
SPIRITUAL

DISCIPLINES

FOR THE

CHRISTIAN

L · I · F · E

DONALD S. WHITNEY



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*For the glory of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—
becoming like Him is the goal of the Spiritual Disciplines*

*For Don and Dollie Whitney,
who first taught me of Christ and of many Spiritual Disciplines*

*and for Caffy,
who always encourages me in the Spiritual Disciplines*

FOREWORD

I was asked to write a foreword for this book before I saw it. Having now gone through it, I would in any case have volunteered for the job, so that I can go on record as urging all Christians to read what Don Whitney has written; indeed, to read it three times over, with a month's interval (certainly not less, and ideally, I think, not more) between each reading. This will not only make the book sink in, but will also give you a realistic picture of your seriousness, or lack of it, as Jesus' disciple. Your first reading will show you several particular things that you should start doing. In your second and third readings (for each of which you should choose a date on the day you complete the previous reading) you shall find yourself reviewing what you have done and how you have fared in doing it. That will be very good for you, even if the discovery comes as a bit of a shock at first.

Ever since Richard Foster rang the bell with his *Celebration of Discipline* (1978), discussing the various spiritual disciplines has become a staple element of conservative Christian in-talk in North America. This is a happy thing. The doctrine of the disciplines (Latin *disciplinae*, meaning courses of learning and training) is really a restatement and extension of classical Protestant teaching on the means of grace (the Word of God, prayer, fellowship, the Lord's Supper). Don Whitney's

spiritual feet are blessedly cemented in the wisdom of the Bible, as spelled out by the Puritan and older evangelical masters, and he plots the path of discipline with a sure touch. The foundations he lays are evangelical, not legalistic. In other words, he calls us to pursue Godliness through practicing the disciplines out of gratitude for the grace that has saved us, not as self-justifying or self-advancing effort. What he builds on these foundations is as beneficial as it is solid. He is in truth showing us the path of life.

If, then, as a Christian you want to be really real with your God, moving beyond the stage of playing games with yourself and Him, this book provides practical help. A century and a half ago the Scottish professor “Rabbi” Duncan sent his students off to read John Owen, the Puritan, on indwelling sin with the admonition, “But, gentlemen, *prepare for the knife.*” As I pass you over to Don Whitney, I would say to you, “Now, friend, *prepare for the workout.*” And you will find health for your soul.

—J.I. Packer

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When Allan Wells of Scotland won the 100 meter dash at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, he said, “That’s for Eric Liddell.” In so doing he acknowledged the inspiration and influence Liddell had been to him and to all Scotsmen since the 1924 Olympics in Paris. That’s when Liddell opted out of a great chance at winning the prestigious 100 meter championship because the day of the race conflicted with His Christian convictions, only to set an Olympic record in winning the gold medal on another day in the 400 meters.

As Wells acknowledged the influence of someone who had died almost forty years before, so I want to acknowledge the influence of men I have never met except through their writings and biographies. But they are men whose thoughts and lives have profoundly changed mine.

Thanks to the Puritans. Today they are often maligned by Christians and non-Christians alike who often know little or nothing about them. Our stereotyped perceptions of them reveal a lack of awareness of their profound contributions to spirituality and Godly living. They are spiritual giants on whose shoulders I stand.

Thanks to Jonathan Edwards, C. H. Spurgeon, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. My life and ministry are immeasurably better because of theirs.

I also want to show my gratitude to these in my own day who have

enriched my life in ways that have had a direct bearing on this book.

Thanks to Ernie for his vision for reformation and revival, for his willingness to help a young pastor he hadn't met, and for the books.

Thanks to John, Jim, and Tom for their friendship and for challenging me to think.

Thanks Jim for writing theology so clearly and for communicating so winsomely the fruit of all those years of studying the Puritans.

Thanks to Jim for his genuine, unselfish excitement about the book and for being such a joy to work with.

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Thanks to David for the doctoral seminar which first prompted me to organize much of this material.

Thanks to Roger and Jean for the friendship and encouragement without which this book probably would not have been written and published.

Thanks to Traci for being such an affirming editor from beginning to end.

