
Perhaps the three most important things to understand about spiritual disciplines are these

First, they are all about **process**...

And therefore, they require sustained **practice** over a long time

Finally, for these disciplines to have a genuine impact on you, they must become a **normal**, routine part of your life

We began by considering the discipline of study, last week

This week we'll consider the discipline of **meditation**

These two really need to go together

You really must not practice one without the other

In a very simple sense, the discipline of study produces **knowledge** and **understanding**, and the discipline of meditation transforms that knowledge and understanding into **insight** and **wisdom**

And we need both - study without meditation produces pride, and meditation without study produces confusion and even delusion

The discipline of study is a discipline of focus

We're removing our attention from all those trivial things that are constantly distracting us, and settling into a focused and thoughtful consideration of the things that really matter... on that which is real

And we saw how both science and philosophy - indeed, all knowledge - gives us some degree of access to reality

But the foundation of all true knowledge of reality is revelation

God's own **general** revelation in creation
his **specific** revelation in the Word of God,
and his **complete** revelation in Jesus

So the discipline of study is a focused way of life...

...which begins with a sustained immersion in Jesus and the gospels

That's the very best way to get started: immerse ourselves in Jesus

And as we get to know him, his heart, his priorities, his way of life, his words, his mission... the rest of the Bible comes into focus for us

You really cannot truly understand or interpret the Bible if you are not constantly immersing yourself in Jesus

And you really cannot understand Jesus until you are focused on the **cross**

When Paul came to Corinth to bear witness to Jesus, he came determined to remain centered in what was most crucial

1 Corinthians 2.1–2 NIV When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

And so, as we immerse ourselves in Jesus in the light of the cross

And in all of God's word in the light of Jesus

And in all of God's creation in the light of Jesus and the Word...

We discover that all knowledge - from accountancy to zoology and everything in between - can turn into genuine worship

You'll notice I've not talked about any specific methods of study

These spiritual disciplines are not primarily a matter of technique or method... that's where we often lose our way, in the next new method or technique or experience that comes along

They're all about setting your heart toward Jesus, and moving toward him day after day - a long obedience in the same direction

So the discipline of study creates in us a certain focus in life

We realize that God is communicating to us in a thousand ways

And therefore we set aside all trivial distractions and turn our hearts toward him... we begin to pay focused attention to him

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning describes this so beautifully...

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries

There's a marvelous story recorded in Mark 4, and also in Luke 8

Mark 4.1–9 NIV Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

There are multiple levels to this story

Jesus is revealing something profound, and wonderful, and essential about life in the kingdom of God

But he does so with a cryptic story, a parable... which provokes many questions in the hearts of those who hear it...

But then he doesn't explain it, either

He begins the story with an imperative, a command

Listen!

Akouete, in Greek - listen carefully, pay attention, receive this into yourself, and then bring your life into harmony with what you've heard

And he ends the story with the same provocative word: "Whoever has ears to listen, let them listen."

In other words, he wants us to listen carefully to his words, to reflect on it... and not simply move on to the next thing

This is Jesus' preferred teaching style - he demands active listening and engagement and reflection and meditation and obedience from those who are listening to him

This story about seed being sown is itself is a seed that Jesus sows in our hearts, as we listen to him

The story is a seed that he's sown in our hearts, right now

And then he commands us to **meditate** on it... that's what he means when he says whoever has ears to hear, let them hear

Now the disciples, of course, don't want to muss around with meditation

That seems like far too much work

Plus meditation sounds too much like some weird eastern new agey hot-yoga mumbo-jumbo, you know?

So they're all - give it to us straight, Jesus, what do you really mean?

Mark 4.10–20 NIV When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parable...

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word."

Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

So that helps... we understand better what Jesus is saying

But now the explanation itself provokes further questions from us

How exactly does Satan come and take away the word that is sown in us? What does it mean to receive God’s word joyfully, but without root? And so on and on...

And now we realize that the explanation of the parable is itself is a whole new seed sown in our hearts, which demands further reflection from us

This explanation of a story about meditation becomes something new that demands further meditation from us

So when he says, Listen!

Or when he says, “Whoever has ears to listen, let them listen.”

What he means is this: Listen to my words carefully, with complete focus.

Reflect on them. **Meditate** on them... until they turn into wisdom within you, and then put that wisdom into practice, into an obedient life... and now you’re following me for real

And so he ends this section with a very pointed warning

Mark 4.23–25 NIV “If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear. Consider carefully what you hear... With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

And what Jesus is saying here is that if you take him seriously at his word... and enter into the discipline of meditation on his Word

You will be able to hear him better, and understand him better, and know him better, and be transformed into his likeness...

And then you'll be able to receive far more of the revelation of God

But if you ignore the discipline of meditation, even what you think you already know will turn into foolishness and emptiness and loss

Listen to how James explains all of this, in his own words

James 1.21–25 NIV ...humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

James 1.22–25 MESSAGE Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other... But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it... will find delight...

