

REVISED
AND
UPDATED

SPIRITUAL
DISCIPLINES
FOR THE
CHRISTIAN
LIFE

DONALD S. WHITNEY

FOREWORD BY J. I. PACKER

STUDY GUIDE

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LESSON 1

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.

(1 TIMOTHY 4:7, NASB)

CENTRAL IDEA

The only road to Christian maturity passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. These personal and interpersonal activities given by God in the Bible have been practiced by God's people since biblical times. They are the sufficient means Christians are to use in the Spirit-filled pursuit of godliness, that is, closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ. Jesus modeled them for us and expects us to pursue them. In doing so, we will taste the joy of a spiritually disciplined lifestyle.

WARM-UP

1. Describe a time when you disciplined yourself in order to reach a specific goal or when you did not discipline yourself and failed to reach a specific goal.

What Is the Purpose of Spiritual Disciplines?

When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many believers feel it's discipline without direction. Prayer threatens to be drudgery. The practical value of meditation on Scripture seems uncertain. The real purpose of a discipline like fasting is often unclear.

The Bible says of God's elect, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). God's eternal plan ensures that every Christian will ultimately conform to Christlikeness. We will be changed "when he appears" so that "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). This is no vision; this is you, Christian, as soon as "he appears."

So why all the talk about discipline? If God has predestined our conformity to Christlikeness, where does discipline fit in? Although God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends for us to grow toward it. We aren't merely to wait for holiness; we're to pursue it. "Strive for peace with everyone," we're commanded in Hebrews 12:14, "and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

This leads us to ask what every Christian should ask: "How then shall I pursue holiness? How can I be like Jesus Christ, the Son of God?" We find a clear answer in 1 Timothy 4:7: "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (NASB).

The only road to Christian maturity and godliness (a biblical term synonymous with Christlikeness and holiness) passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. Godliness is the goal of the Disciplines, and when we remember this, the Spiritual Disciplines can become a delight instead of drudgery.

God Commands Us to Be Holy

The original language of the words "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" makes it plain that this is a command of God, not merely a suggestion. Holiness is not an option for those who claim to be children of the Holy One (see 1 Peter 1:15-16), so neither are the means of holiness—that is, the Spiritual Disciplines—an option.

The expectation of disciplined spirituality is implied in Jesus' offer of Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." The same is true in this offer of discipleship: "And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'" (Luke 9:23). These verses tell us that to be a disciple of Jesus means, at the very least, to learn from and follow Him. Learning and following involve discipline, for those who learn only incidentally and follow accidentally are not true disciples. That discipline is at the heart of discipleship is confirmed by Galatians 5:22-23, which says that spiritual self-discipline (implied in "self-control") is one of the most evident marks of being Spirit-controlled.

The Lord Jesus not only expects these biblical Spiritual Disciplines of those who follow Him, He is the model of discipline for the purpose of godliness.

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

First, the Bible prescribes *both personal and interpersonal* Spiritual Disciplines. Some Spiritual Disciplines—like private prayer—we practice alone; others—like small group or congregational prayer—we practice with other Christians. Second, Spiritual Disciplines are *activities, not attitudes*. Disciplines are practices, not character qualities, graces, or "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23). Third, the subject matter of this book is limited to those Spiritual Disciplines that are *biblical*, that is, to practices taught or modeled in the Bible. Fourth, this book takes the position that the Spiritual Disciplines found in Scripture are *sufficient* for knowing and experiencing God, and for growing in Christlikeness. Fifth, the Spiritual Disciplines are practices *derived from the gospel, not divorced from the gospel*. When the Disciplines are rightly practiced, they take us deeper into the gospel of Jesus and its glories, not away from it as though we've moved on to more advanced levels of Christianity. Sixth, the Spiritual Disciplines are *means* to godliness, *not ends* to be practiced for their own sake.

So the Spiritual Disciplines¹ are those personal and interpersonal activities given by God in the Bible as the sufficient means believers in Jesus Christ are to use in the Spirit-filled, gospel-driven pursuit of godliness, that is, closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times.

Whatever the Discipline, its most important feature is its *purpose*. Just as there is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar or piano apart from the purpose of playing music, so there is little value in practicing Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them (see Colossians 2:20-23; 1 Timothy 4:8). That purpose is godliness. Thus we are told in 1 Timothy 4:7 to discipline ourselves “for the purpose of *godliness*” (emphasis added).

