

# introduction : why spiritual disciplines?

"Superficiality is the curse of our age.... The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people."

-Richard Foster, "Celebration of Discipline"

"The spiritual life is first of all a life. It is not merely something to be known and studied, it is to be lived."

-Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in Solitude"

"Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself."

--Leo Tolstoy

*Once upon a time, a group of men from Chicago left their jobs in the high-rise office buildings, moved to the prairie, and bought some farmland.*

*"We're farmers!" They all declared to each other. And all summer long they would go to the field to watch their crop grow up. However, when September rolled in, their fields were filled with goldenrod and all kinds of wildflowers and weeds.*

*"Where's the corn?" they asked each other. And they wondered what they could have possibly done wrong.*

Growing up in the church, I have often noted the fact that so few "long-time church members" experience the significant life-change expected from many years as students of Jesus. Like those city boys, they purchase the land, but do nothing to cultivate a field in which growth could take place.

Why do so many of us feel like we just have not grown very much in the likeness of our Master? Are we just spiritually "thick-headed?" Are we just not "built" to be spiritual giants? Or have we simply not been taught what it means to be a student of Jesus?

Perhaps we as the church have placed so much emphasis on making converts that we have neglected to make disciples. We work hard to help people come to faith--to become a "Christian"-but can you identify any intentional efforts to help people become more like our Teacher?

Perhaps we have emphasized a wrong teaching about faith and its relationship to good deeds. Works has gotten a bad rap, while workless faith has grown more appealing-"cheap grace" as Bonhoeffer stated it.

Maybe both are involved. Maybe something else. In any case, we must realize that something is wrong, and we must take steps-even "radical" steps-to "strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Revelation 3:2).

This study is an invitation for you to make an intentional effort to cultivate the kind of life in which God can bring change. It is an invitation for you to train yourself in the practices for growing in the likeness of Christ. These practices have historically been referred to as the spiritual disciplines.

Richard Foster, in his classic book, Celebration of Discipline, uses two metaphors to illustrate the purpose of disciplines: a field and a path.

A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plants, and then natural forces of

the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines--they are a way of sowing to the Spirit.

The spiritual disciplines are, "a means of receiving God's grace. ...[They] allow us to place ourselves before God so he can transform us." He goes on to say, that the spiritual disciplines are like a narrow ridge with a sheer drop-off on either side: there is the abyss of trust in works on one side and the abyss of faith without deeds on the other.

On the ridge there is a path, the disciplines of the spiritual life. ...We must always remember that the path does not produce change; it only places us where the change can occur.

The task for us, then is to cultivate our daily lives into fertile ground in which God can bring growth and change. This is what the spiritual disciplines are all about.

Dallas Willard defines a discipline as, "any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort." One of my goals since high school has been to dunk a basketball. For over ten years, I have, by natural ability, been able only to grab the rim. I need another six to eight inches before I can dunk. The only way I will reach this goal is by engaging in some specific exercises that will increase my vertical jump. They will, in time, enable me to do what I cannot do now by direct effort.

The application to the spiritual life is not too difficult to understand. If your life-as-usual has not been fertile ground in which God can bring change, then, as Dallas Willard writes, "life-as-usual must go."

Your practice of spiritual disciplines will require an alteration of life-as-usual. You will approach your life with these two questions:

What am I currently not doing that, if I were doing, would open myself up more to God's work of grace in my life?

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2) What am I currently doing that, if eliminated, would open myself up more to God's work of grace in my life?

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In the coming lessons, you will examine fourteen specific disciplines that you may make a part of your life; depending on what you are either neglecting or engaged in that is standing between you and spiritual growth.

Before concluding, I would like to explain one danger of the spiritual disciplines and three ways to avoid that danger.

If we approach them incorrectly, the spiritual disciplines meant to bring life may become laws that lead to death. Legalism has a nasty way of creeping in and turning the means of these practices into ends in themselves.

How do we avoid that danger?

- 1) Constantly remember the purpose of the spiritual disciplines. Recall Foster's image of the path: "the path does not produce change; it only places us where the change can occur."
- 2) Listen to Jesus. Ask God to point out where you have begun to pursue the disciplines rather than Him, and He will make it known to you. The Holy Spirit, as Jesus said, will guide us in all truth.
- 3) Remember that change is God's work, not yours. Again, Foster's words are helpful: The spiritual disciplines are, "a means of receiving God's grace. ...[They] allow us to place ourselves before God so he can transform us."

In the 1990's, Gatorade ran a long series of commercials that sang the jingle, "I want to be like Mike" (referring to the basketball superstar, Michael Jordan). The student of Jesus Christ must have his or her own jingle, "I want to be like Jesus." In essence, that is what spiritual disciplines are all about.

As an apprentice of the Master, you watch his methods, and put them into practice. You listen to his teaching, and apply it in your everyday life. As Dallas Willard puts it, the spiritual disciplines are "simply a matter of following [Jesus] into his own practices, appropriately modified to suit our own condition."

I invite you to the truly wonderful experience of throwing out life-as-usual and taking up new paths where God can change our lives from the inside out.

for further study

1. The gospels are full of examples of Jesus both teaching and practicing disciplines such as solitude, silence, fasting, worship, prayer, secrecy, simplicity, celebration, fellowship, and service. Read through Matthew and make a note of the examples you find.

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2. Richard Foster said, "Superficiality is the curse of our age." John Ortberg said that our greatest enemy in the spiritual life is Hurry. How are hurry (busy-ness) and superficiality related? Are you under the curse of superficiality?

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# spiritual disciplines: silence and solitude

"Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life."  
-Dallas Willard, "The Spirit of the Disciplines"

"We receive only when we are recollected; only in silence is heard the beating of the heart of God."  
-Father Bernardo Olivera

"Best of any song is bird song in the quiet, but first you must have the quiet."  
-Wendell Berry

"It is a good discipline to wonder in each new situation if people wouldn't be better served by our silence than by our words."  
-Henri J. M. Nouwen, "The Way of the Heart"

There are many attitudes, actions, and assumptions, which are a part of our normal routines that are occluding God's work of changing our hearts. Our first step to opening up our lives to God's grace is to expose these "occlusions." When we can identify the blockage, we can then take the appropriate steps to remove it.

We will examine some causes of spiritual suffocation: noise and loneliness. We will then explore the practices we can use to overcome them, thus opening our lives up to the life-change that God has made available through Jesus Christ.

## **Noise and Company: Trying to Fill the Infinite with the Finite**

Everyone is part Egyptian. We have all spent time living in denial. (sorry...)

We have an infinite void in our hearts that we attempt to fill with noise, people, busy-ness, possessions, and other finite things. This is a major sickness in our culture.

We are addicted to noise. We need noise. We've got to have noise! Silence is creepy, even frightening. Silence steals away the distractions of life which anesthetize us from the feeling that our lives are still empty. Noise helps us live on the banks of denial. Noise keeps us concentrated on something else-anything else!

Think about how much we hate to think. There is a t-shirt that reads, "When I work, I work hard. When I play, I play hard. When I think...I fall asleep." Contemplation is a four-letter word. Reflection is for mirrors and pools and highway signs. Why? It is because when we look at what our life really consists of, we are terrified by its vast emptiness.

Do you know someone who cannot be in the house alone without the television or radio on? Do you know someone who has trouble "doing nothing?" Do you know someone who cannot ride in the car without music playing? Do you know someone who is terrified of being alone? Is that person you?

