

Spiritual Life and the Kingdom of God

Tom Davis explores how recovering the practice of classic spiritual disciplines can enhance believers' relationship with God and our impact on the world around us.

There is a loss of spiritual knowledge of the truth of Christianity and how we live in light of that truth. This loss of spiritual knowledge is the result of shifts in cultural attitudes toward faith, happiness, ethics, freedom, and tolerance. The answer to the loss of spiritual knowledge is a return to the practice of spiritual disciplines. After examining the benefits of suffering and the disciplines of study, prayer, and fasting, I will show how these disciplines restore spiritual knowledge in society.

Loss of Spirituality

Today's society is in spiritual turmoil. Most people are not knowledgeable about spiritual things. The National Study of Youth and Religion indicates that the Church has become less influential in the lives of people. The effects of modernity and post modernity have created a popular culture that is suspicious of any claim to objective religious knowledge and any idea of an authoritative source of information concerning spiritual issues. Christian Smith writes, "In this culture religion lost, at least in theory, any remaining principled, authoritative standing to make truth claims that it has enjoyed in previous eras of history."[\[1\]](#)

Basically, this means that most people have adopted a mindset that says, "You can't know anything for sure about religion. And if you think you do, you're an arrogant bigot."

Five Steps to Spiritual Death

In his book, *Kingdom Triangle*, Biola professor and theologian J.P. Moreland claims that there are five cultural shifts that have contributed to today's state of spirituality in the culture. The first shift separates knowledge from faith.^{2} All spiritual beliefs are considered valid because they are not real knowledge. Many people think that all religions lead to the same God. They say that we should not criticize other religions because they call God by a different name or hold different theological beliefs. These things are a matter of faith, not knowledge. This kind of attitude relegates all things spiritual to the subjective arena of faith. The things of the spirit are relegated to the "upper story" of faith. Real knowledge only exists in the "lower story" of the academic disciplines.^{3} The result of this view of faith is that spirituality becomes something that is neither true nor false. Separating faith and knowledge ultimately leads to a denial of spiritual truth.

The second shift is the definition of happiness.^{4} In the Bible happiness is portrayed as part of a right relationship with God. To live the good life meant that a person had intellectual and moral virtue. God created people to live well according to what they were created to be. J.P. Moreland explains, "So understood, happiness involves suffering, endurance, and patience because these are important means to becoming a good person."^{5} The pressure of modernism and postmodernism has changed this view. Happiness is now associated with pleasure. Television commercials promise to deliver happiness through the next fad diet that will increase your sex appeal. Male enhancement drugs promise to give men happiness by giving them back their youth and an increased sex drive. Happiness can be achieved by buying the newest car, toy, accessory, or a trip to an exotic place or amusement park. The good life now means having fun and collecting things so that you can feel good.

The third shift that Moreland notes is a shift from duty and virtue in morality to a minimalist view of ethics.[{6}](#) Previously, moral knowledge was viewed as an objective set of propositions about right or wrong, or good and evil. It used to be that everyone would agree it was always wrong to torture and kill small children. Now moral knowledge is viewed as subjective feelings or opinions. This change can be seen if we look at the language we use when making moral statements. People used to say things like, "I know," or "I think that this is the right thing to do." Now we say, "I felt that it was right for me to do this."

Duty to one's society used to be viewed as an essential part of a moral life. People were expected to help their neighbor. If an old lady was trying to cross the street, young men were expected to help her. Now, as long as they do not push the old lady into traffic, or rob her, the young men are considered to be moral. This change is the result of culture. People are no longer expected to contribute to their society. As long as people are not hurting anyone else, they are now considered to be moral. This view of morality changes a person's view of life. Life is now about having the most fun without harming anyone. Life used to be about living for something bigger than the individual. People used to live for God and country. Now people live for themselves and their own pleasure.

The fourth shift is in how people view freedom.[{7}](#) Freedom used to mean that people could live the way they ought to live. People were free to do what was right without government interference. Now freedom means the right of people to do what they want, when they want. Popular culture says that as long as you do not hurt anyone you can do what you want.

The last shift that Moreland notes is a shift in the meaning of tolerance.[{8}](#) Classic tolerance is when people will allow others to be, do, or believe differently than they do, even though one person thinks that the view of another person is wrong. People were allowed to critique the views of other

people, but respect for the other person was still maintained. Contemporary tolerance is the view that people are not allowed to critique another person's beliefs. People are no longer allowed to say that someone is wrong. This attitude ends all public discussion. Every idea must be tolerated, except ideas that claim that other ideas are wrong. Ironically, the new tolerance fails its own definition of tolerance because they do not tolerate intolerance.

