

WHAT ARE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES?

Understanding the power of sin over us will help us grasp the meaning and necessity for spiritual disciplines.

Sin

The Bible explains sin with several metaphors. Sin:

- Captures (Prov. 5:22; Heb. 12:1)
- Enslaves (Gen. 4:7; John 8:34; Rom. 7:14, 23; Gal. 3:22)
- Is deadly (Rom. 6:23; 5:12; Eph. 2:1)
- Is a sickness (Ps. 32:1–5; Isa. 53:5; Matt. 9:2, 5; 1 Peter 2:24)
- Is impurity (Zech. 13:1; Ps. 51:2; Isa. 1:18)
- Separates (Isa. 59:1–2; Eph. 2:12–16; 4:18)

Sin disguises itself as habits—that is, behaviors and thoughts that have become “second-nature.” Many of the sins we commit come so naturally to us that we hardly notice them—whether they occur while driving on a busy freeway, having conversations about other people, abusing substances or other harmful things that may temporarily make us feel better. Habits require time and repetition to become entrenched. These habits enslave us, lead us to deadly consequences, make us sick, corrupt us, and ultimately separate us from God. We have to unlearn many of these behaviors and learn behaviors that are fit for the citizens of God’s kingdom.

Spiritual disciplines are practices we do regularly that can help us change, with the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, our sinful habits into good habits that make us more like Christ and connect us closer to God.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES AND SALVATION

We are saved by and through God’s grace alone. We can do nothing to earn our salvation. Spiritual disciplines are not behaviors or practices that make us right with God in any way. They are tools that the Holy Spirit can use to renew our hearts. When we practice spiritual disciplines:

- We recognize that Jesus is the King of our lives.
- We acknowledge that we belong to him alone.
- We also seek to live out the fruit of the Spirit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23).

Spiritual disciplines *do not* help God to make our lives holy. Instead:

- They help us recognize God’s callings and promptings in our lives, and identify those areas in our lives that still need to be renewed.
- They make us sensitive and humble to follow God’s leading.
- They help us realize that we depend completely on God’s grace at every moment and for everything.
- They train and equip us to respond in a worthy manner when life throws problems and storms at us.

2. PRAYER

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- Many of the Psalms are prayers—for example, see Psalms 10, 59, 83, 86, and others
- The believer is to constantly be in an attitude of prayer—Luke 18:1; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:8
- Access to God through Jesus belongs to the believer—Heb. 4:16
- The manner of prayer calls for honest communication, not showy pretense or empty repetition—Ecc. 5:1–3; Matt. 6:5–7
- Prayer should not be done with an unforgiving attitude—Mark 11:25
- Prayer should be made in confident hope that God hears and knows our real needs—Matt. 7:7–11; Heb. 11:6

THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

- Prayer is commanded in the Bible. The discipline of prayer is a way to be obedient to this commandment.
- Often learning about the heroes of the faith is intimidating. Instead of being motivated, we might feel discouraged with the enormous challenge of their example.
- Who could fly a jet or run a marathon without much previous and rigorous training? No one is born knowing how to pray and being great at it.
- Learning to pray is a bit like learning to swim. It can only happen in the water, despite fears, insecurities, and doubts.
- Prayer requires *concentration* and *focus*.
 - ▲ Teaching ourselves to concentrate is one of the reasons we close our eyes.
 - ▲ But we need to close our ears and minds as well to the many distractions around us.
 - ▲ Spending a few minutes just to quiet mind and heart will help us achieve better concentration and focus.
- Prayer builds up our humility, dependence on God, and compassion for others.
- If praying on your own is difficult, make a “prayer date” with a friend you are comfortable with.
- Start by praying simple, short prayers—pray one minute, take a break and read or sing, then pray again.
- When you feel stuck, unmotivated, or without words—all very normal occurrences—pray a prayer from the Bible: a psalm, the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), Nehemiah’s prayer (Neh. 1:5–11), Solomon’s prayer (1 Kings 8:22–61).
- Your prayers do not have to be pretty—the Holy Spirit takes all of our prayers, pretty or not, and brings them before God the Father (Rom. 8:26–27).
- Make sure your prayers include, among other things, *praise* for God’s greatness, *gratitude* for God’s gifts, *petitions* for you and others, *confession* of your struggles and sins, and whatever the Spirit brings to your mind.
- The apostle Paul tells us to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17). Is this even possible? Not immediately. Just as no one can run a marathon without training, no one can pray continually without training.
- Sometimes prayer is a “battleground.” Prayer can be difficult and produce anxiety. Sometimes it is while praying that God reveals to us what needs changing, what needs to be done. Sometimes, prayer can be a painful mirror.
- Finally, our prayers are not primarily for changing God’s mind about something; prayer changes our mind about who we are, what we need, and how we please God. Prayer is transformational.

3. FASTING

BIBLICAL BASIS AND EXAMPLES

- The nation Israel fasted asking God's forgiveness—Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 7:6; Jer. 36:9; Ezra 8:21–23
- The city of Nineveh fasted asking God's forgiveness—Jonah 3:5–10
- Moses fasted when he received God's commandments—Ex. 34:28
- David fasted seeking God's forgiveness and guidance—2 Sam. 1:12, 3:35, 12:16–22
- Ezra fasted to ask God's forgiveness—Ezra 10:6
- Nehemiah fasted seeking God's favor—Neh. 1:4
- Daniel fasted seeking God's favor—Dan. 9:3, 10:2–3
- Anna fasted seeking God's favor and guidance—Luke 2:37
- Cornelius fasted seeking God's favor—Acts 10:30
- Paul fasted seeking God's guidance—Acts 9:9
- Jesus fasted in the wilderness seeking God's guidance—Matt. 4:2
- The manner of fasting is to be sincere, dedicated to God, without a public show—Matt. 6:16–18

“First, let [fasting] be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven.”

