

“Just a Closer Walk with Thee”

Spiritual Disciplines for Devotional Vitality

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Objectives

This lesson series has four main purposes:

- To teach the participants basic truths concerning fellowship with God;
- To acquaint the participants with nine spiritual disciplines;
- To involve the participants in the practice of several spiritual disciplines;
- To motivate the participants to seek a closer relationship with God.

The Most Important Thing to Remember

The most important thing to remember about your relationship with God is that it is just that—a personal relationship with God. Your relationship won't grow if you approach it mechanically. God is a Person to be known, loved, and worshiped.

Introduction

James 4:7-10 gives us a snapshot of how our relationship with God should develop. This text reads as follows:

- 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.
- 8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse [your] hands, [ye] sinners; and purify [your] hearts, [ye] double minded.
- 9 Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and [your] joy to heaviness.
- 10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

This passage commands us to draw close to God (v 8). It also mentions some specific actions and emotions that will characterize us when we are in intimate fellowship with him. These are submission (v 7), spiritual warfare (v 7), confession of sin (v 8), sorrow (v 9), and humility (v 10). The most important thing we can glean from this text is the fact that God has commanded us to draw near him. He expects the intimacy of our relationship to grow. But just how can we accomplish this lofty goal of knowing and loving God more?

Fortunately, God has designed certain activities—we'll refer to them as disciplines—that can help us to draw closer to him. Two disciplines that come to mind readily are prayer and Bible reading. But these are just the beginning. This lesson series will actually survey nine different disciplines, and there are arguably others that won't be covered here. The important thing to note about the disciplines is that they facilitate a relationship but they can't substitute for it. In other words, you could spend hours going through the motions of practicing spiritual disciplines, but unless your heart is in them, you won't be any closer to God than when you started.

The Disciplines Are Means of Sowing to the Spirit

"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. They are God's means of grace" (Foster 7).

The Discipline of Prayer

"I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, [and] giving of thanks, be made for all men" (1 Tim 2.1).

Insights

- We develop friendships by spending time with others, especially in conversation. This is no less true of our relationship with God than of our relationships with fellow men and women.
- Prayer is not primarily a matter of asking and receiving. God has a much higher purpose for prayer. He intends for it to be our primary means of communication with him. More specifically, prayer allows us to fellowship with God as a friend.
- Prayer should include a variety of elements, including *adoration, confession of sin, praise, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession*.
- Prayer is in many ways foundational to the other disciplines. No relationship can grow apart from communication.

Exercise

Ask the participants to pray around an attribute of God or a spiritual truth for a certain number of minutes. Suggested themes are listed below:

- God's role as refuge (Ps 46.1)
- God's provision for our needs (Phlp 4.19)

- God's deep love for man, as shown in Christ (Jn 3.16)

Further Reading

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Bounds, E. M. Numerous writings on the subject of prayer.

Eastman, Dick. *The Hour That Changes the World: A Practical Plan for Personal Prayer*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978.

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Hartman, Lance. "Does Prayer Change God's Mind?" *Discipleship Journal* Mar. 1994: 36-41.

Hughes, R. Kent. "Discipline of Prayer." *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991. 93-104.

Lewis, C. S. "If God Is Sovereign, Why Should We Pray?" *Discipleship Journal* Jan. 1994: 82.

The Discipline of Public Worship

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col 3.16).

Insights

- There is definitely discipline involved in channeling public worship toward the goal of spiritual intimacy. Public worship can easily become routine, a mere exercise in tradition. It is easy to go through the external motions of praise and worship without engaging in their internal reality. The possibility of a genuine encounter with God in public worship depends largely on the mental and spiritual preparation of each individual Christian. However, it is also dependent on the preparation of those who lead the congregation in worship.
- There are myriad obstacles to intimacy through public worship. Not the least of these are the inhibition and self-consciousness that we often feel in the presence of a crowd. Also, being around a large group of people offers numerous opportunities for distraction. Further, cultural differences in the church tend to complicate the free conduct of corporate worship.

Exercise

Ask the audience to participate in the corporate reading of a Christian text (poem, hymn, creed, etc.). Reading should be clear, crisp, properly paced, and paused for effect.

Further Reading

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- Foster, Richard J. "The Discipline of Worship." *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Rev. ed. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988. 158-174.
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- Keller, Tim. "What It Takes to Worship Well." *Leadership* 15.2 (1994): 16-23.
- Murren, Doug. "Four Essential Secrets: Principles for Becoming a Successful Worship Leader, Today and For Years to Come." *Worship Leader* July 1996: 14+.
- Sanders, J. Oswald. "Intimacy Is Nourished by Worship." *Enjoying Intimacy with God*. Chicago: Moody, 1980. 21-27.