Returning to Spiritual Health

The popular culture has raised five strongholds against the knowledge of God: separation of faith and knowledge, a self-centered view of happiness, a minimal view of ethics, a new view of freedom, and a new view of tolerance. How are Christians to respond to this? Paul writes, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Christians must recapture our spiritual disciplines.

Theology, the Intellect, and Spirituality

The first thing that needs to be addressed is that Christians need a renewed interest in theology. J. I. Packer, while discussing the influence of the Puritans in his life, writes, "All theology is also spirituality, in the sense that it has an influence, good or bad, positive or negative, on its recipient's relationship or lack of relationship to God."[\[9\]](#) Theology comes from two Greek words. *Theos* is the Greek word for God; *logos* is the Greek word for logic. Theology can be understood as the logic, or science of God.[\[10\]](#) Spirituality, in the Christian context, is a person's relationship with God. In order to claim to have a relationship with God a person has to have knowledge of who God is. It would be odd to have a man talk about having a relationship with a woman and then say he does not know her and has never met her. The concept of a

relationship presupposes that each party in the relationship has knowledge of the other party.

The Bible and Books

An essential step to gaining spiritual knowledge is a disciplined approach to reading the Bible. Billy Graham addresses the importance of studying the Bible: “Your spiritual life needs food. What kind of food? Spiritual food. Where do you find this spiritual food? In the Bible, the Word of God.”[\[11\]](#) Paul writes, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God gave the Bible to people so that people can learn about God. By studying the Bible a person will gain knowledge about God and strengthen that person’s relationship with God.

Christians should also read other books. The Bible contains essential information for salvation and knowing God. However, the Bible is not exhaustive in its knowledge. Christians can grow intellectually and spiritually by gaining knowledge about God’s creation. David Naugle, head of the philosophy department at Dallas Baptist University, sums up the impact of books on his life: “I have sought and still seek to be a person of the Book and of books, that I might know God and more and more about his world in the context of faith.”[\[12\]](#) The study of the disciplines of theology, philosophy, the humanities, and the sciences helps people develop a coherent worldview. A worldview gives people the ability to understand the world through the corrective lens of the knowledge of God.

The medieval priest Thomas à Kempis advises, “If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the saying of the ancients, for they

were not made without purpose.”[{13}](#) We grow intellectually and spiritually when we read the books of others. We gain insight to their wisdom. We should humbly read the books written by the ancient teachers. They left their wisdom in writing so that we can learn from them.

Suffering

Contemporary society thinks that suffering should be avoided at all costs. However, suffering can have a good outcome. Paul writes, “More than that, we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4). When we suffer, we can learn to endure. Our endurance produces character—that is, we mature and learn to trust God. God is the only hope that will never fail. Matthew Henry writes, “He who, being thus tried, comes forth as gold, will thereby be encouraged to hope.”[{14}](#) When soldiers train, they punish their body; they suffer. Their suffering in training makes them better soldiers in combat because their suffering has made them stronger and given them more endurance. As a Navy veteran, I know this is true personally.

Prayer

Prayer is the spiritual discipline of talking to God. God speaks to us in the Bible like the way people communicate through writing letters; the communication is one way. Praying is more like a discussion between two people. In prayer we get to talk with God.

Paul told the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The best way to start a disciplined prayer life is to pray every day. This is easier if we begin each day with prayer. J. P. Moreland writes, “When you get up in the morning, start off with praise and thanksgiving to God for the things you honestly appreciate about him and his dealings with you. Then lift your burdens to him until you have a sense of rest before the Lord.”[{15}](#) By beginning each

day with prayer we turn our minds and our hearts toward God and His will. Each day is a new opportunity to minister to someone in need. Our prayers will give us spiritual discernment so that we can recognize those in need. Our minds will also be turned towards God and the things of heaven, and we can continue to keep these things in our minds throughout the day.

John Calvin used four rules for prayer. First, we must “have our heart and mind framed as becomes those who are entering into converse with God.”[\[16\]](#) We must prepare ourselves to pray. Minds that are distracted do not make for good conversation. This is no ordinary conversation. People prepare themselves for meeting with important people. We should be prepared to open our hearts and minds to God when we pray. We should be aware that we are praying to our God, but that this God loves us and wants to bring our concerns to Him. Paul writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). We should not be anxious when praying because we know that God cares for us and can do all things. We should pray about all our concerns. Our prayers should be full of worship, thanking God for all that He has done.