All our attempts to fill our infinite emptiness with finite things are simply a long string of distractions that occupy our mind until we slip into blessed unconsciousness. Think of all the things people do to "get their mind off it"-whatever "it" might be.

We are addicted to company. Notice also the many ways we work to fill the space around us. We fear being alone. We fear solitude. It is this fear that reveals a desperate insecurity within ourselves. However, our attempts to fill our lives with company will never satisfy the true hunger of the heart-community with God.

I do not suggest that we do not need relationships with other people. On the contrary, we need more true relationships with other people. However, time is necessary if one is to develop a true friendship with God. This must be time spent in solitude.

What would happen if we embraced being alone in quiet as an opportunity to become aware of God's presence? We just might find the One thing that can fill the infinite emptiness in our hearts.

### **Solitude and Silence: Filling the Infinite Void with the Infinite Fullness of God**

Solitude is the practice of being absent from other people and other things so that you can be present with God. In solitude, we rest from our attempts to re-create the world in our image. We rest from arranging our relationships and manipulating people with our words. In solitude, we say to God, "I am here to be changed into whatever you like." In solitude, we learn to "wait on the Lord."

Solitude teaches us that we do not need other people in the way that we usually think we need them. It teaches us that our value is not determined by our usefulness to others-who is using our services when we are absent? Solitude teaches us to hear the voice of God, since we are cut off from the hundreds of other voices that call out to us from our usual company.

Solitude forces us to face despair, yet it provides the only opportunity to discover the amazing power of God's presence. Too often, we run from our loneliness. I am sensitive to the dark power of despair and loneliness-the pain defies explanation-however, I have discovered that it is often in the midst of such experiences that God's presence is most powerfully felt. It is only here that we truly comprehend the words of Jesus, "I am with you always, even to the end of the ages."

Silence is the practice of quieting every voice, including your own inner and outer voices. It is written of one of the Desert Fathers, Abbot Agatho, "that for three years he carried a stone in his mouth until he learned to be silent." A rather extreme measure, but it demonstrates how difficult it is for us to be silent.

Silence means being still so that we can hear the Voice that searches our hearts and minds. We must quiet our own hearts and mouths if we are to be able to listen to the voice of God.

Silence also means excusing ourselves from the voices of others. The demands of the world around us do not easily go away. We hear countless requests and demands each day over the radio, on the television, and from the people around us. Each vying for our time and attention. Certainly some of these voices are important for us to hear-especially the voices of our family. However, there is One Voice that is above all necessary for us to hear. For this reason, we must develop habits of being unavailable to the voices all around us so we can learn to hear the Divine Voice.

Silence is also necessary to free ourselves from our tendency to control. Silence frees us from the tyranny we hold over others with our words. Thomas Merton wrote, "It is not speaking that breaks our silence, but the anxiety to be heard." When we are silent, it is much more difficult to manipulate and control the people and circumstances around us. Words are the weapons we lay down when we practice silence. We give up our insistence of being heard and obeyed. Silence forces us to surrender to the will of Another.

Solitude and silence, combined with an engaged mind. These are the practices to open our lives up to the grace of God. God says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). They are the practices of waiting on the Lord. They are active stillness. They are readying one's heart to receive.

Solitude and silence, combined with a mind that is actively waiting on God will enable us to view life as God reveals it to us. We will consider our actions and the motives behind them. We will

consider the actions of others and allow God to season our response with compassion and forgiveness-because we first recognize the compassion and forgiveness God has shown to us.

Solitude and silence, when matched with such attention, destroy the darkness of loneliness as we recognize that there is One who is eternally present with us. No longer will we coerce people into paying attention to us. These practices will strengthen our awareness that there is no such thing as solitary confinement-for though we may find ourselves abandoned by people, God has not, nor will He ever abandon us. We are freed from the suffocating chains of isolation as we recognize that we are not alone.

In silence and solitude, we discover that our infinitely empty lives can only find fulfillment in an infinite God. So in silence and solitude, we seek Him-and find Him!

The most fantastic thing occurs when we develop what Brother Lawrence termed, "the practice of the presence of God." When our emptiness has been replaced by the fullness of His presence, we begin to view all other parts of life in a new way. God removes the "continual lust for more" (Eph 4:19) that results from a life apart from Him, and replaces it with contentment and ridiculous generosity.

Silence and solitude combined with attention to the presence of God; these are the starting point for all other practices. They place us where we may listen to hear God's perspective on our world, our circumstances, our goals, and our relationships.

Well, how do you do it? How does a person go about putting these practices into practice? There are many ways (more, in fact, than I will list below), for there are many ways we try to fill our lives with the finite. Allow me to suggest the following principles and practice.

1) Solitude and silence may require time and space.

a) Make or find a place where solitude and silence can occur.

--Find a quiet place in a library, a room in your home, a room in a church; somewhere where you will not be interrupted.

--Consider making a spare room in your house into a sanctuary. We make rooms for watching television, why not make one for communing with God?

--As an experiment, try to see how quiet you can actually make your home, car, etc.

b) Create a regular, non-negotiable place in your schedule that is solely for the purpose of being alone and still before God.

c) Carve out three or four days where you can be completely alone. There are many retreat centers designed specifically for such a purpose.

d) If you have large blocks of time where you are alone (at home, in the car), leave the television, radio, etc., off and focus your thoughts on scripture and in prayer. We who know how to worry also know how to meditate-it is just a matter of what our minds dwell on.

2) Solitude and silence do not always require time and space. When you develop a habit of solitude and silence, you will be able to take them with you wherever you go-especially in the hectic places of your life.

a) Look for the short times each day where you can find solitude and silence. Use those times to focus your attention on seeking God's presence.

--The quiet morning moments before you get out of bed.

--The quiet after the children have gone to school.

--The short drive to work (leave the radio off).

--The traffic jam on the way to work.

--The moments you see a beautiful blue sky or green fields or imposing mountains. Let them direct your thoughts on the Creator.

3) Solitude and silence always require attention. Silence and solitude without engaging the mind will put us to sleep.

a) Consider memorized Scripture. Chew it over in your thoughts and apply it in appropriate ways

to your circumstances and relationships.

b) Consider an attribute of God. Think of the significance of the fact that He is present (also, able to do the impossible, gracious, good, just, etc.)

c) Consider the faithful actions of God in the past (Israel, the Church, and in your life). Read Scripture and see His works in history. Reflect on your past. Ask God to reveal the ways He has provided for you.

d) Listen. Wait in active stillness, "more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning" (Ps 130:5-6).

## spiritual disciplines: fasting and frugality

Once two brethren came to a certain elder whose custom it was not to eat every day. But when he saw the brethren he invited them with joy to dine with him saying: Fasting has its reward, but he who eats out of charity fulfils two commandments, for he sets aside his own will and he refreshes his hungry brethren.

-from "Wisdom of the Desert: Translations from the 'Verba Seniorum,'" by Thomas Merton.

"Stop trying to impress people with your clothes and impress them with your life."  
-Richard Foster, "Freedom of Simplicity"

Abbot Agatho frequently admonished his disciple, saying: Never acquire for yourself anything that you might hesitate to give to your brother if he asked you for it, for thus you would be found a transgressor of God's command. If anyone asks, give it to him, and if anyone wants to borrow from you, do not turn away from him.