The Discipline of Meditation

"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success." (Josh 1.8).

"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer." (Ps 19.14).

Insights

- Meditation is commanded in Scripture (Josh 1.8). The Psalms discuss meditation quite a bit, especially Psalm 119. This chapter, dealing entirely with the Word of God, teaches us that meditation is a matter of discipline and determination (vv 15, 148); that it should ideally be a constant activity (v 97); and that it can help us acquire spiritual understanding (v 99).

Meditation Internalizes Spiritual Truth

"Slowly and prayerfully turning over Scripture in this manner engages the eyes, the ears, and the mouth, and drills through the granite to the heart—maximizing internalization and devotion" (Hughes 84).

- Profitable meditation demands that our minds be familiar—even saturated—with the Word of God. Scriptures committed to memory are a tool that God can use to enrich our lives through the discipline of meditation.
- Meditation should include self-examination and self-assessment.

Meditation and Reading Are Mutually Dependent

“Reading without meditation will be useless; meditation without reading will be barren.”—Thomas Shepard II, 17th-century New England minister, to a son newly enrolled at Harvard College

- Meditation can aid in the development of moral convictions.
- It is profitable to record some of your meditations in a spiritual journal of sorts. Then, at an appropriate time, you can read your own writings for the purposes of encouragement and enjoyment.

Exercise

Challenge the participants to practice the discipline of meditation at least once during the coming week, then be prepared to report to the whole group the following session.

Further Reading

Foster, Richard J. “The Discipline of Meditation.” *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*.

Rev. ed. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988. 15-32.

Hughes, R. Kent. “Discipline of Devotion.” *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991. 81-91.

O’Connor, Elizabeth. *Search for Silence*. Waco: Word, 1972.

Hindrances to Spiritual Intimacy

- Busyness/routine
- Fear of the unknown
- Fear of the cost of spiritual intimacy
 - Lack of privacy
 - Emotional imbalance
- Illness/poor physical condition
 - Lack of biblical knowledge
 - Lack of church involvement
- Unconfessed sin/spiritual disarray

Flexibility Is the Key to Freshness

It is vital that we not practice the disciplines in the spirit of legalism, out of a sense of duty. Rather, discipline should be a loving, submissive response to the grace of God in our lives. “The Spiritual Disciplines are intended for our good. They are meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives. It is possible, however, to turn them into another set of soul-killing laws. Law-bound Disciplines breathe death” (Foster 9). Disciplines practiced as laws place a stranglehold on our spiritual growth.

The Discipline of Bible Study

“Thy testimonies also [are] my delight [and] my counselors” (Ps 119.24).

“Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with [my] whole heart” (Ps 119.34).

Insights

- Study is the discipline that we practice to make it possible for God to teach us spiritual truth. We are not really commanded to learn from the Scriptures; rather, God’s design is that he will teach us from them. Diligent, methodical study is the tool that God uses to teach us.
- There is a vital balance to be found in the discipline of Bible study. Some of us are inclined to wear this discipline out. Focusing on Bible study to the exclusion of other disciplines is a lot like reading an owner’s manual without ever using the equipment that the manual describes! Remember the admonition of Solomon: “And further, by these, my son, be admonished: *of making many books there [is] no end; and much study [is] a weariness of the flesh*” (Eccl 12.12).
- On the other hand, some Christians rarely scratch beneath the surface of God’s Word. This is just as serious a problem! The Bible commends people who dig into the content of the Scriptures (cf. Acts 17.11).
- There are many approaches to the study of the Bible, including, for example, word studies, book studies, character studies, and topical studies. All of these approaches should follow the three steps of the inductive method: observation, interpretation, and application.

Inductive Bible Study

The inductive method of Bible study, as taught by various authors (e.g., Finzel, Hendricks, Jensen), consists primarily of three stages: observation, interpretation, and application. If you practice this approach to Scripture, you are sure to gain valuable spiritual knowledge. Approaching the Bible methodically—and with the inductive method in particular—will help you to ground your Christian faith squarely in what the Bible teaches rather than what you may have heard from other Christians.

Exercise

Demonstrate the inductive method by showing how it applies to a well known Scripture passage (e.g., Ps 1).

Further Reading

Finzel, Hans, and Patricia H. Picardi. *Observe, Interpret, Apply*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994.