One way to prepare to pray is to remember what David Naugle calls the “Three P’s.” These are “(1) my purpose, or what I would live my life for, (2) my profession, or what I would spend my life doing, and (3) my partner, or who I would spend my life with.”[\[17\]](#) David Naugle’s “Three P’s” cover the most important decisions we will make in our lives. Our purpose fills our life with purpose. We should pray for purpose so that God will align what we want our purpose in life to be with what He wants our purpose in life to be. Our profession is where we fulfill our purpose. A car mechanic can glorify God in fulfilling his purpose to be God’s representative in the auto shop. Our spouse is our ministry partner. Husbands

and wives are not separated from each other. They share each other's joys and burdens. Praying for these things will focus our minds on what is important and orient our hearts toward living a life pleasing to God.

John Calvin's second rule is "That in asking we must always truly feel our wants, and seriously considering that we need all the things which we ask, accompany the prayer with a sincere, no, ardent desire of obtaining them."[\[18\]](#) Our requests should be things that we truly want or need. When we pray for the wants and needs of others, we should try to feel their desire for the request so that we can better minister to them through prayer. James tells us, "Is anyone suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (James 5:13). We should be honest and sincere in our requests and in our thanksgiving. A sincere prayer would be praying for a loved one to get well when they are sick. An insincere prayer might look like praying for a job promotion when you know that you have not been putting your best effort into the job.

Third, "discard all self-confidence, humbly giving God the whole glory."[\[19\]](#) When we pray, we should realize who we are, and who God is. Jesus said, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others" (Matthew 6:5). The hypocrites' motivation to pray in the street corners was so that people would see them and think that these people were righteous. Jesus makes this point with more clarity in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I 9give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast,

saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:10-13)

The Pharisee came to God in prayer thinking that he was righteous and better than other men. He even pointed out his fasting and tithing as if God should be impressed with these things. The tax collector was humbled in the presence of God. He would not look up to heaven because he understood that he was guilty before God. The tax collector prayed sincerely for mercy. Asking God for mercy gives God glory and humbles the person.

John Calvin's fourth rule of prayer is, "We should be animated to pray with the sure hope of succeeding."[{20}](#) God is all powerful, able to meet our every need. Jesus teaches this same principle, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8). By grace we have been made children of God. If we ask, God will give us what we need. When we humble ourselves before God, He will be merciful. God knows what we need and will give us what is good for us. Jesus said, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11).

Through our prayer life we should conform to the image of God revealed in Jesus. Andrew Murry taught:

And of all the traits of a life *like Christ* there is none higher and more glorious than conformity to Him in the work that now engages Him without ceasing in the Father's presence His all-prevailing intercession. The more we abide in Him, and grow unto his likeness, will His priestly life work in us mightily, and our life become what His is, a life that ever pleads and prevails for men.[{21}](#)

Our prayers should make us more Christlike. By praying, we

conform to God's will. Christ makes intercessions to the Father for us. We have the privilege of making intercessions to Christ for others.

Fasting

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life."[{22}](#) One way to exercise self-control is by abstinence (saying no to ourselves by not doing something we want). Fasting is one of the most difficult abstaining disciplines. Calvin defines fasting as "when we retrench somewhat from our accustomed mode of living, either for one day or a certain period, and prescribe to ourselves a stricter and severer restraint in the use of that ordinary food."[{23}](#) In short, fasting is abstaining from food for a short period of time.

Jesus taught:

When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting is to be done in secret. Again, Jesus points to the hypocrite, who wants to gain a reputation from his spiritual discipline. Jesus taught that people would be rewarded by not making a spectacle out of their spirituality.