-from "Wisdom of the Desert: Translations from the 'Verba Seniorum,'" by Thomas Merton

### Two Stories of Spiritual Foundering

*Joe had almost done it. It was 11:51pm and he had gone the whole day without eating. It was his first attempt at fasting, but at that moment all that was on his mind was: "Should I wait until after midnight to order the pizza or can I order it now-since it wouldn't be ready until after midnight anyway?"*

*To this day, Joe doesn't remember what he decided to do, but he does remember that the pizza was delicious!*

*Lenny had just come back from hearing the missionary speak of the horrible poverty where he served. The pictures of the children with torn, worn, and re-worn clothes had made an impact on him. In fact is such that when he opened his closet and saw his piles and piles of clothes-many of which he rarely wore-he decided to give his excess away to Goodwill.*

*The next morning Lenny woke up and set himself to the task of dividing up his laundry between the essentials and the excess. After going through his piles of clothes, he had decided that he would give up all the clothes he did not wear every week. The pile was substantial. Later, Lenny congratulated himself on his sacrifice as he dropped off the bags to Goodwill.*

*On the way home, Lenny saw a sale sign at his favorite clothing store. Lenny walked in the door of his home with two pair of new blue jeans, three shirts, six pair of socks (they were 3 for \$8!), and a new pair of shoes.*

Fasting and frugality are two spiritual disciplines that our culture will not make easy for us. In fact, the messages of almost every commercial urge us to eat more, buy more, eat more, buy more...

In this section, we will explore the why and the how of fasting and frugality-two practices that will bring us incredible freedom and open our lives to God's great work of making us more like Jesus.

### Fasting: Finding Food That Is Out of This World

What is fasting for?

The primary purpose of this practice is for focusing on God. Early on in this practice, the pangs of hunger may serve as reminders to focus our hearts on God. As we develop in this practice, fasting will result in an increasing spiritual sensitivity. We will be more "tuned in" to the Spirit's leading.

We will be more aware of our own inner condition. We will be more aware of the needs of others.

When Jesus was fasting in the desert he was tempted to turn stones into loaves of bread, but he said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Another time, Jesus' disciples urged Jesus to eat some food (here, Jesus was not said to be fasting), he responded, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about...My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish the work" (John 4:32,34). In abstaining from food and/or drink, we discover an alternative source of strength.

If you recall, one reason for practicing spiritual disciplines is to eliminate the things that keep us from experiencing the fullness of life in God. Through this practice of abstaining from food and/or drink, God can break our bondage to satisfying ourselves. Fasting reveals the things that control us.

From time to time, I unintentionally fast from eating chocolate (it is unintentional because there is just none around!). When I finish a meal, I enjoy a small bit of chocolate. But when there is no chocolate, I realize how much I am imprisoned by it. This is not an example of a discipline, but it is, nonetheless, very revealing.

Fasting will, however, reveal much more than our dependence on food. As we focus on the character and presence of God instead of food, our character will be revealed to us. We will have a heightened spiritual awareness not only of God, but of our own hearts. As Richard Foster writes, "Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear-if they are within us, they will surface during fasting." This is a benefit to us because with these things revealed, they can also be addressed.

What isn't fasting for?

Fasting is not commanded. Jesus said, "When you fast..." (Matthew 6:16). As with any discipline, there is the danger to turn it into law (as the story in the beginning of this section illustrates). But we must not make it so. As Paul said, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). That said, it is, nevertheless, assumed to be a normal part of the life of the disciple.

Fasting is not for impressing others. Jesus essentially said, "When you fast, don't make a big show of it." If you fast, it does not make you superior to others. In fact, if you think yourself better than others because of it, that will only display your spiritual poverty.

Fasting is not magic. The teaching of some may imply that fasting can be used to influence God to act. We do not go on hunger strikes to force God's hand-that is an attempt to manipulate God. Neither do we need to make extravagant pleas to move Him to action (Consider the parable of widow and judge in Luke 18:2-8; also Jesus teaching about prayer in Matthew 6:7-8 and 7:7-12). Fasting is not to try to get God to change his mind, but to help us "see more clearly" what God is doing.

How do we fast?

1) Keep your focus. As you begin the practice of fasting it will be important to keep reminding yourself of the purpose of fasting. Your body will argue (grumbling, weakness, headaches), but don't let those things distract you from your goal. Allow them to serve as reminders to pray or to be still before God.

2) Start out small. Take baby steps into it by fasting one or two meals, one day a week. Then you may increase that as is appropriate (allow me to direct you to Richard Foster's book, Celebration of Discipline. His chapter on fasting has some very practical guidance).

3) Meditate on Jesus' teaching and practice of fasting along with related Scriptures. Read Matthew 4:1-11, 6:16-18, 9:15; John 4:42-34; Luke 12:22-34; Phil 3:19; Rom 16:17-18; 1 Cor 6:12-13).

Resources on Fasting:

Richard Foster, "Celebration of Discipline"

David R. Smith, "Fasting: A Neglected Discipline"

### **Frugality: Appropriate Smallness in a Bigger-Better World**

What is frugality?

Frugality is not stinginess. It is not penny-pinching. Frugality is not buying only sale-items. It is not wearing suits or dresses until they disintegrate. The practice of frugality is about removing our desire for status, glamour, and luxury. It is primarily concerned with our attitudes toward money or goods or food.

Frugality goes completely against the grain of our culture that is so obsessed with "the pursuit of happiness"-which today means comfort and indulgence, pampering and pleasure, luxury, and leisure. Practicing frugality means that we reject the notion that we need such things to make our lives fulfilled. We practice frugality so that our resources (time, energy, thoughts) may be devoted to seeking and serving God, instead of impressing others and gratifying ourselves.

Why do we need to practice frugality?

Consider how much of our time is spent on doing things to impress others or to serve our own desires. We spend so much time on indifferent things-things that really do not matter. As for other people, they do not think about us as much as we worry about what they think of us. As for our desires, often when we obtain them, we are too busy considering the next thing to enjoy them.

We need to practice frugality because we live in a culture that tells us that we need the bigger, the better, and the faster-and not only do we need them, we deserve them! We need to un-learn the patterns of self-indulgence that we have practiced for so many years. Frugality is the painful path that reminds us of how selfish and materialistic we have become.

We need to practice frugality because we live in a culture of waste. Incalculable tons of garbage are 'produced' each day. About 70 percent of all the metal we use is used only once. Most of what we use is thrown away. Most people have enough food rotting in their refrigerators and cupboards to feed many third world families for several weeks.

We need to practice frugality because we live in a world where a billion people survive on less than a dollar a day. How much do you 'survive' on each day? By our wasteful and self-indulgent lifestyles we are contributing to the poverty and starvation around the world. Don't feel guilty, feel responsible, and do something about it.

If you were to inventory your life, how much of your time, thoughts, and energies are spent on indifferent things? How much of your life do you spend trying to find the perfect color of paint for a bathroom? The perfect tie for a new suit? The perfect dessert to go with a particular entrée? The perfect gift for a friend (one that will result in showers of gratitude and admiration)? How much of your life do you spend following the lives of celebrities or the storylines of television programs?

