

Contained in the pages following are supplemental notes for you to use while teaching the Spiritual Disciplines. These are notes that have been compiled over many years of teaching and preaching. These notes are not exhaustive for each topic. We encourage you as the teacher and coordinators for the classes to research further on your own to provide even more material for your classes.

These notes are for you to use, adapt, change, and make your own. Use them to inspire and encourage your classes to have a greater appreciation and understanding of the Spiritual Disciplines - with the greater goal of the entire church here at Mayfair growing in their relationship and connection with God, the Church, and the community they are a part of day in and day out.

May God bless you as you prepare and teach these classes.

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 1 - Prayer

March 17, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

What are some obstacles to prayer?

Sins you knowingly have not confessed

- a. Ps. 66:18 "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened"
- b. Isa. 59:1-2 "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear"

Idolatry (Ezek.14:3 "Son of man these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them enquire of Me at all?")

Stingy and Covetous Spirit

- a. Prov. 21:13 "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered"
- b. 1 Timothy 6:10 "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs"

Unbelief, Doubt

- a. (James 1:6-8 "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does")

Unforgiveness/bitterness

- a. (Matt.6:14-15 "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.")

Family/Marital problems

- a. (1 Pet.3:7 "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.")

Pride

- a. (James 4:6 "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.")

Selfishness/Wrong motives

- a. (James 4:3 "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.")

Judgmental attitude

- a. Matthew 7:1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged"
- b. Romans 14:10 "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgement seat".

Thanklessness, Ingratitude

- a. (1 Thess.5:18 "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.")

Worldly spirit

- a. (1 John 2:15 "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.")

Not praying through Jesus

- a. (John 14:14 "You may ask me for anything in my Name, and I will do it.")

Not praying in God's Will

- a. (1 John 5:14 "This is the assurance we have in approaching God; that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.")

LEARNING TO PRAY:

"Lord, teach us to pray" Luke 11:1

1. Prayer is something you learn -- "No matter how weak or strong your prayer life is right now, you can learn to grow even stronger."

2. Prayer is something you learn by doing it -- "Reading a book about prayer, listening to lectures and talking about it is very good, but it won't teach you to pray. You get nothing without exercise, without practice. I might listen for a year to a professor of music playing the most beautiful music, but that won't teach me to play an instrument."

3. Prayer is something you learn by meditating on

Scripture -- There should be a smooth, almost unnoticeable transition between Scripture input and Prayer output so that we move even closer to God in those moments. This happens when there is the link of meditation in between. Psalm 19:14. Meditation allows us to take what God has said to us and think deeply on it, digest it, and then speak to God about it in meaningful prayer. Matthew Henry said about Psalm 19:14, "David's prayers were not his words only, but his meditations; as meditation is the best

preparation for prayer, so prayer is the best issue of meditation. Meditation and prayer go together.”

4. Prayer is something you learn by praying with others -- Most of the great movements of God can be traced to a small group of people He called together to begin praying.

5. Prayer is something you learn by reading and studying it. -- We would not want this to take the place of prayer, but it is a valuable way to learn.

PHYSICAL ASPECT OF PRAYER:

Stand – standing is a way of honoring the presence of another and giving him or her your full attention. Stand before the majesty of God. (1 Kings 19:11; Mark 11:25; Gen. 18:22)

Outstretched Arms – Lifting up our arms or hands pulls our awareness toward heaven. It is a posture that opens the core of our body toward God. (Psalm 141:2; Psalm 63:4; Psalm 77:2; 1 Timothy 2:8)

Uplifted Eyes – looking up to heaven with open eyes draws our attention above earthly realities to eternal things. We are not alone. God is watching us. (Psalm 123:1-2; Mark 7:34; Mark 6:41; John 17:1)

Kneeling – Kneeling is a way we express humility and reverence. (1 Kings 8:54; Acts 9:40; Daniel 6:10; Mark 1:40)

Prostrate – lying face down or bowing low to the earth reminds us that we were created from dust and to dust we will return. It is a posture of submission and obedient worship. (Genesis 17:3; Exodus 4:31; Neh 8:6; 2 Chron 20:18; Luke 5:12; Luke 8:47; Psalm 72:11; Psalm 66:4)

Benefits of a devoted prayer life:

Colossians 4:2-6 “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders;

make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

A person devoted to prayer becomes more of what God calls him to be. Likewise, a church full of people devoted to prayer will bring about massive regime change from self to Lord. Right after Paul tells us to devote ourselves to prayer...to be watchful and thankful, he begins to turn us inside out.

Prayer leads us outward. Why? It leads us Godward. Whenever we grow toward God we grow toward the lost. "...Pray...that God may open a door for our message..." We cannot ascend in godliness without also ascending in awareness of those around us who need Jesus – and our ardent desire to see them saved. "Pray that I may proclaim it clearly..." The Spirit-filled Apostle Paul asking for prayer like this? His heart is evident. Whatever opportunity is before him, he would like to clearly tell them about Jesus. It is never far from his mind.

Prayer changes the way we view people, and also the way we talk to them. Watch for opportunities to speak grace into the lives of sinners. Get some grace on your lips! How? By devoting yourself to prayer. You cannot pray without realizing that you are talking to someone who should have squashed you like a bothersome gnat – and could have – but chose instead to love you. Grace. Prayer will turn us inside out because...

- *It shifts focus from ourselves to our God.
- *It bends our hearts toward His Will, above our own.
- *It begins to adopt the ways and thoughts of God.
- *It drives us to look for ways to share the Good News with those who need it.
- *It washes our mouth out with gospel soap and gives us words of grace to bless and encourage.

Take it home:

This week, begin writing some prayers in your spiritual journaling.
Some ideas to start with:

- a. Confession - share something with God that perhaps you have not shared yet.
- b. List things that you regularly put before God and pray for strength to put Him first instead
- c. Share some things that perhaps you are selfish with - and ask God to help you.

Try out some new physical aspects of prayer this week - if you usually pray sitting, try some of the above suggestions.

What are the different formats for prayer?

Petitionary Prayer. This is a formal request. It is a solemn supplication or request to a superior authority; in the case of prayer, that superior authority is God. James 4:2.

Intercessory Prayer. An earnest request in favor of another, especially a prayer or petition to God in behalf of another. John 17:15-21.

Thanksgiving Prayer. This is giving thanks to God for (1) who He is and (2) for what he has done on our behalf. Two examples.

- a. First, Exodus 15:1-13, 18 – the song of Moses and the Israelites who rejoiced after crossing the Red Sea on dry land.
- b. Second, Luke 1:46-55 – the prayer of Mary who expresses thanks for God's favor in choosing her to bear the Messiah.