What is the goal of fasting? Augustine taught, "While we live in the temporal order, we must fast and abstain from the enjoyment of what is temporal, for the sake of the eternity in which we desire to live."[{24}](#) Fasting reminds Christians that they do not depend on temporal things. God wants Christians to rely on Him to supply our needs. In a world where tight schedules are kept and frivolous distractions are available

everywhere, it can be easy to forget God. Fasting emphasizes the importance of a right relationship with the world by abstaining from the sustenance of food. John Calvin lists three goals for fasting: “We use it either to mortify and subdue the flesh, that it may not wanton, or to prepare the better for prayer and holy meditation; or to give evidence of humbling ourselves before God, when we would confess our guilt before him.”[\[25\]](#) Many times the flesh (the part of us that operates independently from God, either in active rebellion or passive indifference) will want to rebel against the spirit. Fasting deprives the flesh of sustenance and weakens it. The spirit can then rule the flesh. There are times when a Christian will need to place special focus on prayer and meditation. Fasting is one way to prepare the spirit for these activities.

Reversing the Shifts

In our contemporary culture faith is viewed as being completely separate from knowledge. This faulty view originates within Christianity with the ideas of some Christian philosophers and theologians. Soren Kierkegaard saw faith as “the highest passion in a human being.”[\[26\]](#) He applies this view to Jesus: “The proofs which Scripture presents for Christ’s divinity—His miracles, His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven—are therefore only for faith, that is, they are not ‘proofs,’ they have no intention of proving that all of this agrees perfectly with reason: on the contrary they would prove that it conflicts with reason and therefore is an object of faith.”[\[27\]](#) Kierkegaard believed that Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead. But he thought that Jesus was unknowable through knowledge and reason. One could only know Jesus through faith, and that meant that faith was opposed to knowledge and reason.

When writing to Theophilus, Luke says, “Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, to write an

orderly account for you" (Luke 1:2-3). John writes "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you" (1 John 1:3). The New Testament authors were writing about what they knew. These men walked, talked, and ate with Christ for three years. These men knew Christ face to face. Wayne Grudem addresses the harmony of faith and reason: "Rather, saving faith is consistent with knowledge and true understanding of facts." {28} Faith is not separate from knowledge, it is trust in knowledge.

Once the facts of the Bible are known, faith in those facts will affect how we experience happiness. Happiness defined as satisfaction of desires is an empty pointless feel-good emotion that lasts only for a moment. But the joy of God does not fade. Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Christians get joy through meditating on the things of God. Neal Anderson and Robert Saucy state that "Meditation on the Word should produce thoughts that reach our emotions." {29} A relationship with God produces happiness, a deep well-being of the soul, that lasts. The Psalmist writes, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight" (Psalm 19:14). What we study and put into our minds affects our relationship with God. When we have knowledge of God then we can meditate on God. It is impossible to meditate on an object that you have no knowledge of. Meditation on the things of God brings joy.

The cultural shift to a minimalist ethic, the idea of contemporary freedom, and the meaning of tolerance are the result of relativism's effect on the culture. Relativism is the idea that there are no objective moral values, and morality is either decided by each person or each community. There are many problems with this view. Relativism makes it impossible to criticize others. If moral truths are subjective then each person gets to decide for himself what is right or wrong. Relativism cannot place blame for wrong doings. What

people do is neither right nor wrong. Right or wrong is up to each individual. Why should we expect each person to reach the same conclusion? Relativists cannot promote tolerance because any definition of tolerance is an objective definition that, if true, applies to everyone.^{30} But if morality is objective (meaning that there are things that are right and wrong for all people at all times), then freedom cannot mean that people can do what they want when they want. People will have responsibilities. They will be free to do what is right, and they will be free to do what is wrong. Being free means that we make choices of our own volition.

Conclusion

The loss of spiritual knowledge has caused a fractured society and people who lead fractured lives. The cultural shifts are a result of people not taking spiritual knowledge seriously. Spiritual knowledge must have absolutes to provide meaning for life. Francis Schaeffer observes, “we need absolutes if our existence is to have meaning—my existence, your existence, man’s existence.”^{31} Absolutes are learned by practicing the spiritual disciplines. A careful study of the Bible will bring knowledge ABOUT God; heart-surrender to Him, coupled with learning to abide in Him, will bring knowledge OF God. Prayer will keep people in touch with God. Fasting will break down the resistance of the flesh to living a spiritual life. The five shifts of contemporary culture mean death. The spiritual disciplines bring people spiritual life. True spirituality can only be found in Christ. Only meditation and learning about Christ can return wonder to life. I pray that through spiritual disciplines we may retain the wonder of a life given to us by God.

