

“What are Spiritual Disciplines?”

(1 Timothy 4:7)

Introduction

➤ Oftentimes, during the summer months, we preach through a “summer sermon series.” In past years, we have preached on topics such as “The Lord’s Prayer,” “Misinterpreted/Misunderstood Verses,” “The Beatitudes,” “Unbiblical Sayings,” “Church Matters,” and “Names of God” (just to name a few).

This summer’s topic is “Spiritual Disciplines”, and we will be preaching through various “spiritual disciplines” that are addressed in Scripture.

➤ To begin with, it is important to understand what spiritual disciplines actually are. As the term implies, a “spiritual discipline” is a means of training or chastening oneself to grow spiritually. All too often, the word “discipline” has negative connotations in our contemporary English vernacular – referring to punishment (e.g., “I disciplined my children”).

But “spiritual disciplines” refer to much more than something punitive. They can serve as correction, devotion, abstinence, instruction, restraint, self-denial, commitment, adoration, deference, work, worship, and/or sacrifice. Some spiritual disciplines that are clearly commanded in Scripture, from which we will be preaching this summer, are: prayer, worship, fellowship, Bible study, fasting, confession, Scripture meditation/memorization, giving/stewardship, serving, and evangelism.

➤ To put it simply, spiritual disciplines are disciplines to help you grow spiritually. To put it more formally:

A “spiritual discipline” is a biblical practice that helps the Christian to persevere and mature in their walk with Jesus Christ.

➤ Spiritual disciplines are not just for some Christians, they are for all Christians. In God’s Word we find that Christians are commanded to practice spiritual disciplines. Just as spiritual growth is not an option for the Christian, but is a command of God, spiritual disciplines are essential for the Christian as a means of spiritual growth.

➤ Although there are several to choose from, one passage of Scripture that explicitly exhorts Christians to be spiritually disciplined is found in the book of 1 Timothy:

1 Tim 4:6-10 ~ “If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained [*entrephō*] in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. ⁷Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train [*gymnazō*] yourself for godliness; ⁸for while bodily training [*gymnasia*] 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. ⁹The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. ¹⁰For to this end we toil [*kopiaō*] and strive [*agōnizomai*], because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.”

➤ As a way of helping us grasp this topic, I want to identify five important aspects concerning the biblical teaching of spiritual disciplines.

1. The purpose of spiritual disciplines

➤ We must first understand the biblical purpose of spiritual disciplines. Stated concisely, spiritual disciplines are to enable the Christian to grow in godliness. The purpose of spiritual disciplines is not spiritual disciplines, but what is wrought by the practice of spiritual disciplines (i.e., spiritual growth).

✓ Illust: “The goal of practicing a given Discipline, of course, is not about *doing* as much as it is about *being*, that is, *being* like Jesus. ... Spiritual disciplines are the *means, not ends*. The end – that is, the purpose of practicing the Disciplines – is godliness. I define *godliness* as both closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ, a conformity that’s both inward and outward, a growing conformity to both the heart of Christ and the life of Christ. This Christlikeness is the goal, the reason we should practice the Disciplines. Without this purpose in our practice, the performance of Spiritual Disciplines – no matter how consistent or vigorous – is vain and nothing more than an empty husk of godliness” (Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; p.6, 9).

1 Tim 4:7 ~ “...train yourself for godliness”

➤ We must not forget that the goal of the Christian life is Christlikeness – not self-righteous morality, or secular-religious virtues.

Matt 5:48 ~ “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

1 Peter 1:14-16 ~ “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance,¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,¹⁶ since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”

1 John 2:6 ~ “whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”

Eph 4:1 ~ “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called”

Col 1:9-10 ~ “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

➤ Praying is not the main purpose of prayer; fasting is not the main purpose of fasting; stewardship is not the main purpose of stewardship, and so on. The main purpose of spiritual disciplines is to grow in godliness, to live in a way that is according to the Word and will of God.

✓ Illust: “Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys football team for most of three decades, said, ‘The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do in order to achieve what they’ve always wanted to be.’ In much the same way, Christians are called to make themselves, by the Spirit’s power, do what they would not naturally do – practice the Spiritual Disciplines – in order to experience what the Spirit gives them a desire to be, that is, to be with Christ and like Christ” (Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; p.13).