Warfare Prayer. Warfare prayer is the kind of prayer in which we wage war against an enemy. It is prayer that is undertaken to destroy and undermine the strength of the devil. We engage in warfare prayer every time we pray for the souls of others. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Ephesians 6:11-18

Breath Prayer - God is the oxygen of our soul, and we need to breathe him in all day long" Breath prayer has been practiced in the church for millennia. The eastern Orthodox Church in particular has seen breath prayer as a way of living out Paul's instruction to "pray without ceasing." The "Jesus Prayer" is a breath prayer described in The Way of the Pilgrim:

- a. Take a seat in solitude and silence. Bend your head, close your eyes and breathe softly, in your imagination, look into your own heart. Let your mind, or rather, your thoughts flow from your head down to your heart and say, while breathing: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Whisper these words gently or say them in your mind. Discard all other thoughts. Be serene, persevering and repeat them over and over again.
- b. Breath prayer is to be a living breathing rhythm of surrender. It is a constant reminder of the one in whose presence you stand. Often the rhythm involves breathing in with a name of God, and out with the desire of your heart. The breath prayer can be any phrase that expresses a deep desire of your heart ... brief enough to be repeated over and over throughout the day. Examples:
 - Abba... I belong to you.
 - Healer... speak the word and I shall be healed.
 - Holy One Keep me true.
 - Lord ... here I am. Jesus ... have mercy on me.

Centering Prayer

Centering prayer is a form of contemplative prayer where the pray-er seeks to quiet scattered thoughts and desires in the still center of Christ's presence. Centering prayer is an ancient form of prayer that joins meditation on a word of Scripture with prayer. Centering prayer leads us to sit in the presence of God and give him our undivided love and attention. Generally the only words that are spoken in centering prayer are the prayer words that continually bring our drifting attention back to God. The prayer word is simple, such as Jesus, love, peace,

father, or a phrase from Scripture. In a centering prayer the goal is to dwell in Christ so much that the fruit of this dwelling begins to show up in your life. Centering prayer may 'do' nothing at the moment. You sense physical or spiritual "high" or feeling. But later as you move out into the busyness of life, you begin to notice that something has shifted. Your quiet center in Christ holds.

- A short method for Centering Prayer:
- Set aside a minimum of 15 minutes. Set a timer if that helps you be less concerned about when to stop.
- Settle into a comfortable position.
- Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God, in the center of his love.
- Choose a simple word, phrase or verse from Scripture that expresses your desire for God (e.g. love, peace, grace, Jesus, great Shepherd). Let this word guard your attention.
- Take time to become quiet. It is not unusual for the first minutes to be filled with many noisy thoughts. Don't worry about them or pay attention to them. Let them go. Gently return your attention to the Center of God's presence and love by repeating your word.
- Use your imagination – God gave you the ability!
- Imagine God's river of life running through you. Deep down, the river is calm and slow. But on the surface there is rushing and debris. Imagine your distracting thoughts are a part of the debris floating in the current. Don't try to capture these thoughts; release them and let the river of God's life carry them away.
- As you are resting in God's love, trust the Holy Spirit to connect you with God.
- Take several minutes to come out of prayer. Don't hurry. Offer yourself to God for the tasks awaiting you (e.g., "I am yours," or "Remain with me")

Take A Prayer Walk - One of the most common struggles in the practice of spirituality is maintaining mental focus in prayer. Walking as we pray – either in a large place indoors or outdoors – keeps the mind from wandering as easily. Bring a small Bible to prompt prayer periodically during the walk. Abraham’s son Isaac is an example from Scripture of walking while thinking on the things of God. *Genesis 24:63 reports, “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field.”*

Use Prayer Prompts - Use something that you see on a regular basis to prompt you to prayer.

- Christians have always used commonplace things as ways to turn their thoughts heavenward. When dressing in the morning, many Puritans made a habit of praying briefly for a different matter with each article of clothing they pulled on. I know several believers who pray whenever they hear a siren. *Philippians 1:3-4.*
- Why not transform something from your routine into a prayer prompt? A sight, a smell, sound, thought, event, or experience. You might also use common objects ... or even religious objects – crosses, prayer beads, etc. as aids ... *but they should never be considered as having power other than as a reminder.* Praying with beads is an ancient practice that can be individualized.

Take it home:

During the week set aside specific time to spend in prayer. You may only feel ready to spend 10 mins, 4 times during the week., or you may want to spend 30 mins, 3 times a day, every day, it’s up to you. Remember don’t try to run a marathon unless you are fit enough, and have been training for a long time. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you.

Think about using these Bible readings and pray in response to what they evoke in you. Again, you may use them in any order you want, and spend as long as you need on each one:

READINGFOCUS

Matthew 6: 5-15

The pattern of prayer.

Psalm 103

The prayer of worship.

Psalm 51

The prayer of repentance.

Psalm 150

The prayer of thanksgiving.

Matthew 26: 36-46

The prayer of guidance.

James 5: 13-18

The prayer of faith.

Mark 9: 14-29

The prayer of command.

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 2 - Prayer

March 24, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

From Richard Foster's book - Celebration of Discipline, "In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times."

Why Has Fasting Faded From our Focus?

We would rather indulge than fast. We prefer to gratify every desire rather than exercise discipline in our bodies and souls. We tend to eat too much, and we even waste about twenty-five percent of our food every day. The constant propaganda fed us today convinces us that if we do not have three large meals each day, with several snacks in between, we are on the verge of starvation. We do not like self-discipline and self-control. It can be uncomfortable. Fasting is one of the disciplines of abstinence. When you abstain from something, you miss it and feel its absence.

Is fasting mandatory for Christians?

Although I do not think that fasting is mandatory for believers today, I do believe the discipline is available to strengthen you spiritually and to help you overcome barriers that might keep you from living the victorious Christian life. There simply are no biblical laws that command regular fasting. However, in the context of giving and praying, Jesus gave instruction on fasting. And he said "when you fast" not "if you fast". (Matthew 6:16) Jesus does not, though, say "you must fast". In another text a question by the disciple of John the Baptist questions Jesus about fasting. Matthew 9:15 indicates that it is only when the bridegroom has been taken away that the disciples would fast. Jesus expected his disciples to fast after he was gone.

1. What Is Fasting?

Fasting is abstinence from food – or anything that is legitimate in and of itself – for some spiritual purpose. Biblical fasting always centers on spiritual purposes. In Scripture it is abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water. A partial fast is a restriction of diet but not total abstention. (Daniel 10:3). Absolute fasts: abstaining from food and water (Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9). This fast is the exception, and should be engaged for no more than three days.

Fasting is a means of worship to God. Fasting is not an end to itself; it is a means by which we can worship the Lord and submit ourselves in humility to Him. We don't make God love us any more than He already does if we fast, or if we fast longer. "When ye fasted...did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?" (Zechariah 7:5) Fasting must be centered on God. It must be God-initiated and God-ordained. Fasting can be an expression of finding your greatest pleasure and enjoyment in life from God. That's the case when disciplining yourself to fast means that you love God more than food, that seeking Him is more important to you than eating.

2. Why Fast?

Over Indulgence

One of the major problems in our country is that we have such an abundance of everything. We are an indulged society. Jesus warns us about the dangers of living in a society such as ours. In Luke 21:34 he said, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap." He was speaking to the church. What was he warning them about? Dissipation. Drunkenness. Eating and drinking more and more.

Appetites

One of the areas of modern life in America where we have a great battle on our hands is in the area of Jesus' Lordship over our appetites. Every time our stomach's growl or feel the slightest bit empty our natural reaction in our culture of plenty is to feed it. It is not unusual for us to eat three meals a day and snack in between and after. Obesity is a plague in our country and Christians ...are often the worst offenders. In so many ways our bellies have become our gods. When that lord speaks or even gives the slightest whisper we rush to its aid to give immediate comfort and satisfaction. We simply do not know how to tell our stomach's "no, you are not lord."

