
HOW WE GROW: THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES PRIVATE

I. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Included in the incredible blessing of our salvation is the fact that we are adopted as God's children and given the privilege of intimate fellowship or communion with Him. This means not just an intellectual knowledge of God but a personal relationship with Him. Christianity is not primarily a religion of rules or philosophy but of relationship.

John 17:3 "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Ephesians 3:18-19 "may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

Psalms 34:8 "Taste and see that the LORD is good."

A. He Is A Personal God

The Bible reveals God as one who is alive and personal--He is the living God. He knows, feels, wills, and acts. Therefore, He can be known in an intimate way by His people.

Daniel 6:26b-27 "For He is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. ²⁷ He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions."

Psalms 23:1a "The LORD is my shepherd"

In fact, as a Triune Being, God has always been in relationship. The Father, Son, and Spirit have always enjoyed a personal relationship with one another and loved each other before creation even existed.

John 17:24 "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."

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B. He Desires A Relationship With His People

Furthermore, as a Person, God desires a relationship with His people. His covenant goal through the ages has been to create a people to whom He could say, "You are my people and I am your God."

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Leviticus 26:12 "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people."

Hebrews 8:10-11 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

Revelation 21:3 "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'"

This experience of intimate relationship with God is not reserved for a few super saints, but is available to all of God's people. All the words and descriptions of our relationship with God highlight this personal aspect -- father/child, husband/wife, shepherd/sheep, lord/servant. The culmination of our relationship on earth is our eternal relationship in heaven when we will see His face.

1 John 3:1-2 "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

Teaching Tapes Available for Further Study on the Relational Nature of God:

The Trinity: The Divine Community – August 1, 1999
God's Desire: A Personal Relationship – May 20, 2001

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II. SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES – HOW WE DRAW CLOSE TO GOD

We walk with and relate to God all the time. However, we will never develop the intimacy and maturity we want and need apart from more intense, focused times of communion with Him. God has taught us the means for this type of communion throughout Scripture. We have come to call these activities the spiritual disciplines or the means of grace. There are many such disciplines but we will only focus on the major ones - Bible study, fellowship, prayer, the Lord's Supper, and worship.

Acts 2:42 "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

John 4:23 "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in

bread and to prayer.”

John 4:23 “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”

Two points about the disciplines before we begin. First, the keys for all the disciplines are progress and consistency. How we begin is not as important as our continuation and growth in the practice of the disciplines. Second, the disciplines don't earn us anything with God. They are a spiritual disciplines - not meritorious works.

A. The Word

1. The importance of the Word

The Bible is God's self-revelation to man. In it we find what He is like and how we can appropriate grace for change. It is therefore essential to our growth in knowledge and godliness.

It is inspired by God, error free, and finished. Everything we believe and practice must be judged by the written Word.

Matthew 4:4 “Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”.’”

Acts 20:32 “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

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As we approach the Scriptures we need to particularly keep three of its attributes in mind.

- a. Authority - The Scripture is the very Word of God to us and as such is the final rule of faith and practice. The authority of Scripture is the authority of God Himself, and therefore it must be obeyed.

Deuteronomy 5:1 “Moses summoned all Israel and said: ‘Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them.’”

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.”

- b. Sufficiency - Scripture contains all that is required for man's salvation and for all matters of faith and practice. No other source, such as tradition, is required in conjunction with Scripture. In fact, any tradition must have Scripture as its foundation. Scripture alone is the final authority for believers.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,

final authority for believers.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Acts 17:11 "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

- c. Clarity - Every essential article of faith and rule of practice is clearly revealed or deducible from Scripture so that the ordinary Christian reader may learn them. The theological term for this truth is perspicuity. Our ability to do this comes not from ourselves but from the Holy Spirit.

Psalms 19:7 "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple."

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Psalms 119:105 "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."

1 John 2:27 "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as His anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit-just as it has taught you, remain in him."

2. The Bible as a spiritual discipline

When we speak of the Bible as a spiritual discipline, we mean that as we personally interact with the Scriptures through hearing, reading, study, meditation, and memorization, God’s grace is given to us and draws us closer to Him.

3. Practical Tips

A recent survey found that only 18% of those professing to be born again read the Bible daily. Twenty-three percent said they never read the Bible at all. Obviously, the first and most practical thing we can do is to read and study it regularly. In addition:

- a. Have a plan. While some of the Bible may be more difficult to understand or less inspirational to us, it is nonetheless important in its entirety. There are a variety of good Bible reading plans that will help us to systematically read through the whole Bible on a regular basis.
- b. Research major themes that run through the entire Bible. Learn the background information, major themes and outline of each individual book. Such information will give you a context for understanding what is being said in an individual section or passage.

major themes and outline of each individual book. Such information will give you a context for understanding what is being said in an individual section or passage.

