

Introduction

In *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg notes that spiritual disciplines are: 'Simply a means of appropriating or growing toward the life that God graciously offers...' And he defines them thus: 'Discipline: any activity I can do by direct effort that will help me to do what I cannot now do by direct effort. Spiritual discipline: any activity that can help me gain power to live as Jesus taught and modelled it.'

What Does Spiritual Discipline Do For Us?

- **1 Corinthians 9:24-27** Spiritual discipline helps us effectively 'run the race' and focus our spiritual goals. The idea of running a long-distance race requires us both to train and to fix our eyes on the end. Disciplines are a form of training that help us to receive all that God has for us in order to continue the race. They also keep our focus on the ultimate goal – being like Jesus and being with Jesus.
- **1 Timothy 4:7-10** Disciplines keep us spiritually fit. Spiritual health, 'godliness', is more important than physical health. Service is one way to keep us spiritually fit.
- **Hebrews 12:1-4** Spiritual discipline strips away the non-essentials: our Christian life requires us to give up whatever endangers our relationship with God, to run patiently and to struggle against sin in the power of the Holy Spirit. To live effectively we must keep our eyes on Jesus.

In *Celebration of Discipline* Richard Foster takes a list of 12 disciplines and divides them into three groups: inward (meditation, prayer, fasting and study); outward (simplicity, solitude, submission and service); corporate (confession, worship, guidance and celebration). Session 2 handout 2 provides another way of 'classifying' the disciplines. The following definitions are largely taken from *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard, and help explain them a little further.

Disciplines of Abstinence

1 Peter 2:11: 'Abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.' In the disciplines of abstinence we abstain to some degree and for some time from the satisfaction of what we generally regard as normal and legitimate desires... basic drives and motivations such as those for food, sleep, bodily activity, companionship, curiosity and sex. Our desires for convenience, comfort, material security, reputation or fame, and variety are also considered. Abstinence does not imply that there is anything essentially wrong with these desires as such.

SOLITUDE

Choosing deliberately to abstain from interaction with other human beings, denying ourselves companionship and all that comes from our constant interaction with others – it is not solitude in order to do, but in order to come face-to-face with ourselves and our relationship with God. That can make it scary as many of us immunise ourselves against this through busyness and interaction. In our hyperconnected world solitude also means disconnecting from all things electronic.

FASTING

Abstaining in some significant way from food, and possibly from drink as well, teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. There are many ways to fast: from a bread-and-water, Daniel-style fast (Daniel 1:12) to forgoing food and/or drink completely (Matthew 4). Fasting confirms our utter dependence on God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. We fast in order to feast on God – feasting on him and on doing his will.

FRUGALITY

This involves abstaining from using money or goods at our disposal in ways that merely gratify our desires or hunger for status, glamour or luxury. It means that we stay in the bounds of what general good judgement would designate as necessary for the kind of life to which God has led us. In this context simplicity (the arrangement of life around a few consistent purposes, explicitly excluding what is not necessary to human well-being) can be seen as an extension of frugality.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

CHASTITY

Purposefully choosing to turn away from dwelling on or engaging in the sexual dimension of our relationships with others – even husbands and wives... in other words an abstaining from sex and from indulging in sexual feelings and thoughts, and therefore learning how not to be governed by them. The main effect we are looking for through the practice of chastity is being able to deal with, in a wholesome way, sexual acts, feelings, thoughts and attitudes within our lives as a whole.

SECRECY

Abstaining from causing our good deeds and qualities to be known – even to the extent of taking steps to prevent them being known, if that can be achieved without deception. Rightly practised, this enables us to place our public relations department entirely in the hands of God – we allow him to decide where our deeds will be known and when our light will be noticed (Philippians 2:3).

SACRIFICE

This discipline is about a willingness to sacrifice things that we otherwise would see as necessary for living well. It isn't about giving up things that we can easily do without, but giving up things that incur some sort of 'cost' to us. We may abstain from getting a possession we feel is necessary to meet our preferred needs, or give up something we already have. What constitutes a 'need' will differ from person to person.

Disciplines of Engagement

These are a balance to abstinence. Abstinence counteracts tendencies to sins of commission. Engagement counteracts tendencies to sins of omission.