Frugality is about investment of time, of money, of thought, and of energy. We refrain from spending them on indifferent things so that we may be free to spend them on things that are

eternal. Does this remind you of any Scripture? Maybe I can direct you to meditate on Matthew 6:19-34, 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

How do we practice frugality?

As with every spiritual practice, there are no rules to follow. However, the following suggestions may be helpful as you find appropriate ways to apply them where necessary.

1) Inventory. Go through your house and take a note of what is necessary and what is luxury. For each luxury:

-Ask yourself, Would I be willing to give this up if God asked me to?

-Ask yourself, Could the time, energy, thought, and money I spent acquiring this have been invested in better ways?

-Ask God how He would have you use these luxuries.

-Ask God if He would have you give any or all of them up. If you are convinced that He is asking you to rid yourself of them (after listening in prayer, study, and consultation with a trusted mature Christian friend), then get rid of them in the most appropriate manner.

) Re-Consider. If you have been considering a major purchase, submit it (again?) to God in prayer. Search out your motives for buying it (Is it to have the latest and greatest? To keep up with the Jones's? To cater to your spoiled appetite? Or is it to serve others in some way?).

3) Re-Schedule. Go through your daily schedule and make a note of what percentage of your thoughts are spent dwelling on indifferent things.

-Commit yourself to refrain from spending inappropriate amounts of time thinking about things that really do not matter.

-Ask God to help you bring your thoughts under His guidance.

-Ask God to help you "take every thought captive for Christ."

4) Consider your diet and note how much you concern yourself with food. Are you spending inappropriate amounts of time or money here?

Resources on Frugality and Simplicity:

Richard Foster, "Freedom of Simplicity"

Ronald Sider, "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger"

Francis Florand, "Stages of Simplicity"

Arthur Gish, "Beyond the Rat Race"

## spiritual disciplines: secrecy and sacrifice

A brother asked Mathois, saying, "If I go to live in a certain place, how wouldst thou have me behave there?" The old man said to him, "If thou dost dwell in a place, seek not to make thyself a name for this or that saying, 'I do not come into the assembly of the brethren,' or 'I do not eat this or that,' for these things make thee an empty name, but thereafter thou shalt suffer annoyance, for when men hear of such, thither they run."

-from "The Desert Fathers," translated by Helen Waddell.

"Secrecy rightly practiced enables us to place our public relations department entirely in the hands of God..."

- Dallas Willard, "The Spirit of the Disciplines"

"One of the monks, called Serapion, sold his book of the Gospels and gave the money to those who were hungry, saying: I have sold the book which told me to sell all that I had and give to the poor."

-from "Wisdom of the Desert: Translations from the 'Verba Seniorum,'" by Thomas Merton.

*"Daddy, Daddy! Watch this!" I heard the little girl saying it over and over until her dad would turn and look at her.*

*"That's nice, honey!" he said, and turned his attention back to his conversation. She interrupted again with the same plea while she performed amazing feats such as: "walking-the-imaginary-tightrope," "look-my-hand-is-a-talking-duck," and "spoon-balancing-on-the-head."*

*In conclusion, the preacher asked the people, "Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. What are you willing to sacrifice for God?"*

*The discouraged mother looked at her teenage son, sleeping in the seat next to her, and unexpectedly said aloud, "I'll sacrifice my son."*

*The teenager immediately woke up.*

Secrecy and Sacrifice. These are two more spiritual practices that are not made easy by our culture. However, they are two spiritual practices that will produce incredible freedom from the chains of emotional, spiritual, and material insecurity.

### **Secrecy: Finding Security in God and Freedom from the Approval Game.**

All the things we do so that people will recognize us, appreciate us, and admire us are like the silly actions of the little girl in the story above. When we do things so that people will notice us, we may get noticed, but we will receive no reward from God (since that was not what we were after). Jesus said, "Don't do your good deeds publicly so that you will be admired, because then you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1). The discipline of secrecy cuts to the heart of why we do the things we do. Do we serve others so that we will be admired for our selflessness? Do we give of our time and money so that we will be thought of as generous? Do we pray in public so that we will be respected as "mature Christians?"

Now, it cannot be helped; when we do good deeds, they will most likely be noticed. The question, however, is not with the results. The question is with our motivation. Do we do the things we do in order that we will be admired, respected, applauded? Are we caught up in the approval game?

How do you know if you are caught up in the approval game? Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I ever feel disappointed when nobody notices my efforts?
- Do I ever get upset when someone else gets the credit for my idea?
- Do I ever find myself doing something so someone will think I am smart?
- Do I ever sulk when my past achievements are forgotten or ignored?
- Do I ever get upset when no one says, "Thank you?"

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list, but it does reveal how deeply we all desire admiration, praise, and respect. We all want people to tell us we are "worthy." We want to know that we have immeasurable value in their opinion.

The little girl who cries out, "Daddy, Daddy! Watch this!" wants to know that she is worthy of her father's love-which is expressed, partly, in attention. So it is with people who do things to get noticed. We want to know that we are loved. Where does this desire come from? It comes from our insecurity about what makes us valuable as people.

What a difference it would make if we accepted the truth that God loves us without respect for our accomplishments, degrees, or physical characteristics! That God loves us simply because we are His "dearly loved children." The discipline of secrecy puts us in a place where we can experience this truth.

In practicing secrecy, we find the security of knowing that our value does not lie in the conditional applause and admiration of people, but in the fact that God's love for us is unconditional.

In practicing secrecy, we may intentionally prevent our deeds from being known. However, it is not necessary. We should not lie or mislead people just to keep our deeds a secret. Even if our deeds are recognized-which they often will be-the point is that we do not do them in order to be recognized. We are not practicing secrecy for the sake of secrecy, but to free us from the approval game-to free us into a life of security in God.

Secrecy frees us to love others freely, not just so they love us back. We love out of the infinite reserve of love we receive from God.

Secrecy frees us from conditional, tit-for-tat relationships. It frees us into a life of generosity and compassion.

Secrecy frees us to serve with true humility. Because we serve before the audience of One, we can, as Thomas à Kempis said, rise above the "praisings and blamings" of others. We accept any recognition with easy grace. A simple thank you, or you're welcome is enough. If we get no such recognition, we did not seek it in the first place, so we are not upset.

Some Practical Applications of Secrecy:

1. Go into your room, close the door behind you and pray.
2. Go to a clothing store and put a \$20 bill in the pocket of a pair of jeans while no one is looking (maybe in the dressing room).
3. When you go through a tollbooth, pay for the next ten cars behind you as well.
4. Send an unsigned card expressing love and encouragement to a neighbor.
5. Make up a basket of gift certificates and drop it at someone's door (that's the kind of ding-dong-digit people love!).

### **Sacrifice: Finding Security in God and Freedom from Material Insecurity**

We practice sacrifice to give up our self-security and find security in God. Sacrifice is not the same as frugality. Remember that frugality is giving up things which are "extras," luxuries, and other indifferent things, and instead, investing our time, money, and energy in things that have eternal significance.

In the practice of sacrifice, however, we go farther. We "give until it hurts." The practice of sacrifice is giving up the security of meeting our own needs with our own resources. It is, as Dallas

Willard puts it, "total abandonment to God, a stepping into the darkened abyss in the faith and hope that God will bear us up."

