

Spiritual Disciplines

Some of you have heard of Don Whitney before and he is the Professor of Biblical Spirituality and the John H. Powell Professor of Pastoral Ministry at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

He served there in a similar position from 1995 to 2005, and then as Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate Dean at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, from 2005 to 2024.

He has authored nine books and the one we recommend for this year's series is *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.

In the opening chapter, Whitney says, "Discipline without directions is drudgery." He had an illustration following that which was helpful and I changed some of the details but got the idea from him and thought it was very helpful.

Imagine that a child that loves to be with his friends in the afternoons after schooling/homeschooling is over, but every afternoon they have piano lessons and practice while watching their friends play outside and they are just ready for it to be over with so they can get back outside. That's an example of discipline without direction.

Now humor me and let's say an angel comes to visit this child one day (Timmy) and in a vision the child is taken to a big worship service where he sees a musician playing the piano which Timmy is learning daily, and playing it flawlessly. The child hears the music and the congregation responds in praising and worshiping and many come to know Christ in that vision, and the angel asks the child, "Do you know who that was?" and then the angel informs the child that it was, "you a few years from now." And then pointing to the child's piano, the angel declares, "But you must practice"

Now what do you think the child's attitude will be like moving forward with practicing daily?

Discipline in learning the piano will now have direction! We don't accidentally become good at something like playing the piano, it takes practice, it takes discipline.

When it comes to discipline in our Christian lives, I'm certain that many believers feel the same way that Timmy did about his practice; it's discipline without direction.

What do you think might be some reasons why people don't participate in spiritual disciplines or very little?

Prayer may be a labor to you. The value of meditating on scripture might not be clear to you, and discipline like fasting is often unclear or confusing.

The first thing we must understand as Christians, just like Timmy needed to understand, is what we shall become. What is the end goal or what is the purpose of disciplining ourselves?

Let's see what Paul says in Romans 8:29 of the elect, "***For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.***" **What do you think Paul is getting at here?**

That means that God's eternal plan is to continually sanctify his children from one degree of glory to the next and conform us into Christlikeness and that plan will be completed when Christ returns, and until that happens, he intends for us to grow toward that Christlikeness. God has means that he uses in this transforming us. So we see God is going to transform us into the image of his son and how does he do that.

God uses 3 primary means when transforming us and conforming us to Christlikeness.

Does anyone want to take a guess or know what those 3 primary ways are? People, Circumstances, and Spiritual Disciplines.

- **People:**(***Proverbs 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.***) Sometimes God uses our friends or brothers and sisters in Christ to sharpen us into more Christlikeness.

This is another reason why people should go to church. Do you know someone who claims to be a Christian but doesn't go to church? And what is most likely evident in their lives? The result is most likely lack of fruit and growth in that person's life, because God uses his people-the church-to

grow you. He may even use our enemies, or co-workers to file away our rough edges, having us grow in the fruits of the spirit.

- **Circumstances:**(Romans 8:28, “*For we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose.*” Physical health trials, financial issues, the weather, God can use our circumstances to grow us into Christlikeness.
- **Spiritual Disciplines:** This 3rd mean is different than the last 2 we discussed because when God uses this for our growth, He works from the inside out. The other two are by means that work from things on the outside in.

The other thing I'd like to point out with spiritual disciplines is that when God uses these means he grants us a measure of choice regarding involvement in them whereas we don't always have so much control in the people that we are around or the circumstances we sometimes find ourselves in.

Everyone's sanctification journey looks different and is set at different paces and part of that is due to how much we discipline ourselves or involve ourselves with the means the Lord has provided for that growth.

We have the choice of reading our Bible for the day or fasting for a time, or praying, or sitting under the word of God preached weekly.

So utilizing and growing in spiritual disciplines is synergistic work. [Does anyone want to share what they think that statement means?](#) Yes, a two-handed work. God allows us to grow and partake of the disciplines he provides so there is a two-handed work going on.

