

The Disciplines of the Christian Life

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The Disciplines: A Path to Growth

Loving God: Our Highest Goal

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What should be our highest goal in life?

Matthew 22

34 But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together.

35 Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying,

36 Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

37 Jesus said unto him, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*

38 This is the first and great commandment.

39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Mark 12

28 And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

29 And Jesus answered him, *The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:*

30 *And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.*

31 And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

32 And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he:

33 And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

34 And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question.

Luke 10

25 And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

26 He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?

27 And he answering said, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.*

28 And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.

What kind of love does God desire?

- A supreme love: We should love God above all else. Loving Him is our highest duty and privilege.
- A unique love: He alone is God. No one else is worthy of the love that He deserves. Our other affections should pale in comparison to our love for Him.
- A consuming love: Our love for God should possess our whole being. No part of our lives should be withheld.

How can we cultivate the kind of love that God desires?

- Meditating on His love for us (1 John 4:19)
- Reading His Word
- Praying
- Associating with others who love Him

What kinds of lifestyle changes might this kind of love require?

- Taking time to engage in spiritual disciplines
- Forsaking worldly pursuits (1 John 2:15-16)

For further reading

- Köstenberger, Andreas J. "Great Commandment." *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. Ed. A. Scott Moreau. Grand Rapids: Baker; Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2000.
- Man, Ron. "The Great Commandment & the Great Commission." *Viewpoint* [Reformation & Revival Ministries] Sep.-Oct. 2000: 6-7.
- Morris, Leon. "Love." *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

Growth: A New Testament Overview

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God desires growth--both spiritual and numerical.

1. God commands us to grow in grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).
2. One of Paul's highest aspirations for the Colossian church was that they grow in the knowledge of God, so walking worthy of the Lord (Col. 1:10).
3. We are commanded to take actions that result in growth (1 Pet. 2:2)

God is the ultimate Source of growth.

1. Growth is referred to specifically as originating in God and being mediated by Christ, the Head of the Body (Col. 2:19).
2. The growth of the Corinthian church is attributed to God rather than the ministers who labored there (1 Cor. 3:6-7). As a result, there is no room for pride or partisanship in ministry.

Growth occurs in the context of . . .

faithful leadership

1. The Corinthian church grew through the planting ministry of Paul and the watering efforts of Apollos (1 Cor. 3:6).
2. God has ordained that his Church, the Body of Christ, grow through the leadership of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11-16).

exposure to the Word of God

1. The expansion of the church in Acts was the result of the spreading (literally, growth) of God's Word (6:7; cf. 12:24; 19:20).
2. Spiritual growth is specifically linked to the consumption of the pure milk of the Word of God (1 Pet. 2:2).
3. Spiritual leaders are to provoke believers to growth. Growth occurs as believers are equipped to replace doctrinal instability with a focus on "speaking the truth [literally, truthing] in love" (Eph. 4:11-16).

communion with fellow Christians

1. Growth occurs as we fellowship with other Christians on the basis of truth (Eph. 4:15-16).
2. References to growth in the New Testament uniformly presume the context of a local body of believers that pursues the will of God in unity (e.g., Acts 6:7; 19:20; Eph. 2:19-21; Col. 1:10; 2:18-19; 1 Pet. 2:2ff).

prayer

Paul prayed that the members of the church at Colosse would grow in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:9-10).

a deepening relationship with Christ

1. The key to spiritual growth is not legalistic observance of religious rituals, but connectedness to Christ (Col. 2:18-19).
2. The growth of the Church is likened to the building of a temple, with Christ serving as the chief cornerstone of the foundation (Eph. 2:19-22).
3. The growth of the church is expressed in terms of believers drawing closer to Christ (Eph. 4:15-16).
4. We are commanded to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

Humility: The Spirit of the Disciplines

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God has ordained that spiritual growth occur as we practice spiritual disciplines. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 refers to three such disciplines--acts of mercy, prayer, and fasting. This passage stresses that we should practice these disciplines (and, by extension, all disciplines) with humility. This is the case for at least two reasons:

We should practice the disciplines to enhance our relationship with God, not to gain the praise of our peers.

Though Christian fellowship encourages spiritual growth, and though it is appropriate to practice many of the disciplines corporately, we should never do so to gain the attention of others. Hypocrites give "before men, to be seen of them" (v. 1); they pray "that they may be seen of men" (v. 5); and they fast so "that they may appear unto men to fast" (v. 16). In so doing they exchange divine rewards for earthly ones.