Notes

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2. J.P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian*

- Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit's Power* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 91-94.
3. Ibid., 93.
 4. Ibid., 94-96.
 5. Ibid., 95.
 6. Ibid., 96-98.
 7. Ibid., 98-99.
 8. Ibid., 99-104.
 9. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 15.
 10. William G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* 3rd ed. (Philipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2003), 52.
 11. Billy Graham, *Peace With God* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1984), 205.
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 15. Moreland, 149.
 16. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 565.
 17. Naugle, 199.
 18. Calvin, 567.
 19. Ibid., 568.
 20. Ibid., 571.
 21. Smith, 101.
 22. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 169.
 23. Calvin, 821.
 24. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45.
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 26. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 146.

27. Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity and the Edifying Discourse Which "Accompanied" It* (New York: Random House 2004), 21.
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29. Neal T. Anderson, Robert L. Saucy, *The Common Made Holy* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1997), 204.
30. Francis J. Beckwith, Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Backer Books, 1998). 61-69.
31. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 205), 145.

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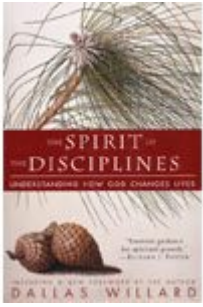
Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World

The spiritual disciplines help us cooperate with God in our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Don Closson discusses disciplines of abstinence and of engagement.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Spirituality and the Body



As a seminary student I was given the assignment to read a book on Christian spirituality called the *Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard.[\[1\]](#) I obediently read the book and either wrote a paper on it or took a test that covered the material (I can't recall which), but the book didn't have a major impact on my life at that time. Recently, over a decade later, I have gone back to the book and found it to be a jewel that I should have spent more time with. In the book, Willard speaks to one of the most important issues facing individual Christians and churches in our time: "How does one live the Spirit-filled life promised in the New Testament?" How does the believer experience the promise that Jesus made in Matthew 11:29-30: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"?



Willard argues that modernity has given us a culture that offers a flood of self-fulfillment programs in the form of political, scientific, and even psychological revolutions. All promise to promote personal peace and affluence, and yet we suffer from an "epidemic of depression, suicide, personal emptiness, and escapism through drugs and alcohol, cultic obsession, consumerism, and sex and violence"[\[2\]](#) Most Christians would agree that the Christian faith offers a model for human transformation that far exceeds the promises of modern scientific programs, but when it comes to delineating the methods of such a transformation there is often confusion or silence.

Christians frequently seek spiritual maturity in all the wrong

places. Some submit themselves to abusive churches that equate busyness and unquestioning subservience with Christ-likeness. Others look for spirituality through syncretism, borrowing the spiritualism of Eastern religions or Gnosticism and covering it with a Christian veneer.

According to Willard, Christians often hope to find Christ's power for living in ways that seem appropriate but miss the mark; for example, through a "sense of forgiveness and love for God" or through the acquisition of propositional truth. Some "seek it through special experiences or the infusion of the Spirit," or by way of "the presence of Christ in the inner life." Others argue that it is only through the "power of ritual and liturgy or the preaching of the Word," or "through the communion of the saints." All of these have value in the Christian life but do not "reliably produce large numbers of people who really are like Christ."[\[3\]](#)

We evangelicals have a natural tendency to avoid anything that hints of meritorious works, works that might somehow justify us before a holy God. As a result, we reduce faith to an entirely mental affair, cutting off the body from the process of living the Christian life.

In this article we will consider a New Testament theology of human transformation in order to better understand what it means to become a living sacrifice to God.

A Model for Transformation

Faith in Jesus Christ brings instant forgiveness along with the promise of eventual glorification and spending eternity with God. However, in between the believer experiences something called sanctification, the process of being set apart for good works. Something that is sanctified is holy, so it makes sense that the process of sanctification is to make us more like Christ.

Even though the Bible talks much of spiritual power and becoming like Christ, many believers find this process of sanctification to be a mystery. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a slow removal from our language of acceptable ways to talk about the spiritual realm. Being rooted in this age of science and materialism, the language of spiritual growth sounds alien and a bit threatening to our ears, but if we want to experience the life that Jesus promised, a life of spiritual strength, we need to understand how to appropriate God's Spirit into our lives.

According to Willard, "A 'spiritual life' consists in that range of activities in which people cooperatively interact with God—and with the spiritual order deriving from God's personality and action. And what is the result? A new overall quality of human existence with corresponding new powers."[\[4\]](#) To be spiritual is to be dominated by the Spirit of God. Willard adds that spirituality is another reality, not just a "commitment" or "life-style." It may result in personal and social change, but the ultimate goal is to become like Christ and to further His Kingdom, not just to be a better person or to make America a better place to live.

