

Information on Spiritual Disciplines for the UP dimension of life as covered in the Freshly Squeezed Service on 14th Sept 08

Spiritual Disciplines are activities we do with our bodies that help us do things we can't do by direct effort. I practice scales so I can play a piece by Beethoven, I lift weights so I will be strong enough to play AFL.

Two general classifications -

Disciplines of abstinence - which help break the power of things we do that are contrary to the kingdom of God

Disciplines of engagement - immerse us even more in the kingdom helping us to do things we aren't currently doing.

In other words, dieting and weightlifting, or stopping and going

In general, most of us tend to engage in more going than stopping. But we need to do more stopping to make our going more effective.

STOPPING

Solitude:

It is being out of human contact, being alone, and being so for lengthy periods of time.

Because it takes time to let go of people even after we have left their presence.

- It breaks the headlong rush through life and helps create a kind of inner space that helps us become aware of what we are doing and what we are about to do.
- It takes the world off our shoulders and for a time interrupts our habit of constantly managing things, of being or thinking we are in control.

What do you do in solitude? Well as far as things to 'get done' - nothing at all. As long as you are doing things to get done, you have not broken human contact. Don't go into solitude with a list. Even lay down your ideas of what solitude will accomplish, don't try to discover anything -

You need to be comfortable, rested, no need to be heroic. Seek to make arrangements with those close to you.

Silence:

It means to escape from sounds and noises other than the gentle ones of nature. When you start to do this you will begin to realize how constantly our houses and offices are filled with whirring, buzzing, murmuring etc. Their noise comforts us in some way.

It goes hand in hand with solitude. But silence must also include the practice of not speaking - this will at least help give us enough control so that we don't automatically shoot off at the mouth.

Here is this testimony:

The more I practice this discipline, the more I appreciate the strength of silence. The less I become skeptical and judgmental, the more I learn to accept the things I didn't like about others, the more I accept them as uniquely created in the image of God. The less I talk, the fuller are words spoken at an appropriate time. The more I value others, the more I serve them in small ways, the more I enjoy and celebrate my life. The more I celebrate,

the more I realise that God has been giving me wonderful things in my life, the less I worry about my future. I will accept and enjoy what God is continuously giving to me. I think I am beginning to really enjoy God.

Fasting

We abstain in some significant way from food. This discipline teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. It can reveal to us how much our peace depends on the pleasures of eating. It can show us how powerful and clever our body is in getting its own way against our strongest resolves. Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food.

I (Mike) spoke with a Nigerian pastor many years ago on the topic of leadership. He oversaw an incredible ministry, where countless people were being saved, healed, and delivered. As we talked together, he didn't mention any particular programs or resources that had impacted his ministry. But he did say that fasting was an essential part of his walk with Jesus. —You'll be a holier man if you know how to fast, he said. —Fasting brings breakthroughs.

The Bible has many examples of times when the people of God fasted and prayed to seek God for a breakthrough. For instance, Esther called the Jewish people of Susa to fast before she went to see the king to plead for their safety from Haman's evil schemes. When we fast, something powerful takes place. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus went to the wilderness to fast for forty days and nights. He emerged from the desert in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Saying no to our appetites is significant. Our appetites—whether for food, acceptance, sex, power—often demand to be fed, whether they need feeding or not. They can get us into trouble. Fasting causes us to rely on God as we say no to that urge. If we can say no to one of our appetites, we learn we can say no to them all. We can live a purer life. Instead of being controlled by the cries of our appetites, we can master them.

Secrecy

We abstain from our good deeds and qualities to be known - even taking steps to prevent them being known if it doesn't involve deceit. It helps us lose or tame the hunger for fame, justification, or the simple attention of others.

As we practice it we learn to love to be unknown and even to accept misunderstanding without the loss of our peace, joy or purpose.

Few things are more important in stabilising our walk than this discipline. In the practice of secrecy we experience a continuing relationship with God independent of the opinions of others. Rightly practiced it enables us to place our public relations department entirely in the hands of God. We allow God to decide when our deeds will be known and when our light will be noticed.

At its best it teaches love and humility before God and others.

GOING

Study

As humans the first place of freedom we have is where we will place our minds. We all have the ability to direct our focus or attention.

In study we take in the information about the subject so that it shapes my thoughts feelings and actions. I study the alphabet and it enables me to read and write. I study plumbing and I find myself able to connect pipes in helpful ways etc.