- c. Have pen and paper handy. Write down your thoughts, impressions, questions, etc. They will help you to remember what you have read.
- d. Focus on what it says about God. Ask yourself if what you have read tells you about His nature, actions, will, etc.
- e. Take it personally. Apply what you read to your own life. Ask what you need to do in response to what you have read.

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- f. Use Bible study aids. There are many excellent books available that will help you to understand the Bible and the topics that it covers.

B. Fellowship

1. The importance of fellowship

God does not intend for His people to be alone. In fact, one aspect of being made in God's image is that, like God, we are relational in our nature. We need relationships with other people. The biblical word for relationships between believers is fellowship.

In fellowship, the grace of God is given to us as we encourage each other to draw closer to God and to walk in obedience to His commands. When God observes us dwelling in unity with one another, He commands a blessing to be given to us. Also, fellowship strengthens us so that we will not be deceived and fall into sin, and, should we fall, those around us are able to help us get back on track.

Psalm 133:1-3 "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! ² It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. ³ It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore."

Hebrews 3:13 "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: ¹⁰ If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! ¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

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2. Fellowship as a spiritual discipline

When we speak of fellowship as a spiritual discipline we mean that as believers fellowship with one another, exhorting one another to refrain from sin and to pursue righteousness in attitude and deed, God will strengthen the individual believers and draw them closer to Himself.

3. Practical Tips

- a. Have a plan. Like most important things in life, fellowship does not just happen; we need to have a plan. A basic plan would include regular attendance at the Sunday Celebration, being part of a small group, and regularly spending time with other church members outside of planned meetings.
- b. Recognize the temptation to become too busy for fellowship and avoid this. Do not let your calendar control you – control your calendar!
- c. Make the most of your time together with other believers. Talk to each other about God, His kingdom, what is happening in our personal walks, how we can impact the culture, etc.

C. The Lord's Supper

1. The importance of the Lord's Supper

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper with His disciples, and told them that He would not drink of the fruit of the vine again until He drank it with them in the kingdom (Matthew 26:29). Following this command, the early church partook of the Lord's Supper often. It was referred to by many names, such as communion (1 Corinthians 10:16 KJV), breaking of bread (Acts 2:42), the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20), and the Eucharist (which means thanksgiving – 1 Corinthians 10:16), each of which showed a different aspect of the meal. Down through the centuries, there have been disagreements as to the exact nature of the meal, but virtually all have agreed on one thing – that it is important for believers to partake in this covenant meal.

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1. The importance of prayer. Prayer affects us and the world around us.
 - a. It is an expression of trust and a means of growing in faith. Our flesh tends towards self-sufficiency and pride. It also tends toward fear and unbelief. Prayer is God's invitation to recognize our own weakness and to put our full trust in Him. As He answers our prayers, our trust in Him grows.
 - b. It is a means of bringing us into deeper fellowship with God. As we will see, prayer is conversation with God. His manifest presence builds intimacy.
 - c. It is a means of working His eternal will through the agency of man. God doesn't need us to pray so that His will can be done, but He has ordained prayer as a means for accomplishing that work. It is just one more way that God privileges us to co-labor with Him. Our prayers matter, they make a difference.

2. Prayer as a spiritual discipline

Communication is the heart of any relationship. Prayer is silent or spoken communication with God from our heart and mind. It is spiritual dialogue between a child of God and his heavenly Father or between a servant and his gracious Lord. It includes both talking to God and listening to God. When we pray we may thank God, confess our sins, express our surrender and submission, make petitions or requests for ourselves and others, and much more. The Scripture invites us to talk to God about all of these things. As we do this, God draws near to us, and we are strengthened in our walk with Him.

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Psalm 32:3-5 "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' -- and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

Philippians 4:6 "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

Prayer involves listening to God as we request His guidance. It also involves asking Him to search our hearts for sin or to help us understand something that is challenging or confusing to us. It is important that we wait upon the Lord in our times of prayer.

Psalm 143:8 "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul."

James 1:5 "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."

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3. Practical tips

James tells us we have not because we ask not - if we aren't receiving in prayer it might be because we have not been asking. Pray when you are alert and undistracted-- there is not a commanded time to pray although most people find the morning the best time. Some other practical tips that will help you to be effective in prayer are:

- a. Have a prayer list. It helps if we keep a list to remind us for whom and what we are praying. The Lord may change this as we pray, but it is good to start off with a basic list. This could include things such as family, friends, the church and its leaders, people with whom we are trying to share the Gospel, current events in the news, and those who rule over us.

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- b. Be led by the Holy Spirit. Allow Him to guide you in prayer. This does not mean that prayer lists are unhelpful ,but inviting the Holy Spirit to lead us helps us to pray with sincere faith. This can help us from having our prayers become lifeless routine.

Romans 8:26-27 "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

- c. Pray in Jesus name. This doesn't mean that we use this phrase with every prayer but rather that we realize that when we pray we are praying in the authority He has given us. We have power when we pray.

