

INTRODUCING SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES BIBLE STUDIES



Have you ever wondered how God changes people? Maybe it seems as if old habits never change no matter how hard you try. Maybe you've become discouraged with your lack of growth into Christlikeness. You know that you are forgiven through Jesus' suffering on the cross, and you realize that you are totally accepted by God on that basis. This is wonderful. And yet your desire to live in a way that pleases God somehow constantly falls short of the mark.

God desires to transform our souls. This transformation occurs as we recognize that God created us to live in an interactive relationship with the Trinity. Our task is not to transform ourselves, but to stay connected with God in as much of life as possible. As we pay attention to the nudges of the Holy Spirit, we become disciples of Christ. Our task is to do the connecting, while God does the perfecting.

As we connect with God, we gradually begin acting more like Christ. We become more likely to weep over our enemies instead of discrediting them. We're more likely to give up power instead of taking control. We're more likely to point out another's successes rather than grab the credit. Connecting with God changes us on the inside, and we slowly become the tenderhearted, conscientious people our families always wished we'd become. This transformation of our souls through the work of the Holy Spirit results in "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

God does in us what we cannot do by being good. Trying to be good generally makes us obnoxious because it's so obvious that we're only trying. The goodness doesn't come from within ourselves. When we do succeed at being good, we subtly

look down on those who don't do as well. When we don't succeed, we beat ourselves up and despair over our lack of spirituality. Either way, we remain focused on self instead of on setting our hearts on things above.

Connecting with God, then, is important. But what does connecting with God look like? Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we copy Jesus in behind-the-scenes, everyday activities he did to connect with God. As we let these activities become habits, we slowly become "trained" to have the heart of Christ and behave as he did. These activities are spiritual disciplines, also called spiritual exercises or strategies.

How Spiritual Disciplines Work

We connect with God through spiritual disciplines (or exercises or practices, which are specific versions of disciplines). Included in this book are six studies each on eight sets of disciplines: solitude and silence, service and secrecy, prayer and listening, Bible study and Scripture meditation, community and submission, reflection and confession, simplicity and fasting, and worship and celebration. Now and then other disciplines are included as a session within a set, such as: journaling (Reflection and Confession, session 6); practicing the presence of God (Prayer and Listening, session 6); and welcoming the stranger (Community and Submission, session 6).

Many other activities become spiritual disciplines for us as we practice them on a regular basis to "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), that is, to bring us into union with God and transformation into Christlikeness. Some of them are written about in the classics of the faith and God will show you many others. Indeed, a spiritual discipline is *anything*, as Henri Nouwen said, that helps us practice "how to become attentive to that small voice and willing to respond when we hear it."¹

Some spiritual disciplines are activities of *engagement*. For example, in practicing the disciplines of Bible study and worship we engage in those activities in regular, focused ways. Others are disciplines of *abstinence* because we abstain from something. For example, in fasting we refrain from eating or another activity in a regular, focused way. In secrecy we refrain from letting anyone know about our good deeds. When we abstain from a substance or activity this way, we miss it and feel its absence. We have to depend on God more. We also hear our heart better—that part of us that is "deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9). As we hear our heart, we face our real self and surrender it to God. Disciplines of engagement are like breathing in (we take in good things), and disciplines of abstinence are like breathing out (we let go of things we don't need for a while to die to self and trust in God).

Spiritual disciplines help us in the following ways.

- They build our relationship with God as we acquaint ourselves with the ways of God. (It's possible, of course, to do these disciplines in a legalistic way and never bond with Christ.)

¹Sources for quoted material can be found at the end of the book.

- They build our trust in Christ. Some of the disciplines are uncomfortable. You have to go out on a limb. You try fasting, and you don't die. You serve someone, and it turns out to be fun and enriching.
- They force us to make “little decisions” that multiply. Your little decision to abstain from watching a television show helps you to deny yourself and love others in all sorts of ways.
- They reorganize our impulses so that obedience is more natural. For example, if you have a spiritual discipline of practicing the presence of God, you may learn to automatically pray the breath prayer “Into thy hands” when someone opposes you. Without your realizing it, your opponent is no longer an adversary, but a person God is dealing with or perhaps even speaking through in some way.
- They help us eventually behave like Christ—but this is by God's miraculous work, not our direct effort.
- They teach us to trust that God will do the work in our inner being through the power of the Spirit (Ephesians 3:16). Your spirituality is not about you; it's the work of God in you. You get to cooperate in God's “family business” of transforming the world.