Gluttony

In Titus 1:12 we read that the Cretans were known as lazy gluttons. It is quite easy to practice gluttony in our society. We live in an age of gluttony. Here we can eat again and again, even in the middle of the night. And we eat even when we are not hungry. Have you ever noticed how, when you are watching a movie or television program in which people are eating, all of a sudden you will go into the kitchen to find something to eat even when you are not hungry? This is our problem, and the spiritual discipline of fasting will help us to learn and exercise the self-control we need.

Mastery

"Fasting reveals the measure of food's mastery over us – or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God."

Priorities

Fasting helps us define and establish godly priorities. Jesus, who was the perfect example of someone with godly priorities, started his ministry with fasting. Matthew 4:1ff. We often mention that Jesus was prepared for his confrontation with the devil by his knowledge of scripture but he also prepared for it through fasting. If you knew you would be tempted by the devil for 40 days, wouldn't you want to be well fed and prepared? When

Jesus prepares to go into the wilderness to face the devil, he fasts for 40 days to prepare himself.

Spiritual Fullness

But fasting is just as much about filling up as it is about emptying. You don't want to remain empty. You want to fill yourself up with God's word and with prayer. You may want some time to meditate and think about God for an hour or so each day while you fast. (Dabbs)

Survival

Fasting reminds us that we are sustained "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

3. When Should We Fast ?

On Predetermined Days

During the time of Jesus, Some Pharisees, such as the one who prayed to himself in Luke 18:12, fasted twice a week. Mondays and Thursdays were market days and these Pharisees would also go to the market in this gloomy and miserable condition. Why do you think they did that?

Often

Paul was in "fastings often" (2 Corinthians 11:27).

When facing sickness and death, wars or serious disasters like long-term droughts or plagues

(Judges 20; 1 Samuel 31; Nehemiah 1; 2 Chronicles 20; Joel, 2 Samuel 12)

When needing guidance

In Acts 13 and 14 the apostles fasted and prayed for guidance before they sent out Paul.

When preparing to serve God

Jesus fasted forty days in preparation for his ministry.

In longing for the appearance of Jesus

Jesus prophesied that his disciples would fast in his absence. (Matthew 9:14-15)

4. Qualities of Christian Fasting

Fasting is voluntary and private.

We should fast as we are led by the Spirit of the living God, and, thus, our fasting ought not to be mechanical and Pharisaical.

It is a means to accomplish spiritual purposes.

It trains us in self-denial, which is a key mark of a Christian.

It empties us so we become hungry for things that really matter.

The discipline of abstinence teaches us to be in the world but not of the world.

Negative qualities:

We should never fast in order to be seen and applauded by men.

We ought not to appear sad and gloomy.

Fasting is not meritorious.

Fasting is not a way to spiritually twist God's arm so that he will do something for you. As a spiritual discipline it can help you practically

develop humility, dependence on God and a prayerful spirit as you learn to feed on Christ.

5. Spiritual Activities During Fasting

Bible reading

Confession of sins

In 1 Samuel 7:6 we read how the Israelites fasted and confessed their sins before the Lord. "We have sinned against the Lord," they said.

Mourning and grieving

Ezra fasted and wept for the unfaithfulness of Israel, as we read in Ezra 10:6, "Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles." There is a mourning, a grieving, because we feel that we have offended God.

Humble ourselves

In Psalm 35:13 we read, "Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting."

Accompanied by serious prayer

We see this in Ezra 8, Psalm 35, and Acts 13. Fasting must be accompanied by worship and prayer. Fasting and prayer go hand in hand.

Should be done in the context of loving God and his people. We are to help the poor, cover the naked, practice justice and mercy, and so on, as we read in Isaiah 58.

6. Prayers During Fasting

Sickness

We pray for those who are ill.

Revival

We read about that in Ezra 10, Nehemiah 1, and Daniel 9.

Guidance

We should pray with fasting for guidance. The New Testament church engaged in this activity of prayer and fasting before they sent out missionaries, as we read in Acts 13 and 14.

Deliverance

We are to fast and pray for deliverance from our enemies. Mordecai, Esther, and others fasted for seventy-two hours without eating or drinking, and God brought about great deliverance.

The salvation of our loved ones.

7. How to Fast

Imperfectly

You don't have to be Olympic-skilled. You might begin by fasting from people (solitude), conversation (silence), spending (frugality), media or using the telephone. Perhaps you'd like to experiment with abstaining from overpackaged highly processed foods, from lack of exercise (or fitness mania), or from living with an overpacked schedule. Or you may attempt a partial fast of eating no rich food, meat, or wine (Daniel 10:3).

Start Small

You could start by skipping one meal or fasting for one day. You could start fasting for a night or for three days. For a one-day fast you could try a noon-to-noon fast, or to begin after the noon meal one day and break the fast at the noon meal the next. In that case you are actually only skipping

the evening and morning meal. Or maybe - begin with a partial fast of 24 hours ... lunch to lunch. Drink fresh fruit juices during the fast. Do this once a week for several weeks. Monitor the inner attitude of the heart. Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables and a good deal of inner rejoicing. Keep progressing.

Media

It is good also to fast sometimes from the television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

Personal

Fasting is a personal matter between the individual and God. When you fast, you should tell only those who need to know. "For instance, I generally only let my wife know when I am going to fast so that she can pray for me. She is usually careful not to eat in front of me or to cook anything really savory while I am fasting. I suggest that you ask at least one other believer to be praying for you when you plan to fast because my own experience has taught me that it can be a powerful spiritual battleground." (Feldman)

8. Beginning Your Fast

Physical condition

If you have any kind of physical problems, you should consult with your doctor before you begin to fast. If you have diabetes, high blood pressure, or any other physical condition that would be affected by fasting, you should not begin to fast without medical advice.

Objectives

We must pray for something, and it is good to begin with our own needs. Tell God how oblivious you are to your own sins and needs and ask him to reveal them to you. You should pray for the needs of your family and the

needs of the church. You should pray for the needs of our nation and the world.

Perseverance

Be sure to persevere in it. We are not used to fasting, and we may experience headaches or other discomforts that make us want to quit. But we should persevere as we seek God. Eat lightly before and after fasting. Eat fruits and light foods rather than heavy foods like steak. You want to ease your body into the fast and break it gradually.

Drink

Drink lots of fluids—water and juice—during your fast.

Repent

Repent, confess, pray, and intercede for others during the fast.

Private

Avoid showmanship when you fast. Look normal and don't call attention to your fasting.

9. Benefits of Fasting. What, then, are the benefits to be gained from the practice of fasting?

Self Discipline

Fasting for spiritual purposes teaches us self-discipline. Jesus said to deny ourselves, meaning we must say "No" to the demands of our flesh. We are to say "No" to illegitimate demands as well as to certain legitimate ones. Fasting enables us to have self-discipline so that we can say "No" and make it stick. And it trains us to say "Yes" to God in terms of prayer, confession, and doing what is right.

Dependence

Fasting helps us to understand how much we depend on God. When we stop eating, what happens? We experience pain and trouble. We may even think we are about to die. When we fast, we begin to understand that we need God to give us daily bread, and that realization should give us a little humility. We realize that we live, move, and have our being in God.

