

The Spiritual Disciplines

Let's begin with a brief review of what we covered last time.

According to Dallas Willard, “[Christian] Spiritual Formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being. ... It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.”

Or more formally: “Christian spiritual formation is the process through which the embodied/reflective will takes on the character of Christ's will.”

If you remember, we discussed the three dimensions of the Will: the Impulsive Will, the Reflective Will, and the Embodied Will. These form the framework for our understanding of *Christian Spiritual Formation (for the sake of others)*, as well as the place of The Spiritual Disciplines within this framework. The details about the three dimensions are:

- **Impulsive Will:** Impulsive Will is outwardly directed and moved by and toward things that are simply attractive. With this Will, we simply choose what we desire. “I want what I want when I want it.”
- **Reflective Will:** Reflective Will is oriented toward what is good for the person as a whole, not merely to what is desired. With this will, we choose what is good, and especially as Christians, we choose what is good under God within the context of the Kingdom of Heaven and for the sake of others.
- **Embodied Will:** Embodied Will is where one of the other two Wills has sunk down into the body to such an extent that the body automatically does what the Embodied Will dictates. The key word here is automatically. In general, there is no conscious choice involved with the actions of the Embodied Will. It is just acting on behalf of one of the other two Wills.

We also discussed the VIM model for Christian Spiritual Formation: *Vision*, *Intention*, and *Method*. It is the Method portion where we seek, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, to replace the Impulsive/Embodied Will bonding with the Reflective/Embodied Will bonding, and it is here that The Spiritual Disciplines come into play. They teach us to open a space between the Impulsive Will and the Embodied Will so that the Reflective Will has a fighting chance to edge out the Impulsive Will and bond with the Embodied Will.

If you are interested in reading a fuller treatment of this, I would commend to you the paper: *Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done* by Dallas Willard, which is available at <https://dwillard.org>.

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So, what are the classical spiritual disciplines? There is no canonical list, and there is much overlap within the various lists that are out there in literature and online.

For example, Richard Foster in his classic *Celebration of Discipline* provides this list, which is organized in three categories:

- The Inward Disciplines
 - Contemplation (Meditation)
 - Prayer
 - Fasting
 - Study
- The Outward Disciplines
 - Simplicity
 - Solitude
 - Submission
 - Service
- The Corporate Disciplines
 - Confession
 - Worship
 - Guidance
 - Celebration

Jan Johnson, in her book *Abundant Simplicity*, organizes them into two categories:

- **The Disciplines of Engagement:** Study, Service, Worship, Fellowship, etc.
- **The Disciplines of Abstinence:** Fasting, Solitude, Silence, Chastity, Secrecy, Frugality, Simplicity of Speech, Simplicity of Time, etc.

Marc's list: Silence, Solitude, Sabbath, Study, Slowing, Service, Fasting, Contemplation, Prayer (esp. Lectio Divina & The Daily Office), Prayer Beads, Journaling.

There are many others. Additionally, there are disagreements about which are spiritual disciplines and which are spiritual practices. The rough distinction is that spiritual disciplines are never practiced for their own sake, but you will often see the two terms used synonymously, and the boundary between them is fuzzy.

Guidelines & Cautions

“Over the last seventeen years I have taken seriously, with adaptation appropriate to my needs, the idea of spiritual disciplines. I have nothing new to say on this topic - I am a practitioner, not an original thinker. But I offer you a few pointers. The disciplines should be practiced in a targeted fashion. It’s not good to start with a list of the disciplines and start practicing them randomly. Nor should we work from the top of the list to the bottom. When I made the decision to live as a co-operative friend of Jesus [for the sake of others], I took on some very simple disciplines that I could practice *within* my daily routines.” - Todd Hunter, *Christianity Beyond Belief*

Here are some general guidelines and cautions to keep in mind for our journeys with the Spiritual Disciplines:

- 1. Means Not End:** It is worth repeating from last week that The Spiritual Disciplines are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. They provide a way to come at Spiritual Formation (Transformation) sideways because it never works to come at it head on. Doing so almost always results in turning the desired transformation into a Law rather than a change of Heart.
- 2. The Righteousness Of The Scribes and Pharisees:** It is also worth repeating from last week that the point of The Spiritual Disciplines is transformation of the heart to take on the character of Jesus for the sake of others. Practicing the Disciplines is not about achieving perfection in practicing the Disciplines. Concert pianists do not go on stage at a concert and play the scales. They play the scales so as to be able to go on stage to play the concert. The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees is in reference to our strong tendency to turn things like The Spiritual Disciplines into a Law.