2. The need for spiritual disciplines

➤ To be sure, no Christian is perfect. Therefore, no Christian is exempt from the need for spiritual growth. And, since every Christian has a need to grow spiritually, every Christian can (and should) benefit from the practice of spiritual disciplines. Furthermore, there is no true spiritual latency in the Christian life – a person is either growing (maturing) in Christ or regressing in Christ (or growing in worldliness). Every Christian has need of spiritual disciplines, as every Christian has need of spiritual growth.

We must not ever think that we have “arrived” at some satisfactory level of Christianity or Christian maturity. This is one of the most effective weapons in Satan’s arsenal – deceiving Christians into a state of complacency and lethargy, into thinking they have grown enough, they have learned enough, they have done enough, they have matured enough. This is a spiritual danger, even deadly, trap.

1 Cor 10:12 ~ “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”

Gal 6:3 ~ “For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”

Phil 3:12-15 ~ “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.”

➤ Even if we do not think we have “arrived”, there is a tendency to think that true spiritual growth occurs automatically in the Christian life. That is, we can incorrectly assume that God will grow us spiritually without our effort or partnership. In fact, some wrongly believe that actively/practically trying to grow spiritually is the basis of legalism, and the exercise of humanistic (self-righteous) religion. The truth is, as we will see, God commands that we participate in our own spiritual growth.

While the Christian is saved by grace alone, he/she is not sanctified by grace alone. We know that a person is not saved *by* good works, but saved *unto* good works. But such good works do not come by osmosis (e.g., sleeping with your bible as a pillow does not help someone understand or memorize scripture)

Eph 2:8-10 ~ “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Titus 2:11-14 ~ “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹²training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

➤ Every true Christian has the indwelling power and presence of the Holy Spirit to enable them to walk according to the Word and the will of God. But this does not mean that spiritual disciplines are easy or effortless.

3. The difficulties of spiritual disciplines

➤ Oftentimes, the very topic of spiritual disciplines can conjure feelings of conviction or guilt. Since no one is living a perfect Christian life, every Christian can grow (improve) in some area of the Christian life.

➤ True spiritual growth can be hard work. Much like with physical exercise, where there is no pain there is no gain. This is one reason why spiritual disciplines are called ... disciplines. For we must be disciplined in our efforts to be spiritual. This requires self-control, effort, humility, training, instruction, and resolve.

For example, I cannot consider my fasting from broccoli and cauliflower as a spiritual discipline. While I have been perfectly faithful in this decades-long abstinence, it requires no effort from me because I hate broccoli and cauliflower. Similarly, I do not need to be disciplined to eat that which is bad for me (i.e., pizza and ice cream), and I do not need to be disciplined in order to ensure that I overeat (that I can do fine on my own). In fact, for all of these examples, the opposite is true. That which is good for me, that which would benefit me, does not come easy or natural for me. It takes sincere, deliberate, and consistent effort and discipline.

➤ The apostle Paul illustrates this truth as he described his ministry to the church in Colossae:

Col 1:28-29 ~ “[Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature [*teleios*] in Christ. ²⁹For this I toil [*kopiaō*], struggling [*agōnizomai*] with all his energy [*energeia*] that he powerfully [*dunamis*] works [*energeō*] within me.”

It is important to notice in these verses that the apostle Paul was not operating independent of the Spirit of God, but actually with the “energy” that comes from God through the Holy Spirit “within” (see Jn.15:4-5). Also, it is important to note the fact that the Holy Spirit is not working through Paul’s laziness or indifference (see 2Cor.6:4-5; 11:23-28). Paul was working hard, with the power of God, not in his own strength.

➤ Thankfully, Scripture does not conceal the fact that the practice of spiritual disciplines is difficult. In fact, there are several (Greek) words used in the New Testament that graphically illustrated the spiritual effort required to grow spiritually. Here are several examples:

♦ “train” (*gymnazo*, vb. / *gymnasia*, n.) –

1 Tim 4:7-8 ~ “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train [*gymnazo*] yourself for godliness; ⁸for while bodily training [*gymnasia*] 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.”