Just like back to the point of we don't accidentally become good at something, we aren't going to know God's word if we don't read it. We aren't going to know the gospel if we don't study who God is and what he's done for us.

And so, God uses the means of people, circumstances, and spiritual disciplines to grow us towards Christlikeness. My prayer for us men this year will be that we will all grow in awareness of the disciplines and that we strive to grow in them.

Would someone read for us Hebrews 12:14, "***Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord***"

Okay so without holiness we won't see the Lord. Can someone read for us 1 Peter 1:13-16, "***Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being soberminded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who has called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct since it is written, "You shall be holy for I am holy."***

So how do we pursue this holiness? I'm glad you asked... let's look at 1 Timothy 4:7-8, "***Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.***

Is Paul giving a suggestion or a command? Paul doesn't say, if you find time or when you feel like it, he is commanding us to exercise spiritually for the purpose of godliness and it is beneficial for all things in this life and the next.

The word discipline in 1 Timothy 4:7 is translated from the Greek word Gumnazo which means a physical bodily exertion or conditioning. It is we get our English words gymnasium and gymnastics from.

So, we should think of spiritual disciplines as spiritual exercise. It is not just exercising the mind but a physical exertion of the body. Going to your quiet spot for prayer is just like going to the gym and hitting the weight machines. Physical exercise promotes strength and spiritual exercises promote godliness.

Christlikeness and Godliness or holiness is the goal of spiritual disciplines to glorify God and as Paul reminds us in 1 Tim 4:7-8 that we should discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness.

So, what are spiritual disciplines?

- They are personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth. They are habits of devotion that have been and continue to be practiced by God's people
- Spiritual disciplines can include but not limited to
- Prayer
- Meditation
- Fasting
- Study of Scripture
- Worship
- Service
- Simplicity
- Solitude
- Silence
- Confession
- Accountability
- Celebration
- Guidance
- Fellowship
- Generosity
- Gratitude
- Rest
- Evangelism
- Stewardship
- Spiritual Direction
- **And the most important feature of the discipline is its purpose. The purpose for godliness.**
- Spiritual Disciplines are the God-given means we are to use in the spirit filled pursuit of Godliness. And what I mean by this is that the most iron-willed self-discipline will not **make us more holy**.

For example, an unbeliever can reap the physical benefits that come from fasting, but an unbeliever cannot gain eternal value from this discipline because the motives and purposes are not God centered and not in practice for the purpose of godliness.

We see in scripture in 1 Thes. 5:23, "***now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely;*** and in Hebrew 2:11, For ***both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father;*** We see here that God is sanctifying us and it's not of your own doing although there is a real element of responsibility and action on our parts to involve and utilize the means the Lord has given us.

- John Piper makes a good point of this in his book "A Hunger for God", and that is "[Fasting] is not first offered to God that we might be paid back because of it. It is first given by God that we might benefit from it and that he might be glorified through it" (A Hunger for God, p. 177)

So, we see that spiritual disciplines are a gift from God which are means to a spirit filled pursuit of godliness and now that we see what spiritual disciplines are, why are they important?

Let's look at God's word in Matthew 11:29, (Jesus),***take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,*** "and also in Luke 9:23, "***If anyone should come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.***"

So, in these 2 scriptures we see that to be a disciple of Jesus at the very least we are to learn from him and follow him. Learning and following involve discipline and you don't learn accidentally and following Him incidentally is not a trait or fruit that is going to display to others that you truly are his disciple.

The Lord Jesus doesn't just expect these disciplines of us, he modeled them for us in his Earthly ministry. He applied his heart to discipline and did so for the purpose of Godliness. And to grow into being more Christlike, we must live as Christ lived. This is the reason that spiritual disciplines are so important. We are called to glorify him, and to be holy, and to be Christlike, and we can't be any of those accidentally. It takes God's Holy Spirit and discipline.

So with us having a small understanding now of what spiritual disciplines are and how they are to be used, lets look at our list of application questions.