STUDY

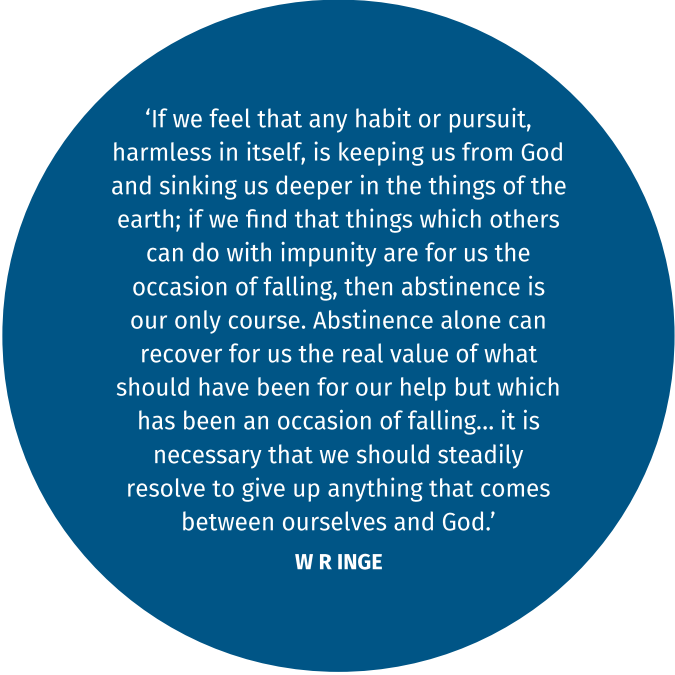
Engaging with the written and spoken word of God – not just for the sake of knowledge, but in order to meditate on it, learn from it and apply it so that it becomes part of the everyday fabric of our lives. Our prayer as we do this should be that God will speak to us through his living word. This will involve a regular allocation of time, plus time spent reading the Bible as a whole. It also means making an effort to sit under biblical teaching, sharing with others and reading biographies of other disciples.

WORSHIP

In worship we engage ourselves with, dwell on and express the greatness, beauty and goodness of God – through thought and the use of words, music, some ritual and symbols. We should do this alone and with other believers. In worship we should take time to come to the Father through the Son – in other words to focus on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and all that means to us. We should expect worship to deepen our relationship with God as his Holy Spirit fills us and draws us close.

CELEBRATION

This is one of the most important disciplines of engagement, yet one of the most misunderstood and overlooked. It is the completion of worship, for it dwells on the greatness of God as shown in his goodness to us. We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our lives, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God's greatness. We concentrate on our life and world as God's work and as God's gift to us. Celebration can include feasting with God's people, music, singing and dance, and the relating of stories of God's action for us and his people.



'If we feel that any habit or pursuit, harmless in itself, is keeping us from God and sinking us deeper in the things of the earth; if we find that things which others can do with impunity are for us the occasion of falling, then abstinence is our only course. Abstinence alone can recover for us the real value of what should have been for our help but which has been an occasion of falling... it is necessary that we should steadily resolve to give up anything that comes between ourselves and God.'

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SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

SERVICE

In service we engage our goods and strengths in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world. We need to remember, though, that not every act that MAY be done as a discipline NEED be done as a discipline, but in the sense of spiritual discipline I may choose to serve another to train myself away from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment or covetousness. Service is a way to be freed from bondage to other people... we are primarily serving God (Colossians 3:22-24). For leaders, the discipline of service can be hard – to live as a servant whilst fulfilling socially important roles is one of the greatest challenges any disciple faces.

PRAYER

Prayer is conversing, communicating with God. When we pray we talk to God – aloud or in our own thoughts. By its very nature prayer almost always involves other disciplines and spiritual activities – especially worship, study, meditation and sometimes solitude and fasting. Of course prayer should not be undertaken purely as a discipline – yet it can be one. As a discipline it has its greatest force in strengthening the spiritual life as we learn to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17 and Philippians 4:6). We can train ourselves to invoke God's presence in every act we perform through practising the discipline of prayer in all circumstances.

FELLOWSHIP

In fellowship we engage in common activities of worship, study and prayer, celebration and service, with other disciples. This can be done in large gatherings or small groups, but the members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other – do not neglect to meet together. There is a reciprocal nature to life in the body and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given through the body as a whole to be administered to and for each other.

CONFESSION

Confession is a discipline that functions within fellowship. In it we let trusted others know