Heb 5:14 ~ “But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained [*gymnazo*] by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

Heb 12:11 ~ “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained [*gymnazo*] by it”

2 Peter 2:14 ~ “They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained [*gymnazo*] in greed. Accursed children!”

♦ “grow/grow up” (*auxanō*) –

1 Peter 2:2 ~ “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up [*auxanō*] into salvation”

2 Peter 3:18 ~ “But grow [*auxanō*] in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”

Eph 4:15 ~ “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up [*auxanō*] in every way into him who is the head, into Christ”

♦ “discipline” (*hypōpiazō*) –

1 Cor 9:26-27 ~ “So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷But I discipline [*hypōpiazō*; lit. to hit under the eye; i.e., beat, buffet] my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified”

♦ “put to death” (*thanatoō*) –

Rom 8:13 ~ “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

♦ “put on / put off [put away]” (*endyō* / *apotithēmi* [*apekdyomai*]) –

Eph 4:22-24 ~ “to put off [*apotithēmi*] your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and to put on [*endyō*] the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (vs.25)

Eph 6:11 ~ “Put on [*endyō*] the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”

Col 3:8-11 ~ “But now you must put them all away [*apotithēmi*]: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off [*apekdyomai*] the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on [*endyō*] the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

Heb 12:1-2 ~ “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside [*apotithēmi*] every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us”

♦ “bearing fruit” (*karpophoreō*) –

Col 1:10 ~ “so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit [*karpophoreō*] in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

♦ “work out / having done” (*katēgazomai*) –

Phil 2:12 ~ “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out [*katēgazomai*] your own salvation with fear and trembling”

Eph 6:13 ~ “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done [*katēgazomai*] all, to stand firm.”

- There is no “auto-pilot” for the Christian. With the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit of God, enabling and instructing us to live according to the Word of God, every Christian can grow spiritually; and is compelled to do so.
- However, it must be noted, just because something is difficult does not mean that it is unenjoyable or unrewarding. We must not think of spiritual disciplines as the arduous grind of the Christian life, or as some awful tasting medicine that we must drink in order to be more spiritual. While spiritual disciplines can be difficult, the exercise and results of these disciplines should fill the Christian with tremendous joy.
- ✓ Illust: “Any discipline without direction is drudgery. But the Spiritual Disciplines are never drudgery as long as we practice them with the goal of godliness (that is, closeness to and conformity to Christ) in mind. If your picture of a disciplined Christian is one of a grim, tight-lipped, joyless half-robot, then you’ve missed the point” (Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; p.19).

4. The dangers of spiritual disciplines

- Another aspect of spiritual disciplines that needs to be acknowledged are the inherent dangers. Satan loves to counterfeit God’s truth, and sabotage God’s work. Literally every good and godly thing can be misused or abused. For example, a reverence for God’s Word can turn into bibliolatry (the worshipping of the Bible).

- There are at least three dangers in the practice of spiritual disciplines that we must understand and avoid.

First, inherent in the practice of spiritual discipline is the ever-lurking danger of pride. Like the Christian who brags about his humility, we can be boastful (internally, if not also audibly) about our spiritual disciplines. That is, we can brag about how much Scripture we read and/or memorize; we can flaunt how early get up to do our devotions, or how long we spend in daily devotions; we can boast about all the sacrificial ministries we have been or are apart of; we can give, pray, and fast in order to impress others with our spiritual discipline.

Matt 6:1-6 ~ “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ²Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵And when you pray, you must not be like

the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Matt 6:16-18 ~ “And 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 received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that 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.”

Gal 6:14-15 ~ “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”

Second, is the danger of legalism. Simply put, legalism is not pursuing holiness but pursuing holiness as a means (or an attempt) to earn/merit God’s saving grace. As we have seen, a Christian is not saved (in any way, shape, or degree) by good works but saved unto good works. However, even knowing this Gospel truth, it is relatively easy for Christians to approach spiritual disciplines as a means of gaining God’s favor – e.g., His blessing, favor, protection, power, etc. If we are not careful, we can practice spiritual disciplines in order to elicit something from God rather than to become more like God (i.e., more godly). For example, we can superstitiously think of our Bibles as good luck charms, and the reading of the Bible as a means of obtaining or maintaining our salvation. This (legalism) is dangerous because it put the focus, first and foremost, on us and not on godliness. Legalism is always self-centered (self-righteous), whereas the disciplines are always God-centered. The heart of a legalist thinks: “Doing this will help me gain something from God.” The heart of the follower of Christ thinks: “I want to do this because I love God and seek to please Him.”

Luke 18:9-14 ~ “[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³But 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!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.’”