The practice of sacrifice places us well outside of our comfort zone, and into the desert where we must trust the resources of God. In some cases, this may involve the sacrifice of our financial security (Note: we must meet our normal financial commitments first. Sacrifice does not mean we are to become irresponsible. We should not be delinquent on our debts so we can give to some "good cause."). When all our bills are paid and we find a surplus, we may practice sacrifice and give the money away (however little or much it may be).

Only those who sacrifice experience the amazing depths of God's ability to provide. Only when we are totally abandoned to God do we discover the full wealth of His resources. Again, Willard provides a powerful image: "The cautious faith that never saws off the limb on which it is sitting never learns that unattached limbs may find strange, unaccountable ways of not falling."

Sacrifice is not only concerned with money. Practicing sacrifice may mean giving up the security of a relationship. Jesus said, "Whoever loves his mother or father or brother or sister or anyone more than me is not worthy of me." God called Abraham to give up his son (his only son, the son who he loved), Isaac. Abraham had finally discovered that his only security was to be in God alone, and so he was willing to sacrifice his long awaited hope and dream, Isaac.

Sacrifice may involve giving up your time, sleep, shirt, coat, career-whatever of your own resources that you trust in rather than God.

It is necessary for us to examine the source of our security. The practice of sacrifice helps us to find security somewhere other than our own resources and relationships. And when we sacrifice, we discover the freedom that comes in such a life of abandonment. We find a security that is (pardon the pun) out of this world.

Examine your life. In which areas do you rely solely on your own resources? Would you be willing to risk cutting off that branch so you can discover "strange, unaccountable ways" God can provide? I guarantee you will be surprised at the results.

# spiritual disciplines: prayer and study

"Those who live prayerfully are constantly ready to receive the breath of God, and to let their lives be renewed and expanded."  
-Henri J. M. Nouwen, "With Open Hands"

"All good meditative prayer is a conversion of our entire self to God."  
-Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in Solitude"

Keep your soul free. What matters most in life is not knowledge, but character.  
-A. G. Sertillanges, "The Intellectual Life"

"Many people have chosen to seek knowledge rather than to live well, and they are often let astray and their lives come to very little--  
or nothing at all."  
-Thomas a Kempis, "The Imitation of Christ"

*Sam closed his eyes as the elder began his prayer. Sam was with him for the first ten seconds, then he remembered that he needed to pick up some super-glue so he could fix that coffee cup he chipped that morning...which reminded him of breakfast...which reminded him of lunch...which reminded him that he also needed to get the grill's propane tank filled soon...which reminded him that the gas bills were finally coming down with the warmer weather...gee it's a beautiful day...kind of like those days he flew kites as a kid...nice breeze...warm sun on your face...Then the elder said, "Amen."*

*When Jamie's mother walked in her room, Jamie was laying on her back with her feet at the head of her bed. She had headphones covering her ears which blasted out music at a seemingly deafening volume. The television blared out some commercial about fast food. Jamie was holding a book up in the air two feet from her face.*

*"What are you doing?" her mother yelled.  
"Studying."*

Prayer and study are the two practices that are the most talked about, and perhaps the most commonly practiced-although not as commonly as we would like to imagine. Prayer and study are often either avoided or misapplied. However, they are two disciplines that act as catalysts for transformation in both the heart and mind.

## **Prayer: the Practice of the Presence of God**

There is much to say about prayer, but in this section we will consider prayer as a spiritual discipline. Prayer, of course, is much more than a spiritual discipline; it is a life. As Dallas Willard comments, "It would...be a rather low-voltage spiritual life in which prayer was chiefly undertaken as a discipline..." Still, prayer is a very potent practice for opening our lives to God.

Why do we need to practice prayer as a discipline? In our culture, it is because we have severely impaired attention spans. In prayer we attend our minds to God, and all too often that attention lasts for a few seconds. We begin our prayer with "Heavenly Father," and it is not long before our minds are meandering off; attending to anything other than the One we began to address.

It is for this reason that we must undertake prayer as a spiritual discipline-to enable ourselves to attain the single-mindedness necessary to attend to the God-who-is-present. It is also vital for us to understand that prayer, just as every other discipline, is a learning process. We will find ourselves distracted. We will notice our minds wandering among the countless concerns of the day. However, as we continue in the paths of prayer, our meanders will be shorter and less frequent.

Prayer is conversation or communication with God. It involves both speaking and listening. So often we pray as if it were a monologue. But prayer is so much more than talking to God. In fact, the seasoned pray-er knows that prayer is more about listening than talking.

Soren Kierkegaard said, "A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening." And this makes sense because God knows much more than we do-and He knows it a whole lot better than we do.

Prayer is opening our lives to God for change. Prayer is recognition that God is God and we are not, and so in prayer we yield our desires to God's. Jesus prayed, "Not my will but yours."

In prayer we ask God to change the way we see other people. When you look at other people, see in their faces the eyes of Christ. It is then that transformation happens. We serve others as if we were serving Jesus. We speak to others and listen to others as if we were speaking and listening to Jesus. This happens when we take seriously Jesus words, "Whatever you do to the least...you do it to me."

We ask God to change the way we see ourselves. A prayer I have found to be frightening, but liberating, is "Lord, shine your Light on the dark-shadowed corners of my heart. Show me what I am hiding from you." In prayer, I invite God to come in and occupy the rooms in my heart that I have previously labeled, "Keep Out!" Then I must pay attention to the soft voice of the Spirit as he points out my "restricted areas." When I hear the Spirit pointing out my impatience, I adjust my heart in gratitude for the time and opportunity God has given me. When I see the Spirit shedding light on my pride, I remember that it is only by God's grace that I have this life.

Prayer is not complicated. Prayer is not about saying the "right words," but rather a right orientation of our entire being toward God. Prayers do not need to be flowery. Prayers like that are said either to impress others or to manipulate God. Instead, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray he told them to use simple, straightforward speech (Matthew 6:7-13, 7:7-11).

"Praying is living," Henri Nouwen says. Prayer is not something that is done only before meals or during church services. It is not limited to bowed heads, clasped hands, and closed eyes. Since praying is paying attention to God (listening, watching), we really can "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Philippians 4:6). In whatever we do, we do it with the awareness that God is present. We can simply ask Him, "God, how would you like me to act in this situation?" or "God, how should I respond to that comment?"

Our prayers may be hours spent listening in silence and solitude. They may be momentary prayers for someone in a passing car. Our prayers may be spoken as we kneel at our bed before we go to sleep. They may be silently voiced as we walk into a meeting. There are many paths of prayer, because paths of prayer are the paths of life.

To pray without ceasing means that wherever we go and in whatever we are doing, we go and do with the awareness of the always-present God. We listen for His take on the world. We look at others and ourselves through His eyes. We ask God to show us what He is doing, and how He would have us join in the process. In prayer God invites us to participate in His world and operate our lives in His ways. As we practice this discipline, we will be able to see more clearly what God's will is so that we will know how we should pray (Romans 12:1-2).

### **Study: Perfecting the Brains God Gave Us**

Study is one of the most important keys to the change that God works in our lives. The Greek word for Repentance is "metanoeo." It means a change of thinking-a change of knowing. Metanoeo is what is in mind when Paul writes about a renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2).

Study is important because it is through study that we discover the truth found in Scripture. How will we know what God is like if we do not pay careful attention to the most significant ways He has revealed his nature and character? How will we know how God would have us live if we do not pay careful attention to the life of Christ recorded in the gospels? If we do not have right

understanding of these things, we cannot know how we should live—we will find ourselves to be on very shaky ground (Matthew 7:24-27; James 1:5-8).