For example, if I am practicing the Discipline of Sabbath to help me to learn how to be a kinder person, and I have decided that I will do the Practice every weekend from 6pm on Saturday to 6pm on Sunday no matter what, it kind of defeats the purpose if I get angry when an issue at work disrupts my practice. I have turned the Discipline into a Law rather than a time to be present to God.

3. **Do What You Can, Not What You Can't:** This advice comes from Jan Johnson, though I don't believe that it is original to her. These are wonderful words to keep in mind. They are words to live by, especially for those of us whose core competency is to turn literally everything into a project, but I digress. These words are the antidote for avoiding the Righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees. Perhaps all I can manage is five minutes of Silence in the morning by getting up a little earlier. Great! Start there. It is not a competition. Do what you can, not what you can't. Start small. Start simple. Work up from there.
4. **The Disciplines Find You:** Your Disciplines will be different from my Disciplines. How you practice your Disciplines will be different from how I practice my Disciplines. The Spiritual Disciplines tend to find us rather than the other way around. So, what resonates with you? Try it for a while. Are you sensing anything like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, or do you feel like it is taking away your joy, that it is just more "work"? If it is the latter, then try something else. There is no "right" list. There is no "right" order. This is between you and the Holy Spirit. Let Him be your guide.
5. **The Disciplines Change With The Seasons:** As the seasons of our lives change, as the seasons of the church year change, so too The Spiritual Disciplines may change. Some of this is due to our life circumstances, and some of it is due to where we are along our spiritual journeys. Doggedly sticking to a specific Spiritual Discipline even when it is no longer bearing fruit is a sure recipe for all of the things that we have already covered. What you are able to do as a retired person is very different from what you are able to do with small children at home. Similarly, our perspectives change with the seasons of our lives and the seasons of the church year. Our journeys bring new things into focus as our seasons change while other things fade away. Perhaps the best way to look at this is as a grand adventure, which it is.
6. **The Disciplines Are Not Linear And Can Overlap:** It is possible for Disciplines to overlap. This is more common with some than with others. Let's suppose that you are praying Morning Prayer from The Daily Office, and something in one of the Psalms captures you. It is perfectly fine to stop Morning Prayer and switch to the Discipline of Silence to sit with what spoke to you in the Psalm. The same can be said about linearity. Both The Daily Office and Lectio Divina have a defined order, but you may find at times that you are called to go back to an early part and begin again from there. Again, that is perfectly fine. Remember, each Discipline is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

7. Above All, Trust In The Slow Work Of God. - Teilhard de Chardin: God will meet us wherever we are with our practice of the Disciplines, but it is important to always remember that the Spiritual Disciplines operate in kairos time rather than chronos time. This is really hard for us. We are used to quick results. The Spiritual Disciplines are not like WeightWatchers where we go and weigh in each week to measure our progress. Likewise, they are not like planting a seed and each morning digging it back up to see if it is growing. We trust that with proper care and watering, it will grow, we know not how. The Spiritual Disciplines take time, and we have to trust that they too will bear fruit with care and watering. We may not see any signs of this right away. Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

Scenarios

Let's now spend some time thinking through and talking about some hypothetical scenarios in light of the Guidelines & Cautions. These are simply meant to start the conversation. Please feel free to add ones of your own. (Note: The names below are fictitious.)

1. George is an avid runner. He is out daily early in the morning getting his miles in for the day. Does this count as practicing the Disciplines of Silence and Solitude?
2. Joan is recently retired and wants to begin the Discipline of Silence. She is already spending her days mostly alone. What are some things that she can do to distinguish between her normal day-to-day silence and a practice of the Discipline of Silence?
3. Mary would like to begin the Discipline of Solitude. She and John have young children at home whom they are homeschooling. Additionally, they have very busy work lives. How might Mary go about beginning this discipline and what pitfalls might she run into along the way?
4. Karen feels called to the Disciplines of Abstinence. She would love to take on the Discipline of Fasting, but she is on a very restricted diet. Are there ways that she might be able to practice this discipline in spite of the dietary restrictions that don't involve putting her health at risk?
5. Bob is also interested in taking on the Discipline of Fasting. He is very much a goal-oriented kind of guy and is very much looking forward to practicing this discipline. What are some of the pitfalls that he might encounter along the way?

6. Sarah finds peace and joy working in her garden. She is interested in beginning to practice The Spiritual Disciplines but has noticed that gardening does not show up in any of the lists of the Disciplines. Does this mean that she will need to give up some of her time gardening to take on the practice of a Discipline?
7. Do you have others?

Questions

How are we doing with all of this? Are there any lingering questions before we close today?