—(John Wesley, as found in the collection *Sermons On Several Occasions*)

THE DISCIPLINES TODAY

- Fasting may be the most neglected of all the spiritual disciplines today. It is easy to dismiss it as an old and quaint practice. But we miss an important and meaningful opportunity for spiritual growth.
- The central point of fasting is training for self-control (2 Peter 1:6; Gal. 5:23; 1 Peter 1:13).
- If we are to break the hold of habits—sin—in our lives, training for self-control is essential.
- Fasting is an effective approach to developing self-control because it deals with a very fundamental necessity of human existence: food.
- We need food to live; however, we can become enslaved by food—or other things we may need or simply want for our lives.
- If we are able to control things essential for life, we will be able to keep in check the things that are not essential for life.
- The practice of fasting fosters humility, reliance on God, compassion, gratitude, and self-control.
- Begin by fasting from food for a short period, such as skipping a meal. Build your fasting time up from there.
- As much as possible, use the time it takes to get or prepare food and eat it for prayer and Bible reflection.
- Fasting from food is the most obvious way to do it. However, you can also abstain from other things. For example, watching television (or other media) often consumes too much of our lives. That central place belongs to God alone.
- If you find you rely too much on caffeine to stay awake or for energy, it may be a good idea to fast from caffeine and be reminded that our dependence on God is sufficient.
- We can extend the same principle to many things around us: technology, music, sports, and so on.
- Internet, although a wonderful tool of communication, can absorb our time and attention in ways not even television could. Try a “media fast.” Turning the computer off in order to be completely present in the lives of others has become a wonderful spiritual practice for many people today.

Other Resources

[Prayer and Acting - Tim Mackie](#)

Feasting and Fasting - Tim Mackie

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you feel empty or restless, what do you do to try to fill the emptiness? What does this tell you about your heart?
2. What is your attitude toward fasting or self-denial?
3. In what ways do you currently deny yourself?
4. When has self-denial brought you something good?
5. What has the experience of fasting been like for you?
6. Where do you operate from an entitlement mentality? How can you wean yourself from this way of life?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. To deepen your understanding of how Jesus denied himself and embraced suffering and death for you, practice some sort of fasting.
2. When the fasting is difficult, share your thoughts and feelings with Jesus. What does Jesus say to you? • Tell Jesus what it means to you to share and fellowship with him in his sufferings.
3. Fast one meal a week. Spend your mealtime in prayer. When you feel hungry, sit with Jesus in the wilderness and feed on the bread of heaven. • Talk to Jesus about what his self-denial means to you.
4. For a period of one week, fast from media, sports, shopping, reading or use of the computer. Dedicate the time you now have to God. What feelings arise in you? What thoughts interrupt your prayer?
5. Make two lists: one of needs, the other of wants. Ask God to show you where to fast from some of your wants. Offer to God the time you spend hankering after your wants.
6. Abstain from purchasing morning coffee or daily sodas or evening videos. Offer the money or time to God.
7. When facing a trial, decide on a fast that gives you time to seek God's strength in your journey.

The Jesus Prayer combines "Son of David, have mercy on me" (Luke 18:39) with "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Breathing in, you pray Jesus, Son of David," breathing out, you say, "have mercy on me, a sinner." This short repetitive prayer frees you from linear thought and allows you to begin to pray in your body, not just your mind. It is meant to

be a lived, breathing rhythm of surrender. And it is a constant reminder of the One in whose presence you stand.

Examples of breath prayers are

- breathe in "Abba," breathe out "I belong to you."
- breathe in "Healer," breathe out "speak the word and I shall be healed."
- breathe in "Shepherd," breathe out "bring home my lost son."
- breathe in "Holy One," breathe out "keep me true."
- breathe in "Lord," breathe out "here I am."
- breathe in "Jesus," breathe out "have mercy on me."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you practice Paul's injunction to pray without ceasing?
2. How do you pray in a way that keeps you as conscious as possible of Christ's presence within you?
3. How does the thought of repetitive prayer strike you?
4. What are the up sides and down sides of repetitive prayer?
5. How might a breath prayer be shorthand for a longer prayer of your heart?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Become comfortable. Breathe deeply. Intentionally place yourself before God. In rhythm with your breathing, gratefully inhale the breath of life. Exhale remembering that Jesus gave his last breath for love of you. Gently and thankfully repeat, "Breath of life, breathe on me."
2. Decide to pray the Jesus Prayer or some other scriptural breath prayer as often as you are able during one day. If you worry about forgetting, set a clock at every hour to remind mind you, or put the prayer on your car mirror. Reminders should be gentle and not forced.
 - In the evening spend time telling the Lord what it means to you to be able to return to him again and again during the day with one particular prayer.
3. Is there someone for whom you wish to pray ceaselessly? Listen deeply to what Jesus' desire for this person might be.
 - Form a breath prayer naming God's adequacy and your desire for the person. Throughout the day as they come to mind, offer up your prayer. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into long prayer dialogues about what you want God to do in this person's life. Let the breath prayer carry all your desire to God.

4. Begin and end each day with your breath prayer. Let it be the word that comes to mind as you wake and as you fall asleep.
5. Tell someone what breath prayer means to you.
6. Help a child form a breath prayer to say while at school or at play.