Time

When we fast, there is more time to seek the kingdom of God . There is no cooking, no eating, and no washing of dishes. A lot of time is released so that we can really engage in spiritual activity.

Sympathy

Fasting enables us to endure suffering and sympathize with others. As we feel pain from fasting, we can better sympathize with others who are suffering.

Money

Fasting generates money. When we fast, we save money that would otherwise be used for food. In the second century the church used such money for the relief of the poor.

Alertness

Fasting contributes to spiritual and mental alertness. When we fast, our minds and perception get sharper because we are focusing less on temporal things and more on eternal realities. We are not rushing through our prayer. We are really thinking things through. Our souls become more alert.

Earnestness

Through fasting we are telling God that we are earnest in our prayer. Fasting signals earnestness and urgency. Prove yourself by serious fasting and prayer, and see whether or not God will help you. Fasting demonstrates our earnestness, urgency, and diligence.

Self-Examination

Fasting enables us to perform true self-examination. We are a generation that is steeped in the philosophy of self-esteem. We dislike the concept of sin and are always whitewashing ourselves. But when we fast and pray, God shows us in increasing degrees our own corruption. And when that happens, we are enabled to confess and forsake our sins.

Conclusion: Do you have a mild case of fasting-phobia? We think about missing a meal or two for the sake of becoming more like Jesus and we get anxious. And yet we willingly miss meals sometimes while shopping, working, recreating, or otherwise occupied.

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 3 - Generosity

March 31, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. - Deuteronomy 15:10

There's a difference between giving and generosity. Generosity is not just giving, but it's changing the way you think about managing your resources.

Proverbs 11:24 says "One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty."

The reason we should be generous is simple: nothing really belongs to us anyways. Every single thing we have belongs to God. God was generous from the beginning of time by creating us, providing for us, loving us, and saving us.

As God created the universe and all within it - he appointed us, His greatest creation, to rule over it. In turn, he provides for us our daily needs. He does this because He is a generous God.

Jesus taught a whole lot about money and possessions. He warned us about these things, to be on guard against desiring more and more, because our life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. After all, what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

The problem tends to be not with the money, or our riches. It's the attitude we have about money. It is really challenging at times to be happy and content with what we have.

Richard Foster says "Money is an effective way of showing our love to God because it is so much a part of us. One economist put it this way: 'Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self.' In a sense, money is coined personality, so tied to who we are that when we give it we are giving ourselves. We sing - Take my life and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to Thee - But we must flesh out that consecration in specific ways, which is why the next line of the hymn says, 'Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.'" We consecrate ourselves by consecrating our money."

It can be scary to think about giving up our money to help others. What if I run out? What if I need it? This money provides security for me! But again, if we want to truly obey Jesus - he says "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" in Luke 9:23.

It can be downright freeing to give and give generously. Giving freely and generously releases the power that money has on us all. And it's not just money - we give lots of things including money, but also we give of our time, and we give of our talents.

You may possess a certain set of skills that can greatly benefit others. These aren't necessarily skills that are so fine tuned that no one else could achieve them. But simply you may have the ability and the time to cut someone's lawn, and they don't have those same things. So by giving of your time to do that for someone who can't, you're giving more than you can imagine to that person.

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 4 - Meditation

April 7, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

Richard Foster wrote, "Our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in "muchness" and "manyness" he will reset satisfied... Though it may sound strange to modern ears, we should without shame enroll as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer."

Donald Whitney wrote, "One sad feature of our modern culture is that meditation has become identified more with nonChristian systems of thought than with biblical Christianity...yoga, transcendental meditation, relaxation therapy, New Age Movement.... We must remember that meditation is both commanded by God and modeled by the Godly in Scripture."

Adele Calhoun wrote, "Meditation runs counter to our busy culture, where speed reading, first impressions and skimming are as deep as we go. In meditation we gaze at something or someone long and longingly. We seek the treasure and truth of what we see."

What are the first images that come to your mind when you think of meditation?

Do you feel comfortable and confident to meditate?

Do you ever feel that meditation is too difficult, complicated or weird? Why?

What is Meditation

MEDITATION: The act of calling to mind some supposition, pondering

upon it, and correlating it to one's own life. The Hebrew words for meditation primarily were derived from two separate roots. The first (hagah) literally means "to utter in a low sound." The word is used to denote the growling of a lion or the cooing of a dove. Therefore it has been suggested that, in ancient Hebrew meditation, Scripture frequently was recited in a low murmur. The second root word (siach) has the basic meaning of "to be occupied with," or "concerned about." Thus meditation is the repetitious going over of a matter in one's mind because it is the chief concern of life.

Listening to God's word, reflecting on God's works, rehearsing God's deeds, ruminating on God's law ... in each case there is stress upon changed behavior as a result of our encounter with the living God.

Deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer. Meditation goes beyond hearing, reading, studying, and even memorizing as a means of taking in God's Word.

Christian meditation is an attempt to fill the mind (and our lives) with God and detach ourselves from the confusion around us. This allows us to focus on God and obtain an inner wholeness and an ordered life. Jesus made a habit of withdrawing to a lonely place (Matthew 14:13) in order to be with God. (see Matt. 4: 1-11; 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:31; Luke 6:12, etc.) What did Jesus do time after time in those deserted hills?

Meditation is not reading, but reading can stimulate meditation.

Meditation is simple. No specific surroundings are necessary. No special instruction is really needed. Of course these things can be added and can influence an effective time, but by itself meditation does not demand any kind of outward set up.

Meditation is practical. It is a matter of allowing your mind to soak in the word of God ... saturate your attitude and spirit with God's wisdom. It can make a great difference in the things you say, write, think, and experience during the day. Meditation is the one thing that can sufficiently redirect our lives so that we can deal with human life successfully ... Meditation sends us into our ordinary world with greater perspective and balance. When we delight in God's Word we think about it, that is, we meditate on it, at times all throughout the day and night. The result of such meditation is stability, fruitfulness, perseverance, and prosperity.

Meditation sets spiritual life in motion. There is no opening prayer and closing prayer. There is no "bring us back again at the next appointed time." For the things that we learn in our time with God will color our day. We will see God at work in the corners of our lives.

Meditation is the ability to hear God's voice and obey his word. Jesus is alive and among us as our Priest to forgive us, our Prophet to teach us, our King to rule us, our Shepherd to guide us. "Whereas the study of Scripture centers on exegesis, the meditation of Scripture centers on internalizing and personalizing the passage. The written Word becomes a living word addressed to you. This is not a time for technical studies, or analysis, or even the gathering of material to share with others. Set aside all tendencies toward arrogance and with a humble heart receive the word addressed to you." (Foster in Celebration of Discipline)

Perhaps the major hope of meditation is to be sure that we have not clouded our reception with God. Our interests are not usually geared to the quiet or the subtle. We live in a loud world and the loudest voice has us. That is, unless we discovered through experience the life-change that can be brought about in this sacred hour. Perhaps we hear from God in a hundred inadvertent ways, but when do we ever purposefully stop our exciting lives to give God our undivided attention? Meditation answers that question.

The Purpose of Meditation

In meditation we are growing into a familiar friendship with Jesus. What happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart... We who have turned our lives over to Christ need to know how very much he longs to eat with us, to commune with us. We seek for our desires and aspirations to be more and more conformed to his way.