We should note that it is not the public practice of the disciplines that is the problem. Rather, it is the intent to impress others--seeking the "glory of men" (v. 2)--that gets in the way of spiritual benefit. As a consequence, we should do right discreetly (vv. 3, 6, 17-18). If we do so, God will see to it that we are rewarded publicly and the glory will go to Him.

We should acknowledge that growth is a gift from God, not the product of our efforts.

The fact that we have practiced spiritual disciplines does not entitle us to take credit for spiritual growth. The disciplines prepare our hearts and minds for God to work in them. They reflect the extent to which we long for God's will to be done in our lives.

According to Matthew 6, we should focus on God as we practice the disciplines, trusting in Him to give the reward (*misthos*: reward--the fruit naturally resulting from toils and endeavors). We should seek to deepen our relationship with God and allow Him to determine the outcome in our lives. We should aim to fulfill the high calling of loving Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength, all the while recognizing that it is His prerogative to make us shine with His character.

The Discipline of Bible Assimilation

The Discipline of Bible Assimilation: Meditation

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The Duty of Meditation

The discipline of meditation is only twice commanded in the Bible. In both cases the command is given to a spiritual leader (Joshua [Josh. 1:8], Timothy [1 Tim. 4:15]). However, the duty is enjoined by positive example as well. Meditation need not be drudgery. In fact, it brings various benefits (see below). It should be motivated by love (Ps. 119:97).

The Subject of Meditation

Meditation should revolve around God:

- His Word (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2; 119:97, 99)
- His wisdom (Ps. 49:3)
- His person (Ps. 63:6; 104:34)
- His works (Ps. 77:12; 143:5)
- His service (1 Tim. 4:15).

The Benefits of Meditation

Meditation can profit the spiritual life in various ways:

- It facilitates obedience to God's Law, thereby contributing to spiritual success (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2).
- It enables the believer to acquire wisdom and understanding (Ps. 49:3; 119:99).
- It produces joy (Ps. 104:34).
- It is one of the keys to successful spiritual leadership (1 Tim. 4:15; cf. Josh. 1:8).

The Practice of Meditation

Biblical meditation is not strictly a matter of thinking, though the mind is obviously involved (Ps. 143:5). Rather, it is frequently related to the mouth (Josh. 1:8), speech (Ps. 19:14; 49:3), and prayer (Ps. 5:1). Meditation is subject to God's approval, thus it is fitting that we pray that it would be pleasing to Him (Ps. 19:14; cf. 5:1).

Meditation may occur more naturally under particular circumstances. For example, certain times and places may seem to facilitate the practice. Times mentioned in Scripture include the evening (Gen. 24:63), nighttime (Ps. 63:6), and all day (Ps. 119:97). Places suggested in the Bible include fields (Gen. 24:63) and one's bed (Ps. 63:6).

The Discipline of Bible Assimilation: Topical Study

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Make a list of verses or passages that discuss the topic you want to study.

1. You can use any of several methods to create your list.
 - a. Consult a reference work that analyzes the Bible topically.

Print tools
Baker Topical Guide to the Bible. Ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001. 864 pp. \$29.99. ISBN: 080102255X.

On-line tools
Nave's Topical Bible <<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Concordances/NavesTopicalBible/>>
Torrey's New Topical Textbook
<<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Concordances/TorreysTopicalTextbook/>>
 - b. Consult a Bible concordance. Look for occurrences of one or more terms that relate to your topic. Be careful to look for varying forms of given word.

Print tools
Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. By James Strong. Available in various editions at various prices. Extends the concordance function found in the back of many Bibles to every word in the Bible.

On-line tools
Crosswalk.com^(TM) < <http://bible.crosswalk.com/> >
The Bible Gateway^(TM) <<http://www.biblegateway.com/>>
 - c. Skim through a book looking for every reference to your topic, regardless of the terms used.
2. You can limit your study to the Old or New Testament, to a particular type of biblical literature (e.g., poetry, gospels, letters), to books by a specific author (e.g., John, Paul), or a single book.

Examples of topical studies
The Christian life as athletic competition (New Testament)
The duties of parents (Proverbs)
Thanksgiving (New Testament)
Meditation as a spiritual discipline (entire Bible)
Fasting (entire Bible)
The believer's duty to the Word of God (Ps. 119)

Record what each verse or passage has to say about the topic.

Study each verse or passage in its context. Ask how it contributes to your understanding of the topic. Ask who, what, when, where, why, and how. While some verses or passages may yield very little, others will prove to be quite helpful.

Organize your findings according to an appropriate pattern.

Group together ideas that are similar or identical. Separate those that are distinct. Look for a pattern that allows you to arrange your findings in a logical way.

Devotional Bible Reading

[This lesson has yet to be developed.]