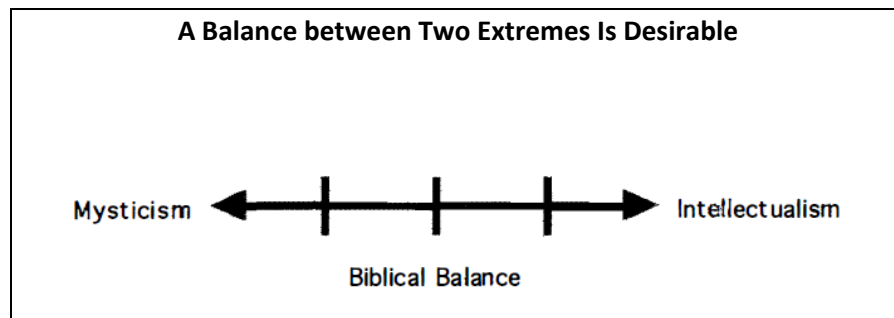
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LaHaye, Tim. *How to Study the Bible for Yourself*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1976.



The Discipline of Devotional Bible Reading

"My soul melteth for heaviness: strengthen thou me according unto thy word." (Ps 119.28).

Insights

- According to Psalm 119, we have many duties to God's Word, including loving it, delighting in it, trusting in it, longing for it, finding strength in it, and respecting it.
- Devotional Bible reading is to be distinguished from Bible study. Devotional reading has *inspiration* for its purpose, while study aims at the procurement of *knowledge*. Both are necessary to spiritual growth.
- Some books of the Bible readily accommodate devotional reading. The Psalms are essentially journals of the spiritual experiences (thoughts, feelings, beliefs, hopes, etc.) of believers much like you and me. It is not hard to gain inspiration from them. The Proverbs are filled with wisdom so relevant to our lives that we can hardly read them without being touched personally. The historical portions of the Scripture tell us about believers who lived long ago, offering us

insight concerning our daily lives. The gospels place us in a face-to-face encounter with the person of Jesus Christ—certainly a refreshing experience.

- Several strategies can help to make your devotional reading more lively. For example, you can read a passage aloud slowly to occupy your full attention. Or, you can pray through a passage, applying the truths to yourself silently or out loud.

Exercise

Ask the audience to read a passage conducive to devotional reading (e.g., Psalm 23) in a prescribed number of minutes. Participants should read for the purpose of inspiration, gaining encouragement through the application of spiritual truth to their life situation.

Further Reading

There is little identifiable literature specifically on the devotional reading of the Bible. Most writings about Bible reading focus primarily on the study of the Scriptures. While there is much to be gained from systematic approaches to the Word, they should be carried out with a view to furthering our relationship with God.

The Discipline of Fasting

“But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast . . . and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly:” (Mt 6.17-18).

Insights

- Fasting is a neglected spiritual discipline. It is discussed dozens of times in the Bible. In addition, it has been widely practiced at various times in church history, most notably during times of revival such as the post-apostolic period, the Reformation, and the 19th century.
- It is important to discuss what fasting is not. Biblical fasting is not a matter of asceticism, that is, denying ourselves something that is supposedly evil so as to earn God’s favor. Neither do we fast because we think we can force God to do something through the seriousness of our commitment.
- What is the purpose of fasting, then? Fasting is really a means of freeing ourselves to get in touch with God. Scripture and history make clear that fasting should always be accompanied by prayer. While it is probably true that prayer—not fasting—brings about spiritual results, it is also likely that fasting enables our prayer lives to reach new heights of devotion and power. According to the Bible, fasting is a means of seeking the blessings of God in virtually every area of life.
- It is imperative to remember that while fasting is a spiritual discipline, it is also a physical act. As such it should be carried out with respect for truth in the nutritional realm. As the Creator and Sustainer of our bodies, God gains no glory from a “discipline” that succeeds in diminishing our physical stamina. Therefore, some people should not fast, and those who do should take care not to abuse the practice.

Exercise

Challenge the participants to engage in a one-day fast in the next week, then be prepared to report to the whole group the following session.

Further Reading

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Linder, Robert D. "Fast, Fasting." *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1984.

Towns, Elmer L. *Fasting for Spiritual Breakthrough*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996.

Wallis, Arthur. *God's Chosen Fast*. Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968.

Dryness Is Not Abnormal or Necessarily Sinful

It is not necessarily sinful to go through periods of dullness and apparent loneliness in your relationship with God. These symptoms are often part of a natural relational cycle: They may simply indicate that you need to practice some unfamiliar disciplines or practice familiar disciplines in different ways. Of course, you should not overlook the possibility that your spiritual dryness may have been caused by, or may have been the cause of, some sin. In any case, the perception of spiritual dullness is an incentive to take the privilege and responsibility of intimacy with God more seriously.

The Discipline of Private Worship

"God [is] a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship [him] in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4.24).