Scriptures that speak of meditation include Joshua 1:7 , Psalm 1:1-3, Psalm 19:13-14, Psalm 48:9-10, Psalm 77:11-13, Psalm 104:33-34, Psalm 119, Psalm 145:4-6 Psalm 143:4-6.

Meditation Requires Sitting Still

I need to sit still so that I will be able to search my heart with honesty. "In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Selah" (Psalm 4:4)

I need to sit still so that I can perceive His guidance. "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." (Psalm 23:2-3)

I need to sit still so I can observe the victorious reign of God in a broken war-torn world, and seek refuge in Him alone. "He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah." (Psalm 46:9-11)

Simple physical exercises like stretching, sitting comfortably and breathing deeply can help us pay attention, listen deeply and even curb our distractibility.

We've all become excellent multi-taskers. With just a lower level of acceptable quality, quantity can be increased significantly. This works in some settings, but not in the kingdom. Modern believers cannot accept meditation because it seems that there should be something else going on also. To sit and quietly contemplate our life in God seems like such a waste.

Preparing to Meditate

We learn to meditate by meditating. A time to meditate is good, but we are aiming for the ability to meditate whenever we have opportunity. A place to meditate. Find a place that is quiet and free from interruption. No phone. No distractions.

Forms of Meditation

Meditation upon Scripture – the central reference point by which all other forms of meditation are kept in proper perspective. This is the process of internalizing and personalizing the passage. Do not rush over Bible passages superficially – this reflects our internal state of hurry. Dietrich Bonhoeffer recommended spending a whole week on a single text. Take a single event or parable, or a few verses or even a single word and allow it to take root in you.

Donald Whitney in his book "Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life" recommends this format for meditating on Scripture:

Select an appropriate passage. "Verses that conspicuously relate to your concerns and personal needs are clearly targets for meditation."

Repeat in different ways ... turn it around like a diamond to see every facet. Think deeply about each word in the passage.

Rewrite it in your own words.

Look for applications of the text. Like chewing without swallowing, so meditation is incomplete without some type of application.

Pray through the text. Psalm 119:18 "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."

Don't rush – take time. It is better to understand a small amount of Scripture and meditate on it than to read an extensive section without meditation. Choose to read less in order to have more time with the text.

Another format for meditation is Re-collection or "Centering Down" – a time to become still, to enter into the recreating silence, to allow the fragmentation of our minds to become centered. Collecting all that which worries us, handing it over to God, and then receiving his replacements e.g. give up pride, receive humility.

Meditation upon the Creation. Focus on the created order ... the trees, a flower, the creatures of the earth. The heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1). Let these lead you to a calm spirit.

Do not be discouraged if in the beginning your meditations have little meaning to you. There is a progression in the spiritual life, and it is wise to have some experience with lesser peaks before trying to tackle the Mt. Everest of the soul.

Another method for meditation:

During the week try and find time (about 20-30 mins.) to practice meditation.

Open your Bible to the chosen Bible reading. Leave it open in front of you.

Enter into God's presence in prayer, asking that His Spirit will bring His word to life for you. Slow down.

Consciously slow down your breathing; breathe deeper, more gently, invite the Holy Spirit into your life. With every deep breath in say, "I breathe in the Holy Spirit", with every deep breath out say, "I breathe out the Love of God". Allow the Holy Spirit to penetrate every part of your being. Picture that happening.

Now read the scripture passage slowly. (Do not analyze or study it.) Allow the Holy Spirit to teach you what He wants.

When a word or phrase "lights up" or "rings a bell", put your bible down. Concentrate on God's word to you by repeating it (gently, not mechanically). Do not force any response/emotion; allow the Holy Spirit to work.

As you become aware of the impression (feeling/attitude) God's word has made on you, respond to God in prayer, or in silence if you wish. Be with Christ, bask in His love.

As distractions set in, close your prayer off in whatever way you want (you may wish to say the Lord's Prayer).

Another suggested form of Meditation - Reading the Psalms as follows:

Read the Psalms – one per week, three times per day

Once through the lens of OT

Once through lens of Jesus

Once as personal prayer.

Some questions to ask of yourself for meditation:

Is purposeful meditation on the word of God a regular practice in your life?

I think we can see that this practice goes beyond reading, beyond lesson preparation, beyond commentary.

Do you have some specific practices that aid you in meditating on the Word?

Is life too fast to even consider taking time to do this?

Do we let the reading of devotional material take the place of reading the Scriptures?

Do you couple meditation with journaling?

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 5 - Confession

April 14, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

“The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.” – Augustine of Hippo.

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:8-9)

Confession is the desire to surrender my weaknesses and faults to the forgiving love of Christ and intentionally desire and embrace practices that lead to transformation.

What does confession involve?

- Admitting to God the natural propensity to rationalize, deny, blame, and self-obsess.
- Examining the ‘sin network’ in your life as evidenced in presumptuous sins, besetting weaknesses, self-centered habits, and broken relationships.
- Replacing sinful habits with healthy ones.
- Seeking God’s grace to change.

The Value of Confession

It brings about objective change. Confession is more than psychologically therapeutic. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit." (Psalm 32:1-2) Keeping company with Jesus as he helps you with how much or how little you change.

It is part of the ongoing work of sanctification in our lives. Philippians 2:12 "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Confession helps the believer to grow "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13) Proverbs 28:13 "No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy."

It challenges our pride.

Thinking of yourself with sober judgment, it gives you awareness of your blind spots.

Helps you gain insight into your temptations and God's work in your life.

Helps you have compassion toward others in their faults.

Helps you to see yourself as God's loved and forgiven children no matter what you have done.

Helps you live in thankfulness for God's work in your life.

Helps you to savor the gift of salvation.

It brings Freedom from bondage. 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.

Is Confession Private or Corporate?

It is a private act. "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" 1 Timothy 2:5. The prayer of "examen" – asking God to stir up an awareness of our sin. We ask God to test us, search us, and know our hearts (Psalm 139:1). Other ways of opening our spiritual need to God: journaling, reading of Scripture, meditating on the Lord's prayer, private retreats.

It is a corporate act. "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another..." James 5:16. The Bible teaches public and shared confession. The model prayer: "Our Father in heaven... Give us this day our daily bread..."(Matthew 6:9-13)

In large assemblies, where Christians may not have meaningful relationships and where they may not even know one another, "Public confession" is deeply problematic. Such venues are not necessarily spiritually or psychologically safe. The chances of abuse, embarrassment, and misunderstanding are considerable.

Suggestion: use confessional prayers such as Psalm 51 or the Lord's prayer, or even a prayer like this from The Book of Common Prayer:

Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
In thought, word, and deed,
By what we have done,
And by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
Have mercy on us and forgive us;
That we may delight in your will,
And walk in your ways,
To the glory of your Name. Amen.

The Challenge of Confession

We can see others as being better Christians than we are. Confession is difficult for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We often hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light."

What if Christians came to the assembly expecting to lay down their burdens, their griefs, and their grievances before each other? What if they refused to go forward with their worship and their countless religious activities until they had made amends with their brothers and sisters in the faith? Could it be that our congregations are unnecessarily burdened by pain because we have failed to confess our faults to one another?