The Bible teaches that to become a spiritual person one must employ the *disciplines* of spirituality. "The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order."[\[5\]](#) Paul wrote in Romans 6:13 that the goal of being spiritual is to offer our body to God as instruments of righteousness in order to be of use for His Kingdom. Moving towards this state of usefulness to God and His Kingdom depends on the actions of individual believers.

Many of us have been taught that this action consists primarily in attending church or giving towards its programs. As important as these are, they fail to address the need for a radical inner change that must take place in our hearts to be of significant use to God. The teaching of Scripture and

specifically the life of Christ tells us that the deep changes that must occur in our lives will only be accomplished via the disciplines of abstinence such as fasting, solitude, silence, and chastity, and the disciplines of engagement such as study, worship, service, prayer, and confession. These disciplines, along with others, will result in being conformed to the person of Christ, the desire of everyone born of His Spirit.

Salvation and Life

When I first read in the Bible that Jesus offered a more abundant life to those who followed Him, I thought that He was primarily describing a life filled with more happiness and purpose. It does include these things, but I now believe that it includes much more. Salvation in Christ promises to radically change the nature of life itself. It is not just a promise that sometime in the far distant future we will experience a resurrected body and see a new heaven and new earth. Salvation in Christ promises a life characterized by the highest ideals of thought and actions as epitomized by the life of Christ Himself.

Although there is no program or classroom course that can guarantee to give us this new life in Christ, it can be argued that in order to live a life like Jesus we need to do the things that Jesus did. If Jesus had to “learn obedience through the things which he suffered” (Hebrew 5:8 KJV), are we to expect to act Christ-like without the benefit of engaging in the disciplines that Jesus did?

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard argues that there is a direct connection between practicing the spiritual disciplines and experiencing the salvation that is promised in Christ. Jesus prayed, fasted, and practiced solitude “not because He was sinful and in need of redemption, as we are, but because he had a body just as we do.”[\[6\]](#) The center of every human being’s existence is his or her body. We are

neither to be neo-Platonic nor Gnostic in our approach to the spiritual life. Both of these traditions play down the importance of the physical universe, arguing that it is either evil or simply inferior to the spiritual domain. But as Willard argues, “to withhold our bodies from religion is to exclude religion from our lives.”

Although our spiritual dimension may be invisible, it is not separate from our bodily existence. *Spirituality*, according to Willard, is “a relationship of our embodied selves to God that has the natural and irrepressible effect of making us alive to the Kingdom of God—here and now in the material world.”^{7} By separating our Christian life from our bodies we create an unnecessary sacred/secular gulf for Christians that often alienates us from the world and people around us.

The Christian faith offers more than just the forgiveness of sins; it promises to transform individuals to live in such a way that responding to events as Jesus did becomes second nature. What are these spiritual disciplines, and how do they transform the very quality of life we experience as followers of Jesus Christ?

The Disciplines of Abstinence

Although many of us have heard horror stories of how spiritual disciplines have been abused and misused in the past, Willard believes that “A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom.”^{8} He reminds us that we discipline ourselves throughout life in order to accomplish a wide variety of tasks or functions. We utilize discipline when we study an academic or professional field; athletes must be disciplined in order to run a marathon or bench press 300 lbs. Why, then, are we surprised to learn that we must discipline ourselves to be useful to God?

Willard divides the disciplines into two categories: disciplines of abstinence, and disciplines of engagement. Depending on our lifestyle and past personal experiences, we will each find different disciplines helpful in accomplishing the goal of living as a new creature in Christ. Solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice are disciplines of abstinence. Given our highly materialistic culture, these might be the most difficult and most beneficial to many of us. We are more familiar with the disciplines of engagement, including study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, and fellowship. However, two others mentioned by Willard might be less familiar: confession and submission.

Abstinence requires that we give up something that is perfectly normal—something that is not wrong in and of itself, such as food or sex—because it has gotten in the way of our walking with God, or because by leaving these things aside we might be able to focus more closely on God for a period of time. As one writer tells us, “Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us . . .”[\[9\]](#) Busyness and superficial activities hide us from the fact that we have little or no inward experience with God. Solitude frees us from social conformity, from being conformed to the patterns of this world that Paul warns us about in Romans 12.