If we want to live as Jesus would live our lives - we need to internalise the nature of the Kingdom of God and that comes as we direct our focus on the Kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus.

We should meditate on in depth and memorize much of key scriptures such as Psalm 23, ten commandments, lord's prayer, sermon on the mount, Rom 8, Col 3, Phil 2-4. Active engagement with these scriptures will bring kingdom order into our entire personality.

It is not just information gathering so we can pass a test or 'give the right answer - it is about seriously internalising the truth - we really come to think and believe differently and that changes everything.

Mike Breen says: I became a Christian at sixteen by reading the Bible, so this discipline comes naturally for me. However, I still have to approach the discipline of study from different angles to keep receiving fresh insights from God's word. Sometimes I'll use a devotional commentary; at other times I'll take a single verse and reflect on it throughout the day. Sometimes I read huge portions of the Bible as if I am just reading a novel. At yet other times I focus on a book of the Bible, one chapter at a time. Sometimes I'll use different translations to get a fresh perspective.

but study without worship is dangerous

Worship

Astonished reverence.

We ascribe greatness, goodness and glory to God. We should seek to put every possible aspect of ourselves into it - our senses, our thoughts our actions and our creativity.

We embellish, elaborate, and magnify. Poetry, and song, colour and texture, food and incense, dance, sometimes quiet absorption of thought.

Now worship must be combined with study because ignorant worship is of limited value and can be dangerous. We can develop a zeal for God that is not according to knowledge (Rom 10:2-21) and do great harm to ourselves and others.

Celebration

Celebration is the completion of worship - for it dwells on the greatness of God as shown in his goodness to us.

In it we engage in it when we enjoy ourselves, our life our world in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God. Typically it means we come together with others who know God to eat and drink, to sing and dance, and to relate stories of God's action for our lives and our people. Some biblical examples include Miriam, Deborah, and David.

Holy delight and joy is the great antidote to despair and is a source of genuine gratitude.

the earthy character of celebration or jubilee is nowhere more clearly portrayed than in Deut 14

Celebration can seem far too hedonistic to many of us. But we dishonour God as much by fearing and avoiding pleasure as we do by dependence upon it or living for it.

Celebration heartily done makes our deprivations and sorrows seem small and we find in it great strength to do the will of our God because his goodness becomes so real to us.

Prayer (but we want to specifically focus on thanksgiving)

Mike Breen experienced a gathering of 1 million Christians in Nigeria:

I asked, —What's the difference between here and back home? The Lord said, —It's the same anointing, it's just different commitment.

The Scriptures tell us that as Christians we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 1 and 2). But the commitment was different in Nigeria. I said, —Lord, show me the difference in commitment. He replied, —Thankfulness. Just look at them. It broke my heart. Every person I saw or met was thankful. They constantly thanked God. Even though in material terms they had very little, they were still grateful to God. Out of their thanksgiving arose a testimony and a witness that transformed lives and changed even the hardest of hearts. No wonder they gathered in hundreds of thousands. I said, —Lord, if that's it, teach me to be thankful.

Two days later he found himself sick in hospital just before he was do to teach on healing. A nurse came and prayed for him and:

As she prayed, I heard the Lord clearly say to me, —Now you are going to learn to be thankful. Remember, two days before I had prayed, —Lord, teach me to be thankful. At this early hour, lying in a hospital bed, miles from anywhere the Lord said, —I'm going to teach you how to be thankful.

After all I had recently experienced, I couldn't resist.

—Lord, for what?

He said, —Start with the nurse

—Thank you for the nurse.

—Now the bed.

I frowned. The bed was about five feet, eight inches in length. I am six feet, four inches tall. Reluctantly I said, —Thank you for the bed.

God continued to prompt me and I obeyed. After a while I got into it. Even after all that had happened, I had so much to thank God for. The staff at the hospital was wonderful. The team supported me in prayer back at the hostel. Now I was beginning to feel thankful too. I thanked God for my wife and children, my church, and anyone else I could think of. I even thanked him for people I didn't know—I just thanked God!

A couple of hours later, the nurse came back in and said that my vital signs were getting better. After another two hours she said, —Pastor Breen, you are completely normal!

In our world today, we complain and grumble about the things we do not have. We demand our rights. Cynicism and criticism often set the tone of our homes, offices, and even our churches. One of the ways we can dig for the springs of God's life is to cultivate —an attitude of gratitude. Develop thankfulness as a spiritual discipline. Thankfulness opens the springs of God's powerful presence, transforming our hearts and lives.