Study is the pursuit of truth. We seek to understand things as they truly are. How does the human body heal itself? To know that, we study physiology, biochemistry, and histology. How do I replace a sink drain? To know that, we study Bob Vila's Time-Life home repair books. What is God really like? To know that, we study Scripture. In study, we seek to understand the way things are so we can respond appropriately.

Richard Foster provides some insight into study by noting four steps involved in study: 1) repetition [or rehearsal], 2) concentration [or attention], 3) comprehension [or understanding], and 4) reflection [or meditation].

Repetition is the easiest way to learn. If a person wants to learn how to swing a golf club correctly, he will first need to be shown the proper technique. However, after that, it is all about repetition. Muscles develop a memory (actually the brain develops the memory of how the muscles should be controlled), and the swing becomes "natural." So it is with the mind. That which we rehearse in our minds become patterns of thought. With enough time and rehearsal, they can become ingrained channels through which deep waters may pass unoccluded.

Here it is obvious that it matters what we rehearse in our minds. Can you think of how repetition of truths or lies may affect a person over time?

Attention is also necessary for study. There are many things that distract our minds from the attention necessary for attentive study (noise, interruptions, background music, crowds, tiredness, anxiety, etc.). We must do all we can to eliminate them—or at least minimize their effects. We must focus our thoughts on the object of our study (a book, a Bible story, a sermon, etc.). This requires perseverance. Sometimes we just have to plow through with determination to stay on task. Sometimes we will have to lay down the book (or whatever) and come back to it after some time, but we must come back to it.

Understanding is necessary for study. There comes a time (it may come quickly or after several years) when you finally "get it." It is the moment of "Eureka!" or "A ha!" when you finally get your mind around a concept, problem, teaching, or subject. Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, then you are really my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Finally, meditation, or reflection, is necessary for study. We look back on what we have studied and we "chew it over" in our minds. We dwell on it, play with it, apply it to different situations, challenge it, defend it, roll it over, put it away and pull it out again, and in all of this we ask God to shape our thinking.

The most important aspect to study, therefore, is not in what we do, but in what God does with our minds. Our thinking and study must begin, continue, and end with a request for God to guide our thoughts in His truth.

Prayer must permeate our study. Henry Simmons wrote, "Too many of us are thinking these days as the world thinks because we do not begin our thinking by thinking about God. Only in paying attention to God will we experience the ecstasy that leads to wisdom. Prayer is that work, that disciplined attentiveness."

Thus prayer and study form a beautiful upward spiral. Study of Scripture informs our prayers about God's character. Prayer invites God to shape our minds as we study. God shapes our minds so we understand Him better which helps us pray more and better, and on and on.

Resources on prayer and study:

Richard Foster, "Prayer"

Henri Nouwen, "With Open Hands" (also his, "The Way of the Heart")

Dallas Willard, "Hearing God"

Andrew Murray, "With Christ in the School of Prayer"

Brother Lawrence, "The Practice of the Presence of God"

Eugene Peterson, "The Contemplative Pastor"

Richard Foster, "Celebration of Discipline"

James Sire, "Habits of the Mind" (also his "Disciplines of the Mind")

# spiritual disciplines: service and submission

"Jesus took a towel and a basin and redefined greatness."  
-Richard Foster, "Celebration of Discipline"

"There was an elder who had a well-tried novice living with him, and once, when he was annoyed, he drove the novice out of the cell. But the novice sat down outside and waited for the elder. The elder, opening the door, found him there, and did penance before him, saying: You are my Father, because your patience and humility have overcome the weakness of my soul. Come back in; you can be the elder and Father, I will be the youth and the novice: for by your good work you have surpassed my old age."  
-from "Wisdom of the Desert: Translations from the 'Verba Seniorum,'" by Thomas Merton

As with most, if not all, of the spiritual practices, service and submission go very much against the grain of our culture. However, when we make them a part of our life, we find incredible freedom from a life of duplicity, manipulation, arrogance, and resentment.

## **Service: Downward Mobility in an Upwardly Mobile World**

Jesus taught that the way up is to go down. He taught his first disciples that the secret to becoming great is to become the servant of all. He illustrated his teaching by putting on the dress of a lowly house servant, and washed the grimy feet of his students.

Service is not merely a spiritual discipline-it is a way of orienting one's entire life. However, practicing service as a discipline will help in directing that orientation.

The discipline of service frees us from resentment. Paul wrote, "Whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). In service we learn the secret that our significance is found in God.

There is no hierarchy of values in service. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Whose service is more valuable: a preacher or the woman changing diapers in the nursery? When the woman changing diapers discovers her service is equally pleasing to God, her resentment vanishes.

The discipline of service frees us from the need to be in control. Richard Foster wrote, "When we choose to be a servant, we give up the right to be in charge." How foreign this idea is to us! We live in a culture that celebrates self-determination.

I remember hearing a little girl tell her babysitter, "You're not the boss of me." That's a motto of our world. But in service, I allow others to become "the boss of me." We choose to make ourselves available, and in doing that we make ourselves vulnerable. We may be taken advantage of, but we do so willingly. It is the heart of what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:38-42.

Can you think of some practical ways this can be applied?

The discipline of service frees us from arrogance. If the practice of service can free those in "low" positions from resentment, it can also free those in "high" positions of arrogance. It is easy for people in positions of influence to believe they are more important than others.

Someone tells the story of a time Mohammed Ali was traveling on an airplane. He refused to put on his seatbelt saying, "Superman doesn't need no seatbelt." To which the stewardess responded, "Superman doesn't need no airplane."

Whether you are a successful business person or a leader in the church, humble service, especially that done in secret, can free you from thinking yourself "more highly than you ought" (Romans 12:3).

Here are some guidelines for the practice service as a discipline.

- 1) Begin with a right orientation before God. Examine your heart and ask yourself if you are doing it to please God or to please people? Whatever you do, do it in the name of Jesus.
- 2) Whenever possible do your service in relative secrecy. Do not use deception to conceal your service, and don't be bothered if someone finds out.
- 3) Pay attention to your desires for recognition, appreciation, and admiration. Humility is about taking your mind off yourself and focusing on God. Meditate on Jesus words in Matthew 6:1-4.
- 4) Keep yourself open to serve anyone who you meet. Don't force yourself on someone, but don't refuse anyone any good deed.
- 5) Identify with people of low position. Look at people through God's eyes as someone who is in need just like you. Dallas Willard encourages us to see ourselves as "a particularly lively piece of clay who, as (a) servant of God, happens to be here and now with the ability to do this good and needful thing for that other bit of clay there."

### **Submission: Freedom from the Need to "Have It Your Way"**

Perhaps one of the most difficult spiritual practices is the discipline of submission. It is completely counter-cultural. We want things to go "our way." We do not want to answer to anyone. We do not particularly care to have someone tell us how to live our lives. However, we need the freedom that comes in living life in complete honesty, transparency, and openness to correction and discipline.

How do you respond when someone points out sin in your life? Do you get defensive? Do you get angry? Do you begin listing all their faults? Or do you examine the truth of what they are saying? Do you consider that this person might not be acting "holier-than-thou" but rather in your best interests?