Thanks to Glenfield Baptist Church for praying for me and for supporting me with extra love throughout the process of writing this book.

Thanks to Caffy who patiently endured so much that this book might be written.

Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.
1 Timothy 4:7, NASB

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS



Ours is an undisciplined age. The old disciplines are breaking down. . . . Above all, the discipline of divine grace is derided as legalism or is entirely unknown to a generation that is largely illiterate in the Scriptures. We need the rugged strength of Christian character that can come only from discipline.

V. Raymond Edman
The Disciplines of Life

Discipline without direction is drudgery.

Imagine six-year-old Kevin, whose parents have enrolled him in music lessons. After school every afternoon, he sits in the living room and reluctantly strums “Home on the Range” while watching his buddies play baseball in the park across the street. That’s discipline without direction. It’s drudgery.

Now suppose Kevin is visited by an angel one afternoon during guitar practice. In a vision he’s taken to Carnegie Hall. He’s shown a guitar virtuoso giving a concert. Usually bored by classical music, Kevin is astonished by what he sees and hears. The musician’s fingers dance excitedly on the strings with fluidity and grace. Kevin thinks of how stupid and klunky his hands feel when they halt and stumble over the chords. The virtuoso blends clean, soaring notes into a musical aroma that wafts from his guitar. Kevin remembers the toneless, irritating discord that comes stumbling out of his.

But Kevin is enchanted. His head tilts slightly to one side as he listens. He drinks in everything. He never imagined that anyone could play the guitar like this.

“What do you think, Kevin?” asks the angel.

The answer is a soft, slow, six-year-old’s “W-o-w!”

The vision vanishes, and the angel is again standing in front of Kevin in his living room. “Kevin,” says the angel, “the wonderful musician you saw is *you* in a few years.” Then pointing at the guitar, the angel declares, “But you must practice!”

Suddenly the angel disappears and Kevin finds himself alone with his guitar. Do you think his attitude toward practice will be different now? As long as he remembers what he’s going to become, Kevin’s discipline will have a direction, a goal that will pull him into the future. Yes, effort will be involved, but you could hardly call it drudgery.

When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many believers feel as Kevin did toward guitar practice—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.

First we must understand what we shall become. It is said of God’s elect in Romans 8:29, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” 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, in a few years.

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 that Christlikeness. We aren’t merely to wait for holiness, we’re to pursue it. “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy,” we’re commanded in Hebrews 12:14, for “without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

Which leads us to ask what every Christian should ask, “How then shall we pursue holiness? How can we 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.

This verse is the theme for the entire book. In this chapter I will attempt to unpack its meaning; the rest of the book is an effort to apply it in practical ways. I will refer to the scriptural ways Christians discipline themselves in obedience to this verse as the Spiritual Disciplines. I will maintain that the only road to Christian maturity and Godliness (a biblical term synonymous with Christlikeness and holiness) passes

through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. I will emphasize that Godliness is the goal of the Disciplines, and when we remember this, the Spiritual Disciplines become a delight instead of drudgery.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES— THE MEANS TO GODLINESS

The Spiritual Disciplines are those personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times.

This book examines the Spiritual Disciplines of Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, and learning. This is by no means, however, an exhaustive list of the Disciplines of Christian living. A survey of other literature on this subject would reveal that confession, accountability, simplicity, submission, spiritual direction, celebration, affirmation, sacrifice, “watching,” and more also qualify as Spiritual Disciplines.

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, there is little value in practicing Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them (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).

The Spiritual Disciplines are the God-given means we are to use in the Spirit-filled pursuit of Godliness.

Godly people are disciplined people. It has always been so. Call to mind some heroes of church history—Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Bunyan, Susanna Wesley, George Whitefield, Lady Huntingdon, Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, George Muller—they were all disciplined people. In my own pastoral and personal Christian experience, I can say that I’ve never known a man or woman who came to spiritual maturity except through discipline. Godliness comes through discipline.