There are countless social forces that tempt us to soften the truth, to spin the facts, or merely to stay superficial. For one thing, we live in a harsh and competitive world. The cost of truth-telling can be extraordinarily high, especially in communities of faith, where everyone is expected to look better than they are.

The truth is found in two facts: Everyone who lives is deeply hurt by others. Everyone who lives has deeply hurt others. We have all wounded and offended God. Acts 2:37 "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?""

The Christian who is not confessional is in peril: A danger to himself. A danger to the community. A necessary premise of Good News is that something very bad is going on in our lives for which the Good News is the welcome remedy. If we cannot see the bad news in our lives and confess it, we block the one pathway to hope.

Three Qualities of Confession.

An Examination of Conscience. A time when we are pierced in our soul in the presence of God, helps us to become conscious of the things that must be forgiven and put right before we can continue to love One whose care has been so constant. We bring our sins in specific...both outward sins and the sins of the heart.

Sorrow. It is necessary to a good confession. Sorrow as it relates to confession is an abhorrence at having committed the sin, a deep regret at having offended the heart of the Father. Sorrow is a way of taking the confession seriously.

A determination to avoid sin. This is the will to be delivered from sin that we seek from God as we prepare to make confession. We must desire and be conquered and ruled by God.

To Whom Should we Confess?

Not a gossip. It is an unfortunate fact of life that some people seem to be unable to keep a confidence.

Key Qualities: spiritual maturity, wisdom, compassion, good common sense, the ability to keep a confidence, and a wholesome sense of humor.

There is danger in confessing to improper people at improper times. Jesus taught us to take care not to cast what is most precious before those who will treat it unworthily or with contempt (Matthew 7:6).

How Should I Receive Confession?

Humility. We learn to live under the cross. We can escape being horrified by the sin of others and feeling superior to others – to know the grace and mercy of God's acceptance. Once we know the awfulness of sin we know that regardless of what others have done, we ourselves are the chief of sinners. By living under the cross we are delivered from the danger of spiritual domination. We feel no need to control or straighten them out.

Indwelling. We need to pray for the light of Christ within us so that our presence will speak of the love and forgiving grace of God.

Wisdom. We need to pray for an increase in the gift of discernment.

Quiet. When others are opening their grief to us we discipline ourselves to be quiet. We should not relieve tension with off-handed comments, nor prying out more details than are necessary.

Prayer. Inwardly and imperceptibly you are sending prayers of love and forgiveness for the person who is confessing.

Prayer for the healing of the inner wounds that the sin has caused. Prayer in this manner is best accompanied by "laying on of hands" – a means

through which God communicates his life giving power (Hebrews 6:1-2 “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.”).

Forgiveness is to be Received.

Absolution is the pronouncement of the glorious truth that we have been released from our burden. All Christians ought to hear that God is a good and gracious God, ready to forgive, ready to welcome them home. It is true that only God forgives, it is also true that we can benefit from hearing divine forgiveness explicitly pronounced.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”

1 John 2:12 “I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.”

Christ called us to speak words of truth to one another. We can emphatically affirm that Christ receives and forgives penitent people.

The discipline of Confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a Church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession and confession leads to change. Tippens: Confession is a joint process involving a sincere speaker and an attentive, responsive listener. The confessor speaks his or her weakness; but the speaker must be heard, held, and loved by someone – first and foremost by God, but also by a brother or sister who embodies the patience of Christ.

EXERCISES (from the book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Calhoun)

1. Imagine you are in a safe place, surrounded by the love of God. Ask God to help you see yourself as He sees you. Remember he sees you absolutely and with love. Using the Ten Commandments as a guide, journal your sins. When you have finished, go through each commandment one at a time, asking God to forgive you and help you to change. Then burn your list in a symbolic act of what it means to have God remove your sins from you.

2. Set aside some time for confession and self-examination. In the presence of God ask for light to pierce your defenses. Then ask yourself, Who have I injured recently through thoughtlessness, neglect, anger, and so on? As the Holy Spirit brings people to mind, confess your feelings about these people to God. Ask God to forgive you and if need be to give you grace to forgive them. Write an apology, make a phone call or confess out loud in an attempt to put the relationship back on track.

3. Enter into a covenant group or an accountability relationship where you cannot hide. Tell the truth about who you are and ask your partners to pray for you and help you change.

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 6 - Silence and Solitude

April 21, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

Solitude and silence go together so perfectly that they are considered together. Those who seek a deeper relationship with God must seek out the recreating stillness of solitude.

SOLITUDE AND SILENCE

1. Silence

Donald Whitney says in his book *Simplify Your Spiritual Life*, "The Discipline of silence is the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought. Sometimes silence is observed in order to read, write, pray, and so on. Though there is no outward speaking, there are internal dialogues with self and with God."

Adele Calhoun says "It is difficult to find silence in an age of technology and information. Silence challenges our cultural addiction to amusement, words, music, advertising, noise, alarms and voices both silence and waiting make us uncomfortable. They seem so unproductive. We can't tell if we are doing anything in them. So when we come upon silence, we fill it."

She goes on to say "We are so afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment alone with ourselves, in order not to have to look at ourselves in the mirror."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (via Calhoun, p. 111)

Solitude is the Spiritual Discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes. The period of solitude may

last only a few minutes or for days. Solitude involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a distraction – free environment that you experience isolation and are alone with God. Solitude is a container discipline for the practice of the other spiritual disciplines. 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 recreate the world in our image. 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.”

STEPS INTO SOLITUDE

Take advantage of the “little solitudes” that fill our day. Early in the morning before the family awakens. When traffic comes to a halt. Take short walks. Slip outside just before bed and enjoy the silent night.

Find places outside the home: a park, a church sanctuary kept unlocked, a retreat center. It helps when we find some time / place where we are not in competition with social contact, noise, or stimulation.

Attempt to gain control over your words and make them few and full.

Four times a year withdraw for three to four hours for the purpose of reorienting your life goals. What do you want to have accomplished one year from now? Ten years from now? Keep a journal of what comes to mind during these times. Ask God to show you new alternatives for the future.

Write in journals. Read your Bible. Go for a walk. Decompress from life. Read other books.

Whatever you do - find time for daily silence and solitude. Think about these three words: noise, hurry, crowds. Wouldn't it be nice to take a

break from these things? Develop places that become a refuge for you when seeking solitude and silence.

REASONS FOR SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Follow Jesus' Example. Jesus inaugurated his ministry by spending forty days alone in the desert (MT 4:1- 11). Before he chose the twelve he spent the entire night alone in the desert hills (Luke 6:12). After John the Baptist's death, he "withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart" (Matthew 14:13). After feeding the five thousand Jesus "went up into the hills by himself..." (MT 14:23). In other times of his life, Jesus spent time alone (Mark 1:35; Mark 6:31; Luke 4:42; Luke 5:16; Matthew 17:1-9; Matthew 26:36-46).

To Hear the Voice of God Better. As we contemplate Scripture and inquire of God, busyness and noise tend to drown out any insight we may receive.

To Express Worship To God. The worship of God does not always require words, sounds, or actions. Sometimes worship consists of a God-focused stillness and hush. Habakkuk 2:20 says, "But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

To Express Faith in God. The simple act of silence before the Lord, as opposed to coming to Him in a wordy fret, can be a demonstration of faith in Him. Psalm 62:1,2 "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken."