How We Get Spiritual Disciplines Wrong

Spiritual exercises must be done with the goal of connecting, not for any sake of their own or any desire to check them off a list of to-do items. If you read your Bible just to get it done, or because you've heard this will help you have a better day, you'll be anxious to complete the Bible study questions or to get to the bottom of the page of today's reading. But if your goal in Bible reading is to connect with God, you may pause whenever you sense God speaking to you. You'll stop and meditate on it. You may pray certain phrases back to God, indicating your needs or your wishes or your questions. You may choose to read that passage day after day for a month because God keeps using it to speak to you.

After such a session, you will have a stronger desire to connect with God. That “little choice” you made to connect will leave you slightly different for life.

The exercise or discipline is beneficial because it helps you practice connecting with God. If you want to play the piano well or swing a tennis racket well, you have to practice certain exercises over and over. Good baseball players train behind the scenes by practicing their batting day after day, with no crowds watching.² That's what spiritual disciplines or exercises are about. If you can hear God in fasting and simplicity, you'll more likely hear God in a board meeting or an

²This comparison originated from and is expanded in Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 3.

altercation with a recalcitrant teen when passions run high. In life with God, we get good at connecting on an everyday basis by devoting time to developing the skills needed.

How Do These Studies Work?

These studies examine examples, methods and results of connecting with God through prayer and practicing God's presence. One question in each of the six studies calls for actual praying to be done in the session. Look for these questions and use them. This will demonstrate the pattern that Bible study leads us to respond to God, especially through prayer.

Each session includes several other elements as well.

Turning Toward God presents discussion (for groups) or reflection questions and exercises to draw us into the topic at hand.

Hearing God Through the Word draws us into a study of a related passage of Scripture with questions that connect it to life and invite us to reflect on what God is saying. A leader's guide is printed in the back of each of the eight sections, providing more helps for leaders and study notes for specific questions.

Transformation Exercises are activities or thoughts to experiment with in order to experience the spiritual exercise studied. Perhaps you'll read the exercise and think it's too elementary or too difficult for you. Adapt it as needed. Or maybe you think you can guess what you'll experience, so you don't have to do it. The point is to experience it. Go ahead and try.

If you are leading these studies in a group, you will find further suggestions in the appendix, "Guidelines for Leaders."

What Order Is Recommended?

If you are leading a group, you might wonder, *With what set of studies should I begin?* To make this decision, pray about your potential group members and see what comes to you. Keep in mind two things:

- the personalities of your probable group participants
- that solitude and silence are the basic disciplines and—ideally—should be the first section to study, but that won't work for everyone

If potential participants are unfamiliar with spiritual formation, you might want to begin with "Prayer and Listening" (the most popular topic) and then ask the group to choose the next section to study.

Consider whether potential group participants are introverts or extroverts. (Where do they get their energy and renewal—from being alone or being with people?) If you have some extroverts, be careful not to follow one introvertish topic with another. This sends a message that spirituality is only for people who sit quietly in corners—Jesus was not like that! If you think you'll do more than two studies, move

back and forth between disciplines that are easier for introverts or extroverts. Here's how I designate them.

Introverts	Extroverts	Either/Both
Solitude & Silence	Community & Submission	Simplicity & Fasting
Prayer & Listening	Worship & Celebration	
Reflection	Confession	
Secrecy	Service	
Study & Meditation		

Also, if your group struggles with being transparent, hold “Reflection and Confession” until later in the order of studies, although these topics are very important and will build community in a valuable way. (“Reflection and Confession” also makes an excellent personal retreat. See below.)

Once you figure out the order you want to do them in, don't be afraid to change if so led.

Using These Studies in Retreats

Do the studies at your own pace, and do not rush them. Allow enough time to do the transformation exercises as well. Don't feel you have to do all the studies. In fact, you may wish to focus only on one discipline and use only those studies.

A group wishing to explore certain disciplines can also use one of these studies the same way. Be sure to allow time for participants to do the transformation exercises. Some exercises may be done as a group. Others may be done individually, with group members reporting back to each other about how they heard God during the exercise.

For either type of retreat, allow plenty of time for pondering. May these studies help you move a few steps closer to living your life in union with God.