived on it for some time. But he soon grew ashamed of its small height and found one sixty feet high, three feet across, with a railing to prevent him from falling off in his sleep...On this perch Simon lived uninterruptedly for thirty years, exposed to rain and sun and cold. A ladder enabled disciples to take him food and remove his waste. He bound himself to the pillar by a rope; the rope became embedded in his flesh, which putrefied around it, and stank, and teemed with worms. Simon picked up the worms that fell from his sores and replaced them there, saying to them, 'Eat what God has given you.'"<sup>41</sup>
  - a. "Like being in the presence of a person obsessed with diet or bodybuilding, the point no longer seems to be health or strength, but self-admiration, self-righteousness, and self-obsession."<sup>42</sup>

## G. The Balance

1. "Somewhere between the extremes of avoidance of discipline and the imprisonment of discipline is the holistic practice of balanced spiritual disciplines which become a means of God's grace to shape us in the image of Christ for others. Paul seems to intimate this in his seemingly contradictory "Work out your own salvation...for God is at work in you" (Phil. 2:12-13)...If we destroy the paradox by opting for working out our own salvation, the disciplines by which we seek to do this work will become our prisons. If we destroy the paradox by opting

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<sup>41</sup> Willard, D. p. 142

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 143

for God to do everything, the absence of disciplines becomes a barrier that precludes God's opportunity to effect any consistent transformation in our lives. Holistic spiritual disciplines are acts of loving obedience that we offer to God steadily and consistently, to be used for whatever work God purposes to do in and through our lives."<sup>43</sup>

#### H. Where Do I Start?

1. "The test of a sustaining spiritual practice is: Does it fill you with grace for life? What are your sustaining practices? Do you want to explore some new ones?"<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Mulholland, R. p. 103

<sup>44</sup> Ortberg, J. p. 128