To Seek the Salvation of the Lord. Lamentations 3:25-28 "The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him." In what circumstances do you seek God's deliverance?

To Be Physically and Spiritually restored. We all need to restore the resources of the inward and outward person. Mark 6:31 "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

To Regain A Spiritual Perspective. There's no better way to step back and get a more balanced, less worldly perspective on matters than through the Disciplines of silence and solitude.

To Seek the Will of God. "After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper." (1 Kings 19:12)

To Learn Control of the Tongue. The Bible says that the religion of the person with no tongue control is worthless. James 1:19 "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." "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"

FRUIT OF SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Being attentive to the voice of Jesus.

Having freedom from negative habits of speech (deception, gossip, impulsive chatter, small talk, impression management, the need to express your opinion or critique.)

Freedom from addictions to noise or sound (radio, TV, phone, etc.); the need to be occupied and stimulated.

Receiving quiet from the chaos and noise in your life.

Growing in self-awareness as the silence invites the subconscious to move into deeper levels of knowing.

Developing increased listening skills.

Moving away from letting the world squeeze you into its mold (Romans 12:2).

EXERCISE

If silence is new to you, begin with ten minutes. Setting a timer can help a novice who keeps watching the clock. As you become quiet what do you hear: voices, traffic, your breath, wind, your heart, distracting thoughts? Let the noise go. Continue to let the quiet deepen. Be with God. After ten minutes reflect on what it was like for you to simply become still enough to hear the backgrounds.

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 7 - Study

April 28, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the Discipline of study.

We are transformed through the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2). Paul suggests a number of things to think about in Philippians 4:8. Jesus said that the knowledge of the truth would set us free (John 8:32) No factor is more influential in shaping a person's moral and social behavior than regular Bible reading.

What is Study?

Study is a specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction. The Old Testament instructs the Israelites to write the Laws on gates and doorposts and bind them to their wrists (Deut. 11:18). The purpose of this is to direct the mind repeatedly toward certain modes of thought about God and human relationships. The NT replaces the law on the doorpost with laws written on the heart that lead us to Jesus.

Study is different from meditation. Meditation is devotional; study is analytical. Meditation will relish a word; study will explicate it. The principle task of study is a perception into the reality of a given situation, encounter, book, etc. We can go through a major crisis, for example, without any perception of the real nature of the tragic situation. But if we carefully observe and reflect upon what occurred, we can learn a great deal.

Four Practical Suggestions for Consistent Success in Bible Study:

Find the Time! An audio recorded reading of the Bible can be done in 71-75 hours. The average person in the US watches that much television in less than two weeks. Reading 15 minutes a day can take you through the Bible in less than a year. Five minutes a day take you through the Bible in less than three years.

Find a Bible Reading Plan. One plan is to read three chapters every day and five on Sundays and you will go through the Bible in a year. Find at least one word, phrase, or verse to meditate on each time you read.

Write. Observations about the text, record questions, look up cross references, use a concordance, Outline the chapter.

Use the Tools such as a Bible Dictionary, Concordances, Commentaries, Bible Word Studies, Bible Atlas.

Another tool to utilize for study is memorization.

It supplies spiritual power. When Scripture is stored in the mind, it is available for the Holy Spirit to take and bring to your attention when you need it the most. (Psalm 119:11 "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.")

It strengthens your faith. Proverbs 22:17-19 "Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips. So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you."

It equips you for unexpected witnessing opportunities. You need that information available.

It prepares you to hear God's Guidance. (Psalm 119:24 "Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors.")

It stimulates meditation. When you have the Word in your mind you can meditate on it anywhere at any time when opportunities come available. (Psalm 119:97 "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.")

Keys to Memorization:

Have a plan. Decide on a topic or verses that help with a habit you want to kick.

Write out the verses. First on paper, then on cards ... put them on your screen saver.

Draw picture reminders.

Memorize the verses word-perfectly. Don't be satisfied with almost!

Find a method of accountability – meet with someone regularly to review the verses.

Review and meditate every day.

Remember that the goal of memorization is not to meet a quota, the goal is Godliness.

Conclusion

The first and most important book we are to read is the Bible. Start small and build up.

2 Timothy 3:16, 17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Psalm 119:9, 11 "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. ... I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

Robert Sumner, in his book *The Wonder of the Word of God*, tells of a man in Kansas City who was severely injured in an explosion. His face was badly disfigured, and he lost his eyesight as well as both hands. He had just become a Christian when the accident happened, and one of his great disappointments was that he could no longer read the Bible. Then he heard about a lady in England who read Braille with her lips. He sent for some books of the Bible in Braille, but the nerve endings in his lips had been too badly damaged to distinguish the characters. One day as he brought a Braille page to his lips his tongue happened to touch a few of the raised characters and he could feel them. At the time Robert Sumner wrote his book, the man had read through the entire Bible four times. If he can do that, can we discipline ourselves to read the Bible?

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 8 - Service

May 5, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

Hebrews 13:16 says "Don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God."

We should be continually living with the mindset of service. We should always be asking ourselves "How can I serve God today by serving others?"

Matthew 5:16 says "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven."

Service is the act of helping or doing work for someone else, often those who are in need. It is showing kindness and favor to other people by helping, by assisting, by aiding them.

True service is not born out of guilt or obligation, but rather it is born out of love and gratitude. In order to serve others, it requires a pretty healthy dose of humility, strength, and love. We serve, because Christ himself came to serve us.

Service born out of selfishness is not service. That's because true, Christian service is selfless. It never has an expectation of praise and accolades when done, because that's not true service. If we are to glorify God while serving, selfish motives can not be present. Galatians 5:13 tells us to serve one another with humility and love.

When we serve others, it allows us to experience a deeper and greater appreciation for all God has done for us. Service to others helps us build relationships. Service to others allows others to see Jesus through us.

Jesus really is the ultimate example of being a servant. We read about it in Philippians 2, when Jesus set aside all the wonders of Heaven, all the privileges of being God, to become human, to walk alongside His creation, and willingly go to the cross. While here on earth, with His eyes set on the goal of living a sinless life to die for our sins, he also took time to heal the sick, feed the hungry, teach the lost, and love the unlovable.

Even as he went into His last days on earth, he served his companions by washing their feet in John 13. And He called us all to serve as well.

This idea is somewhat counter-cultural, because society tends to tell us that we need the best, live at the top, and have others serve us.

Or even worse, many people adopt the mentality that "someone else will take care of it" instead of helping and serving on their own. This sadly even bleeds into the church mindset. We need to be careful that we don't turn the church into a place where the elders or the ministers or the deacons, or those appointed to a leadership position take care of everything. If something needs to be done, and we have the ability to do it, we should do it.

The old adage of JOY works well in the idea of service. Jesus first, other second, yourself last.

How can I serve my Savior? How can I serve His Kingdom? How can I help the church be the best version of itself? Are there tasks and responsibilities that need to be taken care of that the same three or four people always take care of? Instead of saying "who can I get to fix this?" - why not say "You know what, I'm going to come and fix this next week."