Actually, God uses three primary catalysts for changing us and conforming us to Christlikeness, but only one is largely under our control. One catalyst the Lord uses to change us is people. “As iron sharpens

iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). Sometimes God uses our friends to sharpen us into more Christlike living, and sometimes He uses our enemies to file away our rough, ungodly edges. Parents, children, spouses, coworkers, customers, teachers, neighbors, pastors—God changes us through these people.

Another change agent God uses in our lives is circumstances. The classic text for this is Romans 8:28: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Financial pressures, physical conditions, even the weather are used in the hands of Divine Providence to stimulate His elect toward holiness.

Then there is the catalyst of the Spiritual Disciplines. This catalyst differs from the first two in that when He uses the Disciplines, God works from the inside out. When He changes us through people and circumstances, the process works from the outside in. The Spiritual Disciplines also differ from the other two methods of change in that God grants us a measure of choice regarding involvement with them. We often have little choice regarding the people and circumstances God brings into our lives, but we can decide, for example, whether we will read the Bible or fast today.

So on the one hand, we recognize that even the most iron-willed self-discipline will not make us more holy, for growth in holiness is a gift from God (John 17:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 2:11). On the other hand, we can do something to further the process. God has given us the Spiritual Disciplines as a means of receiving His grace and growing in Godliness. By them we place ourselves before God for Him to work in us.

The New Testament was first written in Greek. The word translated “discipline” in the New American Standard Bible is the Greek word *gymnasia* from which our English words *gymnasium* and *gymnastics* derive. This word means “to exercise or discipline,” which is why the King James Version renders 1 Timothy 4:7, “Exercise thyself rather unto godliness.”

Think of the Spiritual Disciplines as spiritual exercises. To go to your favorite spot for prayer or journaling, for example, is like going to a gym and using a weight machine. As physical disciplines like this promote strength, so the Spiritual Disciplines promote Godliness.

There are two Bible stories that illustrate another way of thinking

of the role of the Spiritual Disciplines. Luke 18:35-43 tells the story of a blind beggar named Bartimaeus and his encounter with Jesus. As Bartimaeus sat by a roadside near Jericho, a crowd of unusual numbers and excitement came near. When he asked what was happening, he was told that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. Even a social outcast like Bartimaeus had heard the incredible stories about Jesus that had come from all over Israel during the past two or three years. Immediately he began shouting, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Those who were leading the procession, perhaps some of the local dignitaries, were embarrassed by the beggar’s disruptive behavior and sternly told him to keep quiet. But he only cried out all the more, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” To everyone’s amazement, Jesus stopped and called for the one who was calling for Him. In response to the poor man’s faith, Jesus miraculously healed Bartimaeus of his blindness.

The second Bible story is in the very next paragraph of Scripture, Luke 19:1-10. It’s the famous account of the conversion of the tax collector, Zacchaeus. Perhaps it happened only minutes after the healing of Bartimaeus. Because Zacchaeus was so short, he was unable to see Jesus in the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed into a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus when He passed by it. When Jesus came to the place, He looked up, called Zacchaeus by name, and told him to come down. The two of them went to the tax collector’s house, where he believed in Christ for salvation and resolved to give half his possessions to the poor and return with interest all tax money he had wrongfully taken.

Think of the Spiritual Disciplines as ways we can place ourselves in the path of God’s grace and seek Him much as Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus placed themselves in Jesus’ path and sought Him. As with these two seekers, we will find Him willing to have mercy on us and to have communion with us. And in the course of time we will be transformed by Him from one level of Christlikeness to another (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The Spiritual Disciplines then are also like channels of God’s transforming grace. As we place ourselves in them to seek communion with Christ, His grace flows to us and we are changed. That’s why the Disciplines must become priority for us if we will be Godly.

The great British Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon, stressed the importance this way: “I must take care above all that I cultivate communion with Christ, for though that can never be the basis of my peace—mark that—yet it will be the channel of it.”¹

The channels of peace and all that Christ gives that lead us to holiness are the Spiritual Disciplines.

Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys football team for most of three decades, said, “The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don’t want to do in order to achieve what they’ve always wanted to be.”² In much the same way, Christians are called to make themselves do something they would not naturally do—pursue the Spiritual Disciplines—in order to become what they’ve always wanted to be, that is, like Jesus Christ. “Discipline yourself,” says the Scripture, “for the purpose of godliness.”