Third, is the danger of (mindless/heartless) ritual. While routine may be good and beneficial, ritualistic Christianity can be very dangerous. If we are not careful, we can practice spiritual disciplines simply (or only) because we practice spiritual disciplines. That is, what is supposed to be the means of our spiritual growth has become the end. Remember, the ultimate goal of spiritual disciplines is to practice spiritual disciplines – but to become more and more like Christ. Doing devotions just to do devotions can promote a mindless, heartless (even Christless) Christianity. If we are not careful, as with those in the church in Ephesus, we can go through the Christian rituals and (often unwittingly) abandon our true and supreme love for Christ (Rev.2:4; cf. Jn.5:42).

Matt 15:7-9 ~ “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ⁸‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’” [cf. Is.29:13]

2 Tim 3:5 ~ “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.”

➤To be sure, in many ways, there are greater dangers lurking for the Christian who is apathetic or indolent concerning his/her own spiritual growth. But we must not be naïve concerning Satan’s schemes to taint or sabotage the true purpose of spiritual growth.

5. The reward of spiritual disciplines

➤ To be sure, as we have seen, the purpose of spiritual disciplines is spiritual growth with the goal of being progressively godly/Christlike. The earthly and heavenly (spiritual and tangible) rewards and benefits of such a pursuit are manifold. But the ultimate reward – singular – of spiritual disciplines is the glory of God.

Matt 5:16 ~ “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

1 Cor 6:20 ~ “for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

1 Cor 10:31 ~ “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

John 15:8 ~ “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”

Rom 6:4 ~ “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

1 Peter 2:12 ~ “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”

1 Peter 4:11 ~ “whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

➤ Sin, on the other hand, in its most basic expression, is failing to glorify God.

Rom 1:21-23 ~ “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”

Rom 3:23 ~ “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”

➤ Spiritual growth, then, is a means of becoming more godly and less ungodly – it is the pursuit of glorifying God in and over everything else. The Christian’s greatest passion and pursuit in life is the glory of God in and through His Son Jesus Christ. Spiritual disciplines – when done in the right way and for the right reasons – increases the Christian’s capacity to glorify God in their lives; by their spiritual growth and spiritual fruit in Christ.

Conclusion

➤ My heartfelt prayer, for all of us, as we embark on this summer-long series on spiritual disciplines, is that by God’s grace and power we will become more and more godly/Christlike, and glorify God more and more in the process.

✓ Illust: John Newton (1725-1807) was a devoted husband, faithful pastor and prolific hymn-writer (author of the most famous hymn “Amazing Grace”). But this hardly tells the story of his life. Newton was born in London (1725) to a godly mother and an irreligious, sea-faring father. His mother died of tuberculosis about two weeks before Newton’s seventh birthday. By the time he was eleven, Newton was basically a sailor. His life chronicles one tragedy after another, which culminated in dissipation, enslavement and disgrace. According to Newton, chief among his sins was being a slave-trading sea-captain for several years. It was not until after he suffered an epileptic seizure (or severe stroke) in 1754, which effectively ended his sailing career, that Newton gave up slave trading.

From this point on, in 1755 (about 30 years of age), Newton’s life was forever changed. With a renewed faith in Christ, and influence from godly men such as George Whitefield, John Wesley and William Carey, he began pastoring and writing hymns. It wasn’t until he was in his fifties (1779) that

Newton published Olney Hymns, a hymnal that featured such songs as “Amazing Grace” and “I asked the Lord that I Might Grow” – both beautifully describing God’s sovereign love and grace.

When I think about all the suffering Newton endured and caused in his life, and that God redeemed this man to be a faithful preacher and pastor, I cannot help to praise the Lord and to pray that He make me more like Christ. But this prayer comes with a caveat. As Newton’s hymn depicts, spiritual growth is neither profitless nor painless.

*I asked the Lord that I might grow / In faith and love and ev'ry grace
Might more of His salvation know / And seek more earnestly His face*

*'Twas He who taught me thus to pray / And He I trust has answered prayer
But it has been in such a way / As almost drove me to despair*

*I hoped that in some favored hour / At once He'd answer my request
And by His love's constraining power / Subdue my sins and give me rest*

*Instead of this He made me feel / The hidden evils of the heart
And let the angry powers of hell / Assault my soul in ev'ry part*

*Yea more with His own hand He seemed / Intent to aggravate my woe
Crossed all the fair designs I'd schemed / Humbled my heart and laid me low*

*Lord why is this I trembling cried / Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death
'Tis in this way the Lord replied / I answer prayer for grace and faith*

*These inward trials I employ / From self and pride to set you free
And break thy schemes of earthly joy / That thou may'st find your all in Me*

[“I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow” by John Newton (written in 1779) © public domain]