

EXERCISING YOURSELF TO GODLINESS (SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES)

Spiritual disciplines are the practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth. They are not about earning God's favor—which is a free gift received by faith—but about creating space in our lives to receive the grace God freely gives, and to train ourselves for godliness

1 TIMOTHY 4:7 KJV

7 But refuse profane and old wives fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness.

They are often categorized in two main ways: Inward Disciplines (focusing on the internal life) and

Outward Disciplines (focusing on our actions and relationship with others).

KEY SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH:

I. The Inward Disciplines

These disciplines focus on cultivating a deep, personal relationship with God.

1. Prayer

More than just reciting words, prayer is conversation and communion with God. It includes adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication (making requests). It's the primary way we communicate with God and align our will with His. The great preacher Walter Hilton offered practical wisdom for those who struggle with distraction in prayer, particularly when rising in the night to seek God. He advised that one must "dispose thee to pray, or to think some good thought, for to revive and quicken thine heart towards God, and do thou use all thy discreet industry, for the drawing up of thy thoughts from worldly vanities."

· Key Figure: Jesus modeled a life of constant prayer, often withdrawing to lonely places to pray (Luke 5:16).

Scripture:

1 Thessalonians 5:17 ESV

Pray without ceasing.

Author Quote:

Richard Foster reminds us that "Real prayer comes not from gritting our teeth, but from falling in love."

2. Study

This involves more than just reading the Bible. Study is a deep, analytical engagement with Scripture to understand its meaning and context. It includes observation, interpretation, and application. The goal is not just knowledge, but transformation.

· Key Figure: The Bereans were commended for examining the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11).

Scripture:

2 Timothy 2:15 ESV

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

Author Quote:

Donald S. Whitney emphasizes the absolute primacy of this discipline, stating plainly: "No Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word. Nothing can substitute for it."

3. Meditation

Christian meditation is not about emptying the mind, but filling it with God's truth. It is a deep, reflective thinking on a passage of Scripture or a truth about God, chewing on it and pondering its meaning for your life. The purpose is to sink our roots deep into God's truth and allow it to shape our thoughts.

Samuel Davies, the 18th-century Presbyterian evangelist, encouraged believers to make meditation a habitual practice, describing it as sustained, attentive reflection on God, his attributes, works, creation, and word, for the purpose of stirring one's affections toward God.

· Key Figure: Isaac went out to meditate in the field (Genesis 24:63).

Scripture:

Psalm 1:2 ESV

But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Author Quote:

The 14th-century mystic Walter Hilton advised that the best subject for meditation is the one “wherein thou feelest greatest gust, facility and ease or pleasure.”

4. Fasting

The voluntary abstention from food (or other things, like media or comfort) for a spiritual purpose.

Fasting is often combined with prayer to humble oneself before God, seek His guidance, or break spiritual bondages. It reminds us that we “do not live by bread alone.” Puritan author Lewis Bayly, in his classic work *The Practice of Piety*, extolled the virtues of fasting, writing that it “strengthens the memory, and clears the mind—illuminates the understanding, and bridles the affections—mortifies the flesh, prevents sickness, and continues health—it delivers from evils, and procures all kind of blessings.”

· Key Figure: Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-2).

Scripture:

Matthew 4:4 ESV

But he answered, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Additional Scripture:

Acts 13:2-3

The early church fasted and prayed before sending out Barnabas and Saul.

Author Quote:

A mystical insight from *The Book of Margery Kempe* records Christ as saying, “Fasting, Daughter, is good for young beginners” though noting that “thinking, weeping and high contemplation is best life in earth.”

II. The Outward Disciplines

These disciplines focus on how we live out our faith in the world and in relationship

with others.

1. Simplicity

An inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle. It's about focusing our time, energy, and money on God's kingdom rather than on accumulating possessions. It is finding freedom from the compulsion to acquire and the anxiety of materialism, trusting God to provide.

· Key Figure: Jesus lived a simple life, with no place to lay his head (Matthew 8:20).

Scripture:

Matthew 6:19-21 ESV

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

2. Solitude and Silence

Withdrawing from people and noise to be alone with God. Solitude is the physical act of being alone; silence is the quieting of the inner and outer noise. This discipline allows us to break our addiction to activity and human approval, and to find our identity and security in God alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and martyr, wrote profoundly of the relationship between solitude and community.

He observed, "The mark of solitude is silence, as speech is the mark of community... Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech." He further warned, "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community."

· Key Figure: Jesus often withdrew to desolate places to pray (Luke 5:16).

Scripture:

Mark 1:35 ESV

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

Author Quote:

Bonhoeffer also noted the clarifying power of this discipline: "There is a wonderful power of clarification, purification, and concentration

upon the essential thing in being quiet."

3. Submission

This is not about being a doormat, but a voluntary act of yielding to others in love, out of reverence for Christ. It means letting go of the need to have our own way and being open to the needs and leadership of others. It is the path to true freedom from the tyranny of self-will.

· Key Figure: Jesus submitted to the will of the Father, even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

Scripture:

Philippians 2:5-8 ESV

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Additional Scripture:

Ephesians 5:21 ESV

submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Author Quote:

Richard Foster identifies the profound freedom found in this discipline: "What freedom corresponds to submission? It is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way... In the Discipline of submission we are released to drop the matter, to forget it."

4. Service

Serving others not out of a need to be noticed or to feel important, but out of genuine love and humility.

It is the "washing of feet" style of service—doing small, hidden, and mundane tasks for others without expecting anything in return. One anonymous writer captured the heart of true service, stating, "The supreme test of service is this: For whom am I doing this? Much that we call

service to Christ is not such at all...If we are doing this for Christ, we shall not care for human reward or even recognition." Richard Foster further distinguishes true service from self-righteous service, noting that "True service rests contented in hiddenness" and "is free of the need to calculate results."

· Key Figure: Jesus washed his disciples' feet (John 13:1-17).

Scripture:

Galatians 5:13 ESV

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Author Quote:

Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us of the universal call to this discipline: "Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve... You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."