Insights

- Private worship is used here to refer to a variety of activities that you can engage in as an individual with the purpose of worshiping God. The focus here is on activities other than prayer, meditation, Bible study, and devotional Bible reading, though these may be considered a part of private worship.
- While it is obviously possible to worship God without devotional aids, they can certainly be helpful. Examples of useful devotional aids include devotional writings, meditations, Christian poetry, Christian biographies, and Christian music. Of course, the mere use of these devices does not constitute true worship, for worship is above all focusing on the attributes of God.
- Devotional aids can help us to avoid falling into the rut of predictability by reviving us with new perspectives and insights. As such they can be a breath of fresh air.
- The devotional writings of A. W. Tozer, Philip Keller, C. S. Lewis, Andrew Murray, and Oswald Chambers—to name a few authors—have been treasured by Christians for decades.

- Christian biographies reveal men and women of God to have been ordinary people with uncommon devotion and Christian character. Our devotional lives can certainly profit from reading accounts of their lives.

Exercise

Ask for feedback from the participants concerning some of the devotional aids that they have used.

Further Reading

Classic Sermons on Worship. Compiled by Warren W. Wiersbe. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988.

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Peterson, David. *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

Sanders, J. Oswald. *Enjoying Intimacy with God*. Chicago: Moody, 1980.

The Discipline of Esthetic Appreciation

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Ps 19.1).

Insights

- The discipline of esthetic appreciation is probably one of the least practiced of the disciplines. Many Christians may not even be aware that the appreciation of beauty can strengthen their relationship with God.
- The Scriptures give numerous indications of the fact that beauty—both natural and artistic—is important to God (Schaeffer "Art & the Bible" 6-31). God himself is beautiful, and proper worship must take this into account (e.g., 1 Chr 16.29; 2 Chr 20.21; Ps 27.4; 29.2; 90.17; 96.6, 9). The Bible is a work of literary art. God's design for the tabernacle was one of breathtaking beauty. The Jerusalem Temple was spectacular in esthetic quality.
- Throughout church history, numerous forms of art have been put to the service of Christian truth. However, we should acknowledge that even "secular" art can reflect true beauty, and as such can enhance our relationship with God.

Creativity Is One Aspect of Spiritual Living

"For a Christian, redeemed by the work of Christ and living within the norms of Scripture and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the Lordship of Christ should include an interest in the arts" (Schaeffer "Art & the Bible" 10). "Is the creative part of our life committed to Christ? Christ is the Lord of our whole life and the Christian life should produce not only truth—flaming truth—but also beauty" (31).

- Esthetic appreciation can help us to be more spiritually sensitive. However, balance is the key: While God intends for us to see in his creation a reflection of his own attributes (Ps 19.1-6; Rom 1.19-20), we must avoid the excess of worshiping nature (Rom 1.25). Not only can we appreciate the beauty found in nature, it seems that all forms of art (music, literature, architecture, painting, etc.) are expressions of creative power that reflect our creation in the image of our Creator.

Exercise

Project an image of a nature scene on the wall and play a peaceful instrumental piece. Ask the participants to meditate on and praise God for the beauty of his creation.

Further Reading

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Schaeffer, Francis A. *Art & the Bible: Two Essays*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973.

Schaeffer, Franky. *Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th Century Christians and the Arts*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1985.

The Discipline of Christian Fellowship

"Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do" (1 Thess 5.11).

Insights

- One form of Christian fellowship that can profit your spiritual life is a mentoring relationship. A mentoring relationship is established when a relatively experienced Christian assumes the responsibility of guiding and encouraging a less mature believer. This relationship often benefits the mentor as much as the protégé. The sincerity and enthusiasm of young believers can energize and challenge the spiritual life of experienced Christians.
- Sometimes Christians of similar spiritual maturity may develop a relationship of mutual accountability of encouragement in which neither party has a definite guiding role. Spiritual friendship should include discussion of difficulties and successes as well as sharing of prayer, praise, and encouragement.
- One of the most basic forms of Christian fellowship, church attendance, obviously promotes spiritual growth.

Exercise

Challenge the participants to seek out a fellow Christian with whom to share the progress of their devotional life over the course of a month.

Spiritual Disciplines Are for Every Christian

“We must not be led to believe that the Disciplines are only for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach, or only for contemplatives who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. Far from it. God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors” (Foster 1).

Further Reading

Biehl, Bobb. *Mentoring: Confidence in Finding a Mentor and Becoming One*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996.

Inrig, Gary. *Quality Friendship*. Chicago: Moody, 1981.

Logan, Robert E. “Mentoring: Another Way to Encourage.” *Strategies for Today’s Leader* July 1996: 7-9.

Further Reading

Discipleship Journal. *DJ* is a bimonthly magazine published by The Navigators. It is devoted specifically to issues of spiritual growth, including the devotional life.

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Moody. This magazine is published bimonthly by Moody Press. In it you will find useful articles addressing many practical issues related to your spiritual life.

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