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES—THE LORD EXPECTS THEM

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 (1 Peter 1:15-16), so neither are the means of holiness, that is, the Spiritual Disciplines, an option.

The inspired counsel of Solomon in Proverbs 23:12 is, “Apply your heart to discipline” NASB. (Although discipline in the Proverbs usually refers to chastisement from the Lord, verses like this apply to the Spiritual Disciplines when we realize that the Lord disciplines us in order to get us to discipline ourselves.) The picture brought to my mind by the word *apply* is that of applying a decal to my windshield or a bumper sticker to my car. In other words, the Lord expects us to permanently affix ourselves to those devotional practices that promote Godliness.

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: “Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must 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 only learn accidentally and follow incidentally 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 (i.e., “self-control”) is one of the most evident marks of being Spirit-controlled.

The Lord Jesus not only expects these Disciplines of us, He modeled them for us. He applied His heart to discipline. He disciplined Himself for the purpose of Godliness. And if we are going to be Christ-like, we must live as Christ lived.

This is the message of Dallas Willard's book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*:

My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing—by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father.³

So many professing Christians are so spiritually undisciplined that they seem to have little fruit and power in their lives. I've seen men and women who discipline themselves for the purpose of excelling in their profession discipline themselves very little "for the purpose of godliness." I've seen Christians who are faithful to the church of God, who frequently demonstrate genuine enthusiasm for the things of God, and who dearly love the Word of God, trivialize their effectiveness for the Kingdom of God through lack of discipline. Spiritually they are a mile wide and an inch deep. There are no deep, time-worn channels of communing discipline between them and God. They have dabbled in everything but disciplined themselves in nothing.

Consider the people who will work hard at learning to play an instrument, knowing that it takes years to acquire the skills, who will practice hard to lower their golf score or to improve their sports performance, knowing it takes years to become proficient, who will discipline themselves throughout their career because they know it takes sacrifice to succeed. These same people will give up quickly when they find the Spiritual Disciplines don't come easily, as though becoming like Jesus was not supposed to take much effort.

The undisciplined are like playwright George Kaufman, who was enduring a sales pitch from a gold-mine promoter. The salesman was praising the productivity of the mine in hopes of persuading Kaufman

to buy shares in it. “Why, it’s so rich you can pick up the chunks of gold from the ground.”

“Do you mean,” asked Kaufman, “I’d have to bend over?”⁴

The gold of Godliness isn’t found on the surface of Christianity. It has to be dug from the depths with the tools of the Disciplines. But for those who persevere, the treasures are more than worth the troubles.

MORE APPLICATION

There is danger in neglecting the Spiritual Disciplines. A well-known selection from William Barclay’s pen powerfully illustrates the danger. Commenting on the difference between the disciplined and the undisciplined way, he wrote,

Nothing was ever achieved without discipline; and many an athlete and many a man has been ruined because he abandoned discipline and let himself grow slack. Coleridge is the supreme tragedy of indiscipline. Never did so great a mind produce so little. He left Cambridge University to join the army; but he left the army because, in spite of all his erudition, he could not rub down a horse; he returned to Oxford and left without a degree. He began a paper called *The Watchman* which lived for ten numbers and then died. It has been said of him: “He lost himself in visions of work to be done, that always remained to be done. Coleridge had every poetic gift but one—the gift of sustained and concentrated effort.” In his head and in his mind he had all kinds of books, as he said himself, “completed save for transcription.” “I am on the eve,” he says, “of sending to the press two octavo volumes.” But the books were never composed outside Coleridge’s mind, because he would not face the discipline of sitting down to write them out. No one ever reached any eminence, and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline.⁵

By neglecting the Spiritual Disciplines we face the danger of bearing little spiritual fruit. Few of us will have Coleridge’s intellectual and poetic gifts, but all believers have been given spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). The mere presence of spiritual gifts, however, does not

guarantee abundant fruitfulness any more than Coleridge's mental gifts assured the production of poetry. Just as with natural gifts, spiritual gifts must be developed by discipline in order to bear spiritual fruit.