How do you serve others? Taking care of people and providing for people in their time of need is one way. But also - we pass by people every day in need. The homeless, the sick, the widows, they will always be with us.

And they each provide an opportunity to serve others. In a lot of those situations, they can't do much to serve us back, so this gives an opportunity to provide true service.

We can serve others by opening up our home to others. Having people over for dinner, having conversation and fellowship - this is an act of service.

You can serve others by being there for them, by listening to them, by being a shoulder to cry on in their time of grief. Every single one of us benefit from having people to talk to and share things with, so why not be that person for someone?

Another way we can serve is by shining the spotlight on others, praising them and lifting them up for their good deeds.

We should always be ready and willing to serve. In I Samuel 3:10, after hearing a voice call out for him many times, Samuel finally understood it was God calling for him. And in response, after again calling out to him, Samuel said "Speak, for your servant is listening." We should try to have that mentality for every and all opportunities of service - your servant is listening, what can I do to help?

Richard Foster encourages us to wake up every morning and pray: 'Lord Jesus, as it would please you, bring me someone today who I can serve.' How about starting every day this week with this prayer and seeing how God leads you?

Serving your family at home is a great way to start. Think about how much good it does your family when they come home to a place where everyone always puts the needs of others above themselves. In this environment, those who serve will be served.

Laundry doesn't do itself. Dishes don't wash themselves. Food doesn't get prepared on it's own. Service to others is as simple as this.

As you seek to grow in this spiritual discipline of service, why not pray for wisdom and discernment when those opportunities arise so you'll know whether or not you should say yes. Saying yes to every service opportunity may not be the best option. In fact, there will be times when you cannot help or serve. It's easy to get burned out. No is an acceptable answer.

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 9 - Rest

May 12, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

From the very beginning, God knew that we needed rest. Genesis 2:3 tells us that after God had created for six days, he took a rest on the seventh. Later, God called the Israelites to be His chosen nation, His people, and He gave them what we now call the ten commandments. At the heart of one of these commands was rest: Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy.

For God's people, this command was there for many reasons. It was so they could set aside a day to worship. But it wasn't just for worship. It was also a day for them not to work. It was a day to rest. It was a day to refocus. It was a day to step back from the busyness of the daily grind and take a breather.

In our world today, especially in the American culture, we don't seem to value rest the same way that God originally intended. We tend to work as much as humanly possible, and then, when we have a day off, we fill it with all sorts of other tasks and responsibilities.

In fact, we've made our lives so busy, that it doesn't really make sense to stop and rest. We have too many responsibilities, too many appointments, too many extracurricular hobbies and tasks that fill up our day.

But even Jesus, who, being fully God, came to this earth to live in human form, needed rest. Look at this passage from John 4:

"Jacob's well was there, and Jesus tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon." John 4:6

One of the greatest things we can see in Jesus that proves he was fully human while also being fully God while here on earth is that he got tired, and needed rest.

In this particular situation, Jesus was walking through Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee. No matter who you are, after exerting yourself for a while, your body will inevitably become tired. Here, Jesus needed to sit down, rest, and get some water.

Unfortunately, none of us are excluded from the need to rest. None of us have unlimited physical capacity. Rest restores us, not just physically, but also mentally as well.

In this situation, the rest paid off in ways more than just recovery time. It also gave Jesus an opportunity to talk with the Samaritan woman, who in turn took the saving message of Jesus to the entirety of her village.

OTHER WAYS JESUS DEMONSTRATED REST

In Mark 4, after a long day of teaching, he took his disciples and left the crowd behind (vs 36). Having to spend every day teaching and being surrounded by crowds surely had a taxing effect on not only Jesus, but also his disciples. Sometimes, setting boundaries helps force us into rest that we need. When Jesus got into the boat, the crowds could not follow. It is completely acceptable to put boundaries up so people know you need to rest and recharge.

Another example of withdrawing from others to rest is found in Mark 6. In verse 30, the apostles gather around Jesus and talk about all they had done that day, but the people kept coming for more. So in verse 31, Jesus tells them "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

In the verses that follow, we see that the crowd sees them get on the boat and runs ahead to be there when they land. This time alone with his friends in the boat helped them all to prepare for the massive encounter that followed when they fed over 5000 people. Jesus knew they needed some rest before that moment.

In Mark 1:35, we read of one of the occasions when Jesus got up early in the morning and went off on his own to a solitary place to pray. The sun had not even risen yet, but Jesus took time to withdraw before the hustle and bustle of the day began to have spiritual rest time alone with His Father.

Sometimes rest can be achieved by being productive. In Mark 6:46, Jesus leaves his disciples and goes off by himself again to pray. Even though Jesus did not go off to sleep or nap, he went off on his own to re-energize his mind and reconnect with His Father.

In fact, Jesus does this a lot - Luke 5:16 tells us that he often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. This implies that Jesus knew how important this time was for him. He did this often, probably daily, withdrawing from crowds and spending time with God. This is important because he didn't wait until he was burned out to approach God and spend restful time with him, instead, doing this often kept him burning out.

Jesus not only demonstrates rest, but he also provides rest.

Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30)

It's not always easy to find rest. It's not always easy to find time to rest. Rest isn't always convenient. We have things that need to be done, things that need to be accomplished, tasks that need to be achieved.

We are typically given a day or two off each week from work, from school, from the daily grind we all go through. But how many of us actually take our days off and use them to rest? Instead, we fill those days with more things - travel, activities, ball games, commitments, and so on.

There's a reason why one of the ten commandments was to remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy. God knew we needed time to rest, just like He did after creating the universe.

Jesus can provide rest like none other by allowing us to lay our burdens down at His feet so in turn HE can carry them for us.

While it is indeed difficult to find a complete day to rest as was prescribed to God's people in the Old Testament, we need to find a way to incorporate rest into our life.

We do this by being intentional in disconnecting from the hustle and bustle of the world around us. We do this by reconnecting with God on a regular basis. We do this by finding rest in Him. We do this by casting our cares and burdens and struggles on Him.

Other things you can do to find rest on a regular basis:

1. Schedule rest. Put it on your calendar, set aside time each day, each week, each month for scheduled rest. Otherwise, you may find yourself neglecting rest. And rest is not just done from 10pm to 6am while you are sleeping. Active rest is very important for your mental and physical and spiritual being. Designate a day, or at least portions of several days, to rest. Plan it out. Schedule it. Don't stray from it.

2. Make sure you set some boundaries for what you will and will not do while at rest. Answering work emails while you're relaxing in the recliner is not rest. It is work.
3. Plan your rest. What is it that provides you real, meaningful rest? What are some things that refresh you and your soul?
4. Don't be afraid to tell others you are resting. Resting is not just for the sick, the elderly, Kindergarten student napping - no, it is for all of us. Put your phone on "do not disturb" and set an automatic message to reply that you are spending time in rest and that you will get back to them later.
5. Spend extra time on other days to do chores. Get chores done as needed instead of stacking them up for your day off. Cook extra food one night so you have intentional leftovers for another evening.
6. While at rest - make sure you're doing something that distracts you from the worries and problems of the week. Take a walk, sit in your backyard with a journal, grab lunch with someone you love, play games with your children.
7. Finally - "waste time" with God. Do nothing but sit and rest with God. Connect through scripture reading, with silence and meditation.

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