This... is the discipline of MEDITATION

We pay careful and prayerful attention to God's revelation

And we explore it, we study it, we do all we can to miss nothing of what he is revealing of himself

And then we **meditate** on what we have gained through our study

And this sustained meditation results in wisdom, and then we practice it... we bring our lives into conformity with God's reality

So that's the flow... study, meditation, wisdom and then obedience

The discipline of study sows good seed into our hearts

And the discipline of meditation nurtures that seed, waters it and cares for it until it bears fruit in our lives, 30, 60 and 100-fold

Therefore, the only real way to enter into meditation is to be immersed in study

When we are consistently paying attention to God and to all that God is revealing in a disciplined and focused way, it is then that we are best prepared to hear what he's saying specifically to us

So what does it look like, in practice?

You remember the homework I gave you last week? John 1:1-18

So Monday morning last week, I began reading it

John 1.1–18 NIV In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

And these last two sentences caught my heart... and I stopped right there

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world **did not recognize** him. He came to that which was his own, but his own **did not receive** him.

These two phrases pierced my heart and stopped me in my tracks

And I instantly knew deep within me that this was where the Spirit wanted me to focus in on... I could sense Jesus saying, Listen!

How did I know that? How did I know he was speaking to me?

Because as I read these words, something within me suddenly woke up, and all the distractions in my mind and heart faded into the background, and these words were all that occupied my focus

This is how meditation begins...

We begin with asking the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our heart

We read the text, slowly, carefully, prayerfully...

And something catches our attention... catches our heart...and we stop, and start focusing in... trusting that God is speaking to us

And now we're paying attention to two things

One, the particular text that caught our attention

Two, the connected thoughts and emotions, and perhaps even physical reactions... that rise up within us

So... in that moment, I sensed that God was speaking to me - specifically - about these two phrases

did not recognize... did not receive...

And a question emerged from within me... where is it that I don't recognize Jesus in my world? and where is it that I don't receive him?

Now that's not what I was expecting to hear...

I was unconsciously assuming that if God spoke to me, what I'd hear was something along the lines of "well done, good and faithful servant, for recognizing me, and receiving me, and following me"

And instead I was hearing Jesus say to me... perhaps you need to consider where you aren't recognizing me... or receiving me...

And I was feeling rather shocked and stunned in that moment - like someone had doused me with cold water...

And then I remembered those intense words of Jesus in Matthew 25...

Matthew 25.31–45 NIV "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left..."

"Then he will say to those on his left, '... I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"

And so I began to ask Jesus to help me see him where I was missing him...

I began to pray that he would open my eyes to him

There's an old practice of prayer in the ancient church that focuses around these simple words

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner

And so that was what I began to pray...

And in that moment this story from Mark 10 came to mind...

Mark 10.46–52 NIV Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man... was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

And so my prayer became, "Rabbi, I want to see... I want to see you"

So that was Monday...

And then on Tuesday, I began reading the same passage again

I came to those same two phrases: "did not recognize" and "did not receive"... and now I sensed something else that I needed to hear

That even though I do not always recognize Jesus, or receive him... **he recognizes me, and he receives me...** now and always

I was safe in him... safe in his love, his grace, his kindness

I think Jesus knew I needed to hear that word - because the previous meditation had left me a bit shaken

That's how meditation works...

We settle ourselves down into God's revelation and perhaps we then sense him speaking to us, specifically, in our own circumstances...

Sometimes we'll sense something specific, and other times we won't sense anything at all

Often, I'll meditate on what I'm studying, and it's just familiar and simple and good, and there's no great insight or anything

And that's just fine - remember, this is a long obedience in the same direction...

The crucial thing here is to not make something spectacular of these disciplines

These are ordinary, normal practices... and they must become an ordinary, normal part of your life

Richard Foster "Often meditation will yield insights that are deeply practical, almost mundane. Instruction will come on how to relate to your wife or husband, or how to deal with this sensitive problem or that business situation. It is wonderful when a particular meditation leads to ecstasy, but it is far more common to be given guidance in dealing with ordinary human problems. Meditation sends us into our ordinary world with greater perspective and balance."

Meditation is an intensely practical discipline

If you're new to this, and want a good place to start...

I'd highly recommend you begin with Jesus in the gospels, and in particular, begin with one of his parables - perhaps Luke 15

Or you could begin with one of the Psalms, say 16, or 23, or 121

You quiet yourself down, pray for a focused and sensitive heart and mind and spirit... and you ask for your eyes to be opened to Jesus

And then you settle down into the passage you've chosen

Now some days you'll sense nothing at all, and some other days you'll sense something clear

Remember that the spiritual disciplines are all about a long obedience in the same direction

So if you haven't already, dive in... Richard Foster's book has a beautiful chapter on meditation, that you could begin with

Psalm 1.1–3 NIV Blessed is the one ... whose delight is in the [word] of the LORD, and who meditates on his [word] day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither...

We're going to close by joining together in communion

On the night that Jesus was betrayed into the hands of those who would crucify him, he was with his close friends, his disciples...

[SLIDES - 1 minute for each]

John 14.6 NIV Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14.1–3 NIV "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me... I am going to prepare a place for you... I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

John 14.27 NIV "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

John 15.9–12 NIV "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love..."

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."