There is freedom in embracing the Spiritual Disciplines. Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* has been the most popular book on the subject of the Spiritual Disciplines in the last half of the twentieth century. The great contribution of this work is the reminder that the Spiritual Disciplines, which many see as restrictive and binding, are actually the means to spiritual freedom. He rightly calls the Disciplines the "Door to Liberation."

We can illustrate this principle by observing the freedom that comes through mastery of any discipline. Watching a Christopher Parkening or a Chet Atkins play guitar gives the impression that these guitarists were born with the instrument attached to their bodies. They have an intimacy and a freedom with the guitar that makes playing the thing look easy. Anyone who's ever tried to play realizes that the musical freedom of such masters comes from decades of disciplined practice. Freedom through discipline is seen not only in proficient musicians, but also in all-star shortstops, expert carpenters, successful executives, well-prepared students, and moms who daily manage home and family well.

Elton Trueblood demonstrates the relationship between discipline and freedom by saying,

We have not advanced very far in our spiritual lives if we have not encountered the basic paradox of freedom . . . that we are most free when we are bound. But not just any way of being bound will suffice; what matters is the character of our binding. The one who would be an athlete, but who is unwilling to discipline his body by regular exercise and abstinence, is not free to excel on the field or the track. His failure to train rigorously denies him the freedom to run with the desired speed and endurance. With one concerted voice, the giants of the devotional life apply the same principle to the whole of life: Discipline is the price of freedom.⁶

While Trueblood is right in calling discipline "the price" of freedom, Elisabeth Elliot reminds us that "freedom and discipline have

come to be regarded as mutually exclusive, when in fact freedom is not at all the opposite, but the final *reward*, of discipline.”⁷ While emphasizing that discipline is the price of freedom, let us not forget that freedom is the reward of discipline.

What is this freedom of Godliness? Think again of our illustrations. For instance, a guitar virtuoso is “free” to play a difficult arrangement by Segovia while I am not. Why? Because of his years of disciplined practice. Similarly, those who are “free” to quote Scripture are those who have disciplined themselves to memorize God’s Word. We may experience a measure of freedom from spiritual insensitivity through the Discipline of fasting. There is a freedom from self-centeredness found in Disciplines such as worship, service, and evangelism. The freedom of Godliness is the freedom to do what God calls us to do through Scripture and the freedom to express the character qualities of Christ through our own personality. This kind of freedom is the “reward” or result of the blessing of God upon our engagement in the Spiritual Disciplines.

But we must remember that the full-grown freedoms of discipline-nurtured Godliness don’t develop overnight or during a weekend seminar. The Bible reminds us that self-control, such as that expressed through the Spiritual Disciplines, must persevere before the mature fruit of Godliness ripens. Notice the sequence of development in 2 Peter 1:6—“and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness.” Godliness is a lifelong pursuit.

There is an invitation to all Christians to enjoy the Spiritual Disciplines. All in whom the Spirit of God dwells are invited to taste the joy of a Spiritual Disciplines lifestyle.

Remember Kevin and his guitar? His daily practice would take on an entirely new spirit once he realized where it would take him. The discipline of practice would gradually become the means to one of the greatest enjoyments of his life.

Discipline without direction is drudgery. But the Spiritual Disciplines are never drudgery as long as we practice them with the goal of Godliness in mind. 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 passionately alive. He is our Example of discipline. Let us follow Him to joy through the Spiritual Disciplines.

NOTES

1. C. H. Spurgeon, "Peace By Believing," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1864; reprint, Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1970), vol. 9, page 283.
2. Tom Landry, as quoted by Ray Stedman in *Preaching Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, n.d.), tape number 25.
3. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), page ix.
4. George Kaufman, as quoted in *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), page 321.
5. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1958), vol. 1, page 284.
6. Elton Trueblood, as quoted in *Leadership*, vol. 10, no. 3, summer 1989, page 60.
7. Elisabeth Elliot, as quoted in *Christianity Today*, November 4, 1988, page 33, emphasis mine.