Solitude goes hand in hand with silence. The power of the tongue and the damage it can do is taken very seriously in the Bible. There is a quiet inner strength and confidence that exudes from people who are great listeners, who are able to be silent and to be slow to speak.

The Disciplines of Engagement

Thus, the disciplines of abstinence help us diminish improper entanglements with the world. What about the disciplines of

engagement?

Although study is not often thought of as a spiritual discipline, it is the key to a balanced Christian walk. Calvin Miller writes, “Mystics without study are only spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort.”[{10}](#) Study involves reading, memorizing, and meditation on God’s Word. It takes effort and time, and there are no shortcuts. It includes learning from great Christian minds that have gone before us and those who, by their walk and example, can teach much about the power available to believers who seek to experience the light burden that abiding in Jesus offers.

Few Christians deny the need for worship in their weekly routines, even though what constitutes worship has caused considerable controversy. Worship ascribes great worth to God. It is seeing God as He truly is. Willard argues that we should focus our worship through Jesus Christ to the Father. He writes, “When we worship, we fill our minds and hearts with wonder at him—the detailed actions and words of his earthly life, his trial and death on the cross, his resurrection reality, and his work as ascended intercessor.”[{11}](#)

The discipline of celebration is unfamiliar to most of us, yet Willard argues that it is one of the most important forms of engagement with God. He writes that “We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on our life and world as God’s work and as God’s gift to us.”[{12}](#) Although much of the scriptural argument for holy celebration is found in the festivals of the Old Testament and the book of Ecclesiastes, Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he chose to dine and celebrate with sinners.

Christian fellowship and confession go hand in hand. It is within the context of fellowship that Christians build up and encourage one-another with the gifts that God has given to us.

It is also in this context that we practice confession with trusted believers who know both our strengths and weaknesses. This level of transparency and openness is essential for the church to become the healing place of deep intimacy that people are so hungry for.

Walking with Jesus doesn't mean just knowing things about Him; it means living as He lived. This includes practicing the spiritual disciplines that Jesus practiced. As we do, we will be changed through the Spirit to be more like Him and experience the rest that He has offered to us.

Notes

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
2. Ibid., viii.
3. Ibid., x.
4. Ibid., 67.
5. Ibid., 68.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 31.
8. Ibid., 156.
9. Ibid., 161.
10. Ibid., 176.
11. Ibid., 178.
12. Ibid., 179.

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“Help Me Understand Fasting”

The spiritual discipline of fasting is new to me and I have several questions about it.

1. When I felt the Spirit move me to fast I was unsure of the direction. I often hear that still small voice and try my best to follow it immediately. Do I need a specific direction in order to fast?

2. I usually fast for 24 hours but I had a pastor suggest we fast for our government officials for half a day. Other than divine direction is there a specific duration that is acceptable?

3. If I fast for a specific desire, not a worldly type but a family type desire, will God honor it if I unconsciously slip and eat then repent and continue fasting?

4. Are there wrong reasons to fast, other than selfish reasons of course?

1. When I felt the Spirit move me to fast I was unsure of the direction. I often hear that still small voice and try my best to follow it immediately. Do I need a specific direction in order to fast?

No. But it might be good to be still before Him, in listening prayer, asking, "What more do You want to tell me about fasting, Lord?" Then listen until He gives further word.

2. I usually fast for 24 hours but I had a pastor suggest we fast for our government officials for half a day. Other than divine direction is there a specific duration that is acceptable?

We operate under grace. The Lord is pleased with whatever you give Him, as long as it's His idea and His power and not something you do in your own flesh (in your own power without relying on Him). There is no prescribed length of time for a biblical fast; divine direction is the ONLY way to go! When someone makes a suggestion, go to the Lord and ask Him, "Is this what You want me to do?" The answer will either be a

green light, yes, go ahead, or a red light, a check in your spirit, and He has a different answer for you.

3. If I fast for a specific desire, not a worldly type but a family type desire, will God honor it if I unconsciously slip and eat then repent and continue fasting?

I believe so. He judges our hearts and knows our intentions. He wants us to succeed more than we do! There is NO condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1), so just pick yourself up again and keep on going.

4. Are there wrong reasons to fast, other than selfish reasons of course?

Other than self-centered reasons? Only disobedience. For instance, a person might have good and godly intentions to fast, but the Lord says don't. He knows that he has a blood sugar imbalance but the person doesn't, and fasting would be dangerous.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries