

**Notes from: Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**  
**By Donald Whitney**

Foreword: [The author] 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... He is showing us the path of life. If then, as a Christian, you want to be really real with God, if you've moved beyond playing games with yourself and Him, this book (on the spiritual disciplines) provides practical help.

Ch1. **Benefits of discipline.** Discipline without direction is drudgery. Imagine 6 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 one 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 shows a guitar virtuoso giving a concert. Usually bored by classical music, Kevin is astonished by what he sees and hears. The musicians fingers dance excitedly on the strings with fluidity and grace... 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... 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 says, "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 will 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... First, we must understand what we shall become. Romans 8:29 *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...* 1John 3:2 *...we know that when he appears we shall be like him...* Although God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends that we are to grow towards that Christlikeness. We aren't merely to wait for holiness, we are to pursue it... 1Timothy 4:7 *...train [discipline] yourself for godliness...*

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 spiritual disciplines, and when we remember this, the disciplines become a delight instead of drudgery...

The channels of peace and all the 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 become what they've always wanted to be." 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.

Ch 2: Regardless of how busy we become with all things Christian, we must remember that **the most transforming practice available to us** is the disciplined intake of Scripture...

**Bible intake:** Jesus often asked questions about people's understanding of the Scriptures, sometimes beginning with the words, "Have you not read . . . ?" (Matt 19:4; Mark 12:10). He assumed that those claiming to be the people of God would have read the Word of God. And a case can be made that this question implies a familiarity with the entire Word of God...

How often should we read it? British preacher John Blanchard, in his book *How to Enjoy Your Bible*, answers, Surely we only have to be realistic and honest with ourselves to know how regularly we need to turn to the Bible. How often do we face problems, temptation and pressure? Every day! Then how often do we need instruction, guidance and greater encouragement? Every day! To catch all these felt needs up into an even greater issue, how often do we need to see God's face, hear his voice, feel his touch, know his power? The answer to all these questions is the same: every day! As the American evangelist D. L. Moody put it, "A man can no more take in a supply of grace for the future than he can eat enough for the next six months, or take sufficient air into his lungs at one time to sustain life for a week. We must draw upon God's boundless store of grace from day to day as we need it."

Here are the three most practical suggestions for consistent success in Bible reading. First, find the time... Discipline yourself to find the time. Try to make it the same time every day... The second practical suggestion is to find a Bible-reading plan... The third suggestion is to find at least one word, phrase, or verse to meditate on each time you read...

Ch 3: Two brothers were walking on their father's extensive wooded acreage when they came upon a young tree heavy with fruit. Both enjoyed as much of the delicious fruit as they wanted. When they started back, one man gathered all the remaining fruit and took it home with him. His brother, however, took the tree itself and planted it on his own property. The tree flourished and regularly produced a bountiful crop so that the second brother often had fruit when the first had none. The Bible is like the fruit bearing tree in this story. Merely hearing the Word of God is to be like the first brother. You may gather enough fruit from the encounter and even bring home enough to feed on for a few days. But in the long run it doesn't compare with having your own tree. Through the disciplines of reading and studying, we make the tree our own and enjoy its fruit...

The Word of God is the "sword of the Spirit," but if there is no Bible physically accessible to you, then the weapon of the Word must be present in the armory of your mind in order for the Spirit to wield it. Imagine yourself in the midst of a decision and needing guidance, or struggling with a difficult temptation and needing victory. The Holy Spirit enters your mental arsenal and flings open the door, but all He finds is a John 3:16, a I Genesis 1:1, and a Great Commission. Those are great swords, but they're not made for every battle. How do we go about filling our personal spiritual arsenal with a supply of swords for the Holy Spirit to use?

**Memorize Scripture:** Most people think they have a bad memory, but it's not true...memorizing is mainly a problem of motivation. If you know your birthday, phone number, and address, and can remember the names of your friends then you can memorize Scripture. The question becomes whether you are willing to discipline yourself to do it.

**Meditate:** Let's define meditation as deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture, or upon life from a scriptural perspective, 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. A simple analogy would be a cup of tea. In this analogy your mind is the cup of hot water and the tea bag represents your intake of Scripture. Hearing God's Word is like one dip of the tea bag into the cup. Some of the tea's flavor is absorbed by the water, but not as much as would occur with a more thorough soaking of the bag. Reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word are like additional plunges of the tea bag into the cup. The more frequently the tea enters the water, the more permeating its effect. Meditation, however, is like immersing the bag completely and letting it steep until all the rich tea flavor has been extracted and the hot water is thoroughly tintured reddish brown. Meditation on Scripture is letting the Bible brew in the brain. Thus we might say that as the tea colors the water, meditation likewise "colors" our thinking. When we meditate on Scripture it colors our thinking about God, about God's ways and His world, and about ourselves. Similarly, as the tea bag flavors the water, so through meditation we consistently "taste" or experience the reality taught in the text.

**Application:** If we do not apply the truth as we meet it, regardless of how wonderful the experience of discovering the truth has been, we deceive ourselves if we think we will be blessed for giving attention to the Bible on those occasions. The one who "will be blessed in his doing" is the one who does what Scripture says... (John 13:17)... "Medicine will do no good, unless it be applied..." (Charles Spurgeon)

[SPECS model of finding an application for the Scripture you just read: ask yourself if there is a...

- Sin to be dealt with
- Promise to claim
- Example to follow
- Command to obey
- Stumbling block to be avoided]

An encounter with God through His Word should result in at least one specific response. In other words, after you have concluded your time of Bible intake, you should be able to name at least one definite response you have made or will make to what you have encountered. That response may be an explicit act of faith, worship, praise, thanksgiving, or prayer. It may take the form of asking someone's forgiveness or speaking a word of encouragement. The response may involve forsaking a sin or showing an act of love. Regardless of the nature of that response, consciously commit yourself to at least one action to take following the intake of God's Word.

**Prayer:** My wife, Caffy, expects me to call her when I travel. But that expectation is an expectation of love. She requires that I call because she wants to hear from me. God's expectation that we pray is like that. His command to pray is a command of love. In His love He desires to communicate with us and to bless us...

If you've ever learned a foreign language, you know that you learn it best when you actually have to speak it. The same is true with the "foreign language" of prayer. There are many good resources for learning how to pray, but the best way to learn how to pray is to pray...

**Worship:** So we must worship in both spirit and truth, with both heart and head, with both emotion and thought. If we worship with too much emphasis on spirit we will be mushy and weak on the truth, worshiping mainly according to feelings. That can lead anywhere from a lazy, unthinking tolerance of anything in worship at one extreme to uncontrollable spiritual wildfire on the other. But if we overemphasize worship in truth and minimize worship in spirit, then our worship will be taut, grim, and icily predictable. ["Truth" from hearing/reading the Bible and meditating on it (thinking about it deeply). "Spirit" / feeling can come from that as well, or from incidents God places in our path, like sunsets.]

Describing contemporary man, someone has said, "He worships his work, works at his play, and plays at his worship." In defiance of this, will you cultivate the Discipline of worship?

**Evangelism:** We could define New Testament evangelism as communicating the gospel. Anyone faithfully relating the essential elements of God's salvation through Jesus Christ is evangelizing. This is true whether your words are spoken, written, or recorded; delivered to one person or to a crowd...

What is success in evangelism? When the person you witness to comes to Christ? Certainly that's what we want to happen. But if we measure evangelistic success only by conversions, are we failures whenever we share the gospel and people refuse to believe? Was Jesus an "evangelistic failure" when people like the rich young ruler turned away from Him and His message (see Mark 10:21 -22)? Obviously not. Then neither are we when we present Christ and His message and people turn away in unbelief. We need to learn that sharing the gospel is successful evangelism... In this regard we are like the postal service. They measure success by the careful and accurate delivery of the message, not by the response of the recipient. Whenever we share the gospel (which includes the summons to repent and believe), we have succeeded. In the truest sense, all biblical evangelism is successful evangelism, regardless of the results...

No matter how well we live the gospel (and we must live it well, else we hinder its reception), sooner or later we must communicate the content of the gospel before a person can become a disciple of Jesus. The example of Christianity saves no one; rather it is the message of Christianity—the gospel—that "is the power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16)...

Ch 7: **Serving:** C. H. Spurgeon, moved with some of Isaiah's emotion, said... "The heir of heaven [us!] serves his Lord simply out of gratitude; he has no salvation to gain, no heaven to lose;... now, out of love to the God who chose him, and who gave so great a price for his redemption, he desires to lay out himself entirely to his Master's service... The child of God works not for life, but from life; he does not work to be saved, he works because he is saved..."

WANTED: Gifted volunteers for difficult service in the local expression of the kingdom of God. Motivation to serve should be obedience to God, gratitude, gladness, forgiveness, humility, and love. Service will rarely be glorious. Temptation to quit place of service will sometimes be strong. Volunteers must be faithful in spite of long hours, little or no visible results, and possibly no recognition—*except from God for all eternity*...

Ch 8: **Stewardship:** Are you using your time as God would have you use it? ... A more Christlike life really is possible for you through a Spirit-filled Discipline of time. God doesn't dangle growth in grace before you like a spiritual lure that's always enticing but never enjoyed. He promises that actual progress in godliness is possible and the Spiritual Disciplines are the means. The practical step behind each of the Spiritual Disciplines is the Discipline of time...

Ch 9: **Fasting:** There is a broader view of fasting that is often overlooked. This is the approach Richard Foster takes when he defines fasting as "the voluntary denial of a normal function for the sake of intense, spiritual activity." So then, fasting does not always deal with abstinence from food. Sometimes we may need to fast from involvement with other people, or

from the media, from the telephone, from talking, from sleep, etc., in order to become more involved in a time of spiritual activity. [Fast with a specific purpose: to pray for something, to hear from God about something, etc.]

**Ch 10: Fellowship / Silence and Solitude:** Think of silence and solitude as complementary Disciplines to fellowship. By fellowship I do not mean socializing, that is, talking about news, weather, sports, work and family. In its broad, God-given place in life, socializing is a great blessing and enjoying it is part of what it means to be human. Biblical fellowship, however, involves talking about God and the things of God. Perhaps we do much less of that than we think, even at church. The emphasis here, though, is that fellowship requires interaction with other people, whereas silence and solitude do not. It seems that each of us is inclined a little more in one direction than the other. That is, we enjoy meaningful conversation with other Christians more than solitude or vice versa. But both have a place in the life of a biblically consistent believer. Without silence and solitude we can be active, but shallow. Without fellowship we can be deep, but stagnant. Christlikeness requires both sides of the equation.

Many of us need to realize the addiction we have to noise. It's one thing to listen to the television or other device while doing housework or chores, but it's another thing habitually to turn one of these on immediately upon entering a room just to have sound. Even worse is to feel that it's necessary to have background noise during Bible intake or prayer. I believe that the convenience of sound has contributed to the spiritual shallowness of contemporary western Christianity. The advent of affordable, portable sound systems, for instance, has been a mixed blessing. The negative side is that now we don't have to go anywhere without human voices. As a result we are less frequently along with our own thoughts and God's voice. Because of this, and because we are the most urban, noise-polluted generation ever, we have an unprecedented need to learn the disciplines of silence and solitude...

"So I went back and got my Bible," [Billy Graham] continued, "and I went out in the moonlight. And I got to a stump and put the Bible on the stump, and I knelt down, and I said, 'Oh, God; I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions Chuck is raising and some of the other people are raising, but I accept this Book by faith as the Word of God.'" And through that time of solitude and the spiritual perspective he gained that night, Billy Graham was further shaped into the man the world has known since...

Without exception, the men and women I have known who've made the *most rapid, consistent and evident growth* in Christlikeness have been those who develop a daily time of being alone with God. This time of outward silence is the time of daily Bible intake and prayer. In this solitude is the occasion of private worship...

Missionary martyr Jim Elliot knew of the battle: "I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds. . . . Satan is quite aware of the power of silence." Our days are usually filled with more than enough noise, plenty of hurry, and demanding people. Unless we *plan* for daily times of solitary silence before God, these other things will rush in to fill our time like water into the *Titanic*.

**Ch 11: Journaling:** We tend to *feel* most deeply about what we *think* most deeply about. By slowing us down and prompting us to think more deeply about the things of God, journaling helps us feel more deeply and more biblically about them...

A journal helps us to be like Asaph in Psalm 77:11 -12, who said, "I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds..." Francis Bacon put it bluntly, "If a man write little, he had need have a great memory."

**Ch 12. Learning:** to be like Jesus we must be learners, even as He was at only age twelve, "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:46-47). Does this mean we must have several diplomas hanging on the wall to be first-rate Christians? It certainly does not. But it does mean we should discipline ourselves to be intentional learners like Jesus, of whom it was marveled, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" (John 7:15).

**Ch 13. Perseverance:** We must perpetually remind ourselves that despite the most fervent diligence to our responsibility to discipline ourselves... we cannot make ourselves more like Jesus. The Holy Spirit does that, working through the Disciplines...

In *The Discipline of Grace*, Jerry Bridges concurs: "A major temptation in the self-discipline approach to holiness, however, is to rely on a regiment of spiritual disciplines instead of on the Holy Spirit. I believe in spiritual disciplines. I seek to practice them... But those disciplines are not the source of our spiritual strength. The Lord Jesus Christ is, and it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to apply His strength to our lives..." In the Christian, the Spirit of God begins to carry out the will of God to make the child of God like the Son of God (see Romans 8:29). And He who began this good work in the life of the believer "will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6)...

**Perseverance:** Now, the way of Christ is not always an inner struggle or every moment a battle, but neither is it without lifelong opposition. Therefore, don't be misled into thinking that if you drink of the grace God offers through the spiritual Disciplines then living the Christian life will be easy.

Strange as it may sound, I want to alert you to the reality of struggle in the Christian life in order to encourage you, especially when it's difficult for you to practice the Spiritual Disciplines. While writing the previous paragraph I received a call from a young woman who has been a Christian for about three years. She expressed frustration over a recent spiritual failure and wondered if others at church who appeared so spiritually mature fought any of the battles she was bleeding from. A fresh and timely reminder that all Christians struggle in most of the same ways she does brought both comfort and hope. May it do the same for you...

In addition to the world and the flesh, you also have a personal Enemy committed to your failure in the Disciplines—the *Devil*. The apostle Peter reminded us, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8)... Why did Paul command us in Ephesians 6 to put on the armor of God? It's because we are in a battle, a conflict, a struggle. And there is no vacation from the struggle that is a part of Christian living.

Where, then, is the victory? The victory over the world, the flesh, and the Devil was long ago decisively and eternally won by Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. That victory is mediated to us by the Holy Spirit...

And just as the only way to God is through Christ, so the only way to godliness is through the Christ-centered practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. Will you "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness"? Where and when will you begin?