John 14:13-14 "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.

¹⁴ You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it."

- d. Ask with right motives. Our ultimate motive for prayer is that God would be glorified as His will is done. We always need to check our hearts to be sure we aren't praying with ungodly or selfish motives. Please note, however, that this does not preclude us from asking for things for ourselves.

James 4:3 "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

- d. Discern God's will. This is related to all of the above. God is not going to do anything contrary to His purpose and plans just because we ask. Conversely, we should not want anything that is not God's will for us.

1 John 5:14-15 "This is the confidence we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He does not hear us, we do not need to ask, for He who hears us, He will do it."

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1 John 5:14-15 "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us -- whatever we ask -- we know that we have what we asked of him."

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- e. Known and unconfessed sin will hinder our prayers. God may withhold His blessing and fellowship if we harbor sin or unforgiveness.

Psalm 66:18 "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."

Mark 11:25-26 "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

- f. Persevere. Prayer doesn't always yield instant results. Don't give up praying about the things the Holy Spirit has placed in your heart.

Luke 11:9-10 "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

Luke 18:1 "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."

- g. Pray with expectant faith. We need to trust that God is going to answer our prayers according to His gracious promises. Otherwise prayer is just another dead work.

James 1:6-8 "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."

Mark 11:24 "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

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2. Worship as a spiritual discipline

Worship is the occupation of the heart, not with its needs or even with God's blessings, but with God Himself. We worship because God is altogether worthy of it. Included in the definition of worship are acts of thanksgiving and praise. Thanksgiving is expressing gratitude for what God has done for us, the church, and/or the world. Praise is an expression of approval or commendation - telling God how great He is and expressing amazement at His excellence.

Revelation 4:11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

1 Peter 2:9 "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

As we offer God our worship, He draws near to us and fills us anew with His Presence. Like the Temple of old, we are filled with God's Spirit as we minister to Him in worship.

2 Chronicles 5:13-14 "The trumpeters and singers joined in unison, as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang: 'He is good; his love endures forever.' Then the temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud,¹⁴ and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God."

3. Practical tips

Many people are used to worshipping only in the context of a corporate gathering. However, private worship is to be an important part of a Christian's devotional life. This is a time to thank, praise, and adore God. This can often bring wonderful experiences of God's power as we lift our hearts and voices to praise Him, who alone is worthy of our praise. We can do this with or without music although many people find it helpful to worship along with musical tapes. No matter how we do it our worship should be:

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- a. Worship in Spirit. Worship is not a matter of place, form, and ritual. It is an attitude of the soul. To worship in Spirit means to worship with the help of the Spirit, and from our spirit.

John 4:23-24 "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.²⁴ God is Spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Isaiah 29:13 "The Lord says: 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.'"

Matthew 15:9 "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

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- b. Worship in truth. To worship in truth means to worship God as He really is. The essence of idolatry is to worship God as we want Him to be and not as He has revealed Himself to be. Discovering the truth about God will also lead the believing heart to worship.

John 4:24 his worshipers must worship . . . in truth.

- c. Worship that is wholehearted. Worship is a participatory event not a spectator sport. It involves the whole man. The Bible commands and gives many examples of ways that we can express our worship to God. Among them are singing, playing musical instruments, shouting, clapping, lifting our hands, kneeling, laying prostrate, and dancing. Remember, however, that it is not the outward activity that matters most but the heart that motivates those activities.

Psalm 103:1 "Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name."

Mark 12:30 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

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III. THE SUNDAY CELEBRATION

Our Sunday morning corporate meetings are an essential time for us as a church to move forward in God's purposes and plans for us. The meetings provide a context where we can worship God and be built together in our corporate mission. Each Sunday meeting has three primary goals:

- A. To minister to God. God loves it when His saints gather together to worship Him. Our times of worship are times to minister to God and serve Him as we corporately express thanks, praise, and adoration.

- B. To receive from God. God speaks to us and ministers to us in a variety of ways at the corporate meetings.

- 1. Worship:

Corporate worship is the ultimate privilege for Christians. It is a small taste of the privilege that we will share in eternity. It is a context where the Spirit of God delights to illuminate, convict, encourage, and bless believers.

- 2. Preaching:

The clear preaching of God's word is one of the great priorities and privileges of the church. Paul commanded Timothy to devote himself to this work (I Timothy 4:13).

- C. To minister to one another. God often gives us the privilege of praying for others or ministering to

- C. To minister to one another. God often gives us the privilege of praying for others or ministering to others through words of encouragement, prophesy, greeting, word of knowledge, sharing of Scripture, etc.

Teaching Tapes Available for Further Study on the Spiritual Disciplines:

We have two complete tape series available for further study on the spiritual disciplines. These series are entitled:

The Spiritual Disciplines (6 tapes)

Practicing the Presence of God: The Spiritual Disciplines (15 tapes)

If you are interested in either of these series, they may be checked out from the church library.

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