We must be open and accountable to each other-especially those who are entrusted with our spiritual care (i.e., elders, deacons, teachers, mentors). The author of Hebrews wrote, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They care for you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden" (Hebrews 13:17).

A piano student submits herself to the direction of her instructor. She does not say, "I think I will begin with this piece of music because it is my favorite song." She follows her teacher's direction and learns her scales and chord progressions.

A basketball player submits himself to the direction of his coach. He does not say, "I can't make free throws, so I will just practice my around-the-back-reverse-lay-up." He asks the coach how to improve his form and rhythm in shooting his free throws.

So it is in the spiritual life. In practicing submission, you will not be offended when people point out sin. In fact, you will invite God and other Christians to point out your sin. We invite others to hold us accountable, and get our attention if we are going into dangerous places.

Proverbs 28:13-14 says, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble."

We submit ourselves to each other in confession, in openness to correction, in service, and in obedience "out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). In submission, we reject the idea that we are above anyone. We acknowledge that we are all under the authority of the King of kings.

What are the benefits of practicing submission? We receive helpful guidance to grow in faith and love. We receive much needed correction when we wander from safety. We receive the freedom from living in duplicity-from having a secret identity. We receive freedom from the bondage of always having to have things our way.

Can you think of any other benefits?

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What are some practical ways you can practice the discipline of submission?

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# spiritual disciplines: worship and celebration

"A Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot."  
-St. Augustine

"I like the suggestion that dourness is not a sacred attribute."  
-Phyllis McGinley

In American churches, worship has unfortunately been mistaken for what happens for one hour on Sunday morning or Wednesday night. Celebration makes us uncomfortable-it is not religious to have fun when the world is suffering all around us. However, worship and celebration are natural consequences of living with openness to God's active presence in our daily lives. If they are missing from our normal way of life, we can develop practices that will make them as normal as inhaling and exhaling.

## **Worship: Experiencing the Greatness of God**

In the context of our culture, it seems more fitting to describe what worship is not. We have confused it, lopped off its various appendages, mistaken form for substance, and found ourselves very unsure about what worship really is. Worship is not contemporary or traditional-it is not a matter of personal preference. Worship is not liturgical or spontaneous-it is not a matter of order. Worship is not for Sunday morning or Saturday evening-it is not a matter of schedule.

Worship is the engagement of one's entire being with the greatness of the God Who Is. Worship is a life of conversation with God. God speaks, we respond, God responds, we respond again. Worship involves listening, looking, tasting, feeling, and smelling. We breathe in the presence of God wherever we are. We inhale the memories of His faithful acts in the past. Just as we suffocate for lack of air, worship suffocates for lack of attentiveness to God's presence and faithfulness.

Worship is our response to who God is. As we meditate on God's nature and character through prayer and study, the Holy Spirit reveals who God is more and more fully. As we experience who God is and what He is like, we give him more worth in our lives. This is what the worshippers in Revelation 4-5 are doing.

The more we come to understand who God is, the more we desire to open our lives up to the change that He desires in us. Paul wrote, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." It is in this way that true worship is transformational. Perhaps the clearest image of such conversion in worship is found in Isaiah 6:1-8.

What elements of conversion can you identify in that passage?

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How has such an awareness of who God is transformed your life?

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Worship is our response to what God has done. Richard Foster wrote, "Worship is our response to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father." That is what Paul communicated when he wrote,

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your act of spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1).

Throughout the Scriptures, God's people are constantly recalling God's acts of salvation. In fact, all of Scripture may be seen as a retelling of how God has reached out to save his lost children, and how He desires them to live in Him and with Him.

Can you think of some examples from Scripture?

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Can you think of some ways God has proved faithful in your life?

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How does corporate worship reflect such remembering? How might your personal worship throughout the week reflect this?

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Worship is the experience of the greatness of God. It is an encounter with the God who is with us. Such encounters are not limited to clocks and calendars, pianos and guitars, or dramas and dancing. We worship wherever and whenever we experience the living Christ.

When we see the beauty of God in a perfectly still pool of water, when we hear the innocent laughter of children, when we feel the warmth of morning sun, when we taste the sweetness of new wine, when we smell the fields ripe for harvest, worship happens.

When our conscience is brought to life by thoughts of God's holiness, when we grasp a deeper understanding of God, when we grow in compassion for others from knowing God's love for us, when we surrender our desires to the will of God, worship happens.

It would be a sad spiritual life if worship were only in our life as a spiritual discipline. However, if we take up this practice with the intention to experience God in every area of life, worship will no longer be a practice, but a way of life.

### **Celebration: Experiencing the Goodness of God**

The life of the Christian is a life of joy. Too many Christians, however, believe that smiling, laughing, and celebrating are improper for the pious. Consider the image that comes to mind when you hear the word "pious." You tend to think of tight-collared, somber-faced pilgrims, right?

The life of Jesus' disciples is one of celebration. Even though we live in a world full of darkness-suffering in which we often participate-we live with the confidence that God has overcome the darkness. Jesus told his disciples, "In this world you will have troubles, but rejoice, I have overcome the world."

I once suggested that when dealing with death, we can celebrate. How is it possible to celebrate in such a sad time of loss? We can celebrate because we know the mystery of the cross. In his dying, Jesus swallowed up death's power over us. It is no longer a scary unknown, but a conquered enemy.

We celebrate, even in our suffering, because we know the God who is with us. Henri Nouwen writes, "Joy and laughter are the gifts of living in the presence of God and trusting that tomorrow is not worth worrying about." Nouwen also writes that we celebrate because "we see that God, not the Evil One, has the last word."

Beyond suffering, there is much to celebrate in life. God has given us things to enjoy. Pleasure is good, not in the hedonistic sense of a life's pursuit, but as a gift to be received with gratitude (1 Timothy 4:4). In the history of God's people, there have been those who deprived themselves of all pleasure thinking it evil. Certainly we all face the danger of making pleasure a god, however it may be received as a gift and "consecrated by the word of God and prayer."

In C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, the demon-uncle Screwtape comments, "All the same, (pleasure) is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one."

God is good and the life He gives us is good. There is beauty to celebrate. There is love to celebrate. There is answer to prayer to celebrate. There are victories to celebrate. There are changed lives to celebrate. There is a wonderful future to celebrate.

Read Deuteronomy 14:23-27. How might such Biblical celebration challenge your attitude toward having a good time?

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Understanding that our culture has made "having a good time" into a god, how can you redeem celebration as a spiritual discipline?

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Does Philippians 4:4-7 have anything to say to you about celebration?

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God's people are those, as Eugene Peterson states, "whose lives are bordered on one side by a memory of God's acts and the other by hope in God's promises, and who along with whatever else is happening are able to say, at the center, 'We are one happy people.'"

Of all the people on earth, God's people have the most reason to party.

Can you think of some ways you might practice the discipline of celebration?  
How might you as a group practice this discipline?

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# spiritual disciplines: fellowship and confession

"Whether we like it or not, the moment we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, that is, from the time we become a Christian, we are at the same time a member of the Christian church..."