On the one hand, we recognize that even the most iron-willed self-discipline by itself will not make us more holy, for growth in holiness is a gift from God (see John 7:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 2:11). On the other hand, that doesn’t mean that we’re to do nothing to pursue godliness, just living the life we want until and unless God decides to make us holy. What we are to do is discipline ourselves “for the purpose of godliness,” practicing the God-given Spiritual Disciplines as a means of receiving His grace and growing in Christlikeness.

Think of the Spiritual Disciplines as ways by which we can spiritually place ourselves in the path of God’s grace and seek Him (see Luke 19:1-10), much like Zacchaeus placed himself physically in Jesus’ path and sought Him. The Lord, by His Spirit, still travels down certain paths, paths that He Himself has ordained and revealed in Scripture. We call these paths the Spiritual Disciplines, and if we will place ourselves on these paths and look for Him there by faith, we can expect to encounter Him. By means of these Bible-based practices, we consciously place ourselves before God in anticipation of enjoying His presence and receiving His transforming grace.

The Fruit of Spiritual Disciplines

We must remember that the mature freedoms of discipline-nurtured godliness do not develop in a single reading through the Bible or in a few forays through some of the other Disciplines. Scripture reminds us that self-control, such as that expressed through the Spiritual Disciplines, must persevere before it ripens into the mature fruit of godliness. Observe closely the sequence of development in 2 Peter 1:6: “and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness” (NIV). Godliness is a lifelong pursuit.

If your picture of a disciplined Christian is one of a grim, tight-lipped, joyless half-robot, then you’ve missed the point. Jesus was the most disciplined Man who ever lived and yet the most joyful and truly alive. As our Lord and our Redeemer and more, Jesus is not merely our example, still He is our example of discipline. Let us follow Him to joy through the Spiritual Disciplines. (Taken from chapter 1 of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.)

Persevering in the Practice of the Spiritual Disciplines

There are three matters that are indispensable in helping you persevere in the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines: the role of the Holy Spirit, the role of fellowship, and the role of struggle in Christian living.

The Holy Spirit. The role of the Holy Spirit is to produce within us the desire and the power for the Disciplines that lead to godliness. That He develops this in every believer is evident from 2 Timothy 1:7.

The Bible doesn’t explain the mechanics of the mystery of the Spirit’s ministry to us. But these two things are clear: (1) the Holy Spirit will be ever faithful to help each of God’s elect to persevere to the end in those things that will make us like Christ, and (2) we must not harden our hearts, but instead respond to His promptings if we would be godly.

Fellowship. No one should read of the Spiritual Disciplines and imagine that by practicing them in isolation from other believers he or she can be as Christlike—perhaps even more so—than Christians

who are active members of a local body of Christ. Anyone who measures progress in Christlikeness only in terms of growth in his or her fellowship with God takes an incomplete measurement, for spiritual maturity also includes growth in fellowship with the children of God. The apostle John juxtaposed these two in 1 John 1:3. As New Testament fellowship is with both the triune God and His people, so spiritual growth incorporates both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. Moreover, biblical fellowship will encourage your persevering practice of the personal Spiritual Disciplines.

Struggle. Although “trust” and “rest” are core values of the Christian life, so are “discipline” and “struggle.” Many forces combat the spiritual progress of those still on this side of heaven. Because of the world, the flesh, and the Devil, practicing the Spiritual Disciplines and progressing in godliness will be accompanied by struggle (compare Colossians 1:29; 1 Timothy 4:10). The victory that we actually experience in daily life over the forces opposing our progress in the Disciplines comes *through the practice of the Disciplines*. (Taken from chapter 13 of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.)

Pondering Spiritual Disciplines

2. In the past, how have you felt about Spiritual Disciplines such as Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, and fasting? Be honest.

3. What single purpose unites the Spiritual Disciplines? (See 1 Timothy 4:7.)

The Importance of Holiness (Godliness)

4. What does 1 Peter 1:15-16 say about the importance of holiness in believers' lives?

5. Describe a godly person you know who has reached spiritual maturity through discipline. Which practical Spiritual Disciplines has he or she practiced regularly?

Catalysts That God Uses to Make Us More Christlike

6. *People.* Often God brings people into our lives whose input leads us to become more Christlike. Read Proverbs 27:17. Describe a time when God used someone to file away your rough, ungodly edges.