-Eugene Peterson, "Reversed Thunder"

"Wounds from a friend can be trusted..."  
Proverbs 27:6

"The Discipline of confession brings an end to pretense."  
-Richard Foster, "Celebration of Discipline"

*Frank had not been to a worship service in four weeks. So it was Sam's turn to visit him. Sam said, "Frank, I noticed you haven't been to church in a few weeks. I was just wondering if things were okay." "Oh, I'm fine Sam," he said with a smile, "I found a great church on channel four!"*

*The preacher stopped by one afternoon to confront Hal about his frequent critical and mean-spirited comments to members of the church. "Hal," he said, "I've been noticing something about you lately. Do you have something you need to confess?"*

*"Yes. I've felt really bad I didn't come to you sooner."*

*"Well, that's okay. What do you need to get off your chest?"*

*"I have to confess that...well, uh...that...well, you'd be a much better preacher if you would wear a decent suit and stay behind that pulpit. You make me dizzy with all that walking around!"*

## Fellowship: Synergy in Community

Fellowship is a word that has a secret identity these days. We mistake it as the mild-mannered potluck luncheon or picnic, when it is really the super-powered reality of the life of the Church.

Jesus said, "where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18:20). There is a sense that Christ is most present in the community of His people. In the Church, God is here with hands and feet. When we look into one another's eyes, we can see the eyes of Christ looking on us. Jesus said, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:20). And in a very real sense, we do. It is not simply "imagining" that Christ is there and we are serving him, he says that in some real way we truly are serving him.

We cannot serve Christ in permanent isolation. Of course, we need times of solitude and silence and isolation from others, but that is only part of a healthy spiritual life. In the life of faith, there is always this dynamic motion from isolation to community. It never goes the other way. We move back into isolation, but it is only so that we can move deeper into community. We go into solitude so we can better serve when we return to the group.

We see this movement as the overarching movement in Scripture. Adam was not complete without Eve (Genesis 2:18ff). Sin brought isolation from God and from our fellow human beings, so Jesus came to restore us to community with God and with one another (Romans 5:1-11). Revelation culminates in the picture of perfect community restored (Revelation 21:3-4).

Jesus went away into the desert, but he came back out and immediately engaged himself with people (Matthew 4). He went away to a solitary place to pray, but he returned to be with his students and the people of the land (Matthew 14:22-36; Mark 1:35-39; Luke 5:15-17). At Jesus' transfiguration, Peter suggested that they make their home on top of the mountain, but Jesus didn't take him up on the offer (Matthew 17:1-9). The movement in the life of faith is never toward permanent solitude, but toward ever deepening community.

There is a synergy in community. We are stronger when we share our lives with each other. Horses teamed together can pull more than the sum of what they could pull alone. That is synergy. Embers in a fire fade quickly when they are alone, but piled together, they burn stronger and hotter. That is synergy.

God made us for community. The life of faith is not an individual affair. Yes, each of us has our unique life of faith, but it cannot exist separate from the community of faith. There are no rugged individualists in the Christian life. No one can say, "I am a rock. I am an island." We need each other.

I wish sometimes that our English translations would use "ya'll" instead of "you." So many of the NT commands are given in the third person plural, but we read them in the third person singular. Our culture has shaped us into radical individualists; deceiving us into thinking we do not need anyone else.

Think about the way we build neighborhoods. We no longer see any central parks or common places where people can meet and get to know one another. We build side-by-side fenced in kingdoms because we value our privacy. But our privacy is killing us because our deeper need is to live in community.

Because of the way our culture is arranged, we must be more intentional about creating community. We must impose ourselves on others more often (just writing that sentence seems scandalous). We are too concerned with "intruding" or being a "burden" on someone. However the fact is that we are very often doing more harm by remaining in our silence and isolation.

What are some ways of practicing fellowship as a spiritual discipline? Perhaps the most vital first step is to reach out to include those who are unable to participate in community on their own. We are failing in part of our mission as Christians and as a church when we allow people to suffer in isolation. Certainly, we can find time to sacrifice for the benefit of someone who is lonely. 1 Timothy 5 is one passage of Scripture that the Church must rediscover.

Another way we can practice fellowship as a discipline is to gather a small group of fellow believers who can minister love, comfort, joy, encouragement, accountability, and reconciliation to each other. Small groups or "cell groups" are not a new "church growth strategy." They are a significant part of creating community-a community beyond mere affiliation.

Can you think of other ways to practice fellowship as a spiritual discipline-an intentional practice to open your life up to God?

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### **Confession: Freedom in Transparency**

There is no stronger sin than sin that remains hidden. Secret sins are the most destructive force in the spiritual life. They chain us into a life of duplicity and spiritual mediocrity, if not spiritual bankruptcy. However, when we practice confession, our sin is no longer hidden. Such transparency brings an incredible freedom. What were once iron chains of bondage fall off as if they were made of paper.

If confession is so powerful for the spiritual life, why do so few of us practice it? We could identify many excuses, but the central reason is pride. We are afraid that someone will think less of us.

We believe that our present "image" will be permanently defaced. But what good is an "image" if it masks inner decay?

Dean Trune tells of a friend who showed him a tree. From a distance the tree looked strong and healthy. However, upon a close inspection Dean's friend revealed that the tree had a massive hollow in its trunk. It was rotting where it seemed to be strongest.

Some of the most public examples of fallen Christian leaders revealed that the reason for their collapse was that they had no accountability. They had no one to whom they could confess. No one who could help them find freedom from their secret sins.

James 5:16 says, "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another..." While it is true that we need no mediator other than Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5), there is a sense in which Christ receives our confession through our fellow disciples. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Our brother...has been given to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and he forgives our sins in Christ's name. He keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God."

Therefore, it does matter who you choose to receive your confession. If you confessed your sin to an immature person, your concerns of slander might be valid. However, the mature Christian will receive your confession as a fellow sinner saved by the same gracious God. As Richard Foster writes, "there is nothing that anyone can say that will disturb [them]. Nothing. By living under the cross [they] can hear the worst possible things from the best possible people without so much as batting an eyelash."

Confession can help us stay away from sin. When we know that we must give an account to our trusted brother or sister in Christ, it will be easier to let go of our desire to participate in that sin. Being transparent means we will live an integrated life—we will be the same in public and private.

Living transparently means, first, that we acknowledge the fact that we cannot hide anything from God (Psalm 139:7-12). When we cherish our secret sins, we fool ourselves into thinking we can also keep them hidden from God. However, when we confess our sins, we invite God to shine the light of His truth into every dark corner of our heart. We pray, "Lord, show me what I have been trying to hide from you. Help me put it out in the open so you can heal my broken life."

Living transparently means, second, that we acknowledge the fact that our sin is offensive to God (Jeremiah 44:4). When we cherish our secret sins, we fool ourselves into thinking God does not mind. But when we confess our sin, we are essentially agreeing with God that what we did was an offense to Him.

Living transparently means, third, that we recognize the fact that God must deal with sin (Nahum 1:3). When we cherish our hidden sin, we deny God's justice. But when we confess our sin, we recognize that we deserve nothing more than God's wrath. In this recognition we cry out, "Mercy!" and God is ready and willing to forgive us. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

In confession, I identify my sin for what it is. I lay it naked on the table before God and my fellow Christian. I acknowledge that it is my sin. Again, Richard Foster: "We must confess that we have sinned by our own fault, our own most grievous fault. Our sins cannot be called errors in judgment, nor is there any room to blame them on upbringing or family or mean neighbors. This is Reality Therapy of the best sort...."

If there is no stronger sin than sin that remains hidden, then there is no more impotent sin than sin that is brought out into the open.

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