7. a. *Circumstances.* We've all faced trying circumstances that God uses to make us more like Himself. What does Romans 8:28 say about our difficult circumstances?

- b. As a group, discuss how God uses circumstances in life to move you closer toward godliness.

8. *Spiritual Disciplines*. Rather than externally coming from people and/or circumstances, this catalyst works from the inside of our lives and goes outward. Also, God grants us more choice regarding our involvement with this catalyst than with people or circumstances. Describe a time when God used your prayer time or Bible meditation to change you from the inside out.

Spiritual Disciplines: A Way to Seek God and Know Him Better

Today people place great emphasis on physical exercise as a means of staying healthy. Spiritual Disciplines are similar to physical exercise, in that when we exercise ourselves spiritually we promote spiritual health and growth—godliness—in our lives.

Let's look at two Bible stories that reveal how two people put themselves in the path of Jesus and sought Him. As a result, their lives were forever changed.

9. Bartimaeus: Luke 18:35-43
- a. What strikes you about his response to Jesus?

- b. In response to Bartimaeus's faith, what did Jesus do for him?

10. Zacchaeus: Luke 19:1-10

- a. How did this tax collector pursue Jesus?

- b. What does this story tell us about Jesus' mercy?

11. How do these stories encourage you to seek God?

The Spiritual Disciplines Are Like Placing Ourselves in God's Path

12. According to the text on page 13 of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, “by means of these Bible-based practices, we consciously place ourselves before God in anticipation of enjoying His presence and receiving His transforming grace.” Describe a time when you placed yourself in God’s path and His grace transformed you.

The Lord Expects Us to Pursue the Spiritual Disciplines

13. What do the following verses say about what it means for each of us to be Jesus’ disciple?

Matthew 11:29 _____

Luke 9:23 _____

Galatians 5:22-23 _____

The Consequences of Being Spiritually Undisciplined

14. Why do people who will discipline themselves for years to become proficient at their careers or recreational sports quickly stop pursuing the Spiritual Disciplines? Has this happened to you?

15. The text in chapter 1 of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* describes people who are faithful to the church and demonstrate genuine enthusiasm for the things of God, yet spiritually they “are a mile wide and an inch deep.” What are some positive and negative characteristics of these people? How does someone become like this? What does it mean that “they have dabbled in everything but disciplined themselves in nothing”? What would you need to do to ensure this never describes you?

Spiritual Disciplines Bring Freedom

16. a. Freedom “comes through mastery of any discipline. . . . The freedom of godliness is the freedom to do what God calls us through Scripture to do and the freedom to express the character qualities of Christ through our own personality” (pages 17–18 in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*). In which areas of life have you experienced this freedom?

- b. If you haven’t experienced this freedom, what steps will you take to bring yourself closer to this freedom?

Spiritual Disciplines Take Time

17. Read 2 Peter 1:3-6. Why must self-control persevere before the mature fruit of godliness ripens?

God Invites All Christians to Enjoy the Spiritual Disciplines

18. When we practice the Spiritual Disciplines with the goal of godliness in mind, our discipline has direction. Jesus, our Savior and our King, is also our example of discipline. Look up these verses: Matthew 4:2; Luke 2:46-47; John 13:2-6; 17:4. What does each say about Jesus and His pursuit of the Spiritual Disciplines?

Persevering in the Practice of the Spiritual Disciplines

19. Through the Holy Spirit, we have the power to persevere in the Spiritual Disciplines. Read 2 Timothy 1:7 and then describe why this truth should encourage us.

CLOSING PRAYER

Focus on God's deep love for you and on His desire to bless you through the Spiritual Disciplines. Ask the Lord to help you become willing to practice these Disciplines during the coming weeks of this study.

GOING DEEPER

(Extra questions for further study)

20. These days “denying oneself” is not a popular viewpoint. How does what Jesus said in Luke 9:23 relate to the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines?

21. Why is self-control one of the most evident marks of being Spirit-controlled? (See Galatians 5:22-23.)

22. What do you think the text of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* on page 12 means by, “the Spiritual Disciplines [are] ways by which we can spiritually place ourselves in the path of God's grace and seek Him”?

23. According to 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, every believer in Christ has been given spiritual gifts. Why do you think Spiritual Discipline is so important in the development of these gifts?

24. What practical steps are you willing to take this coming week to begin building more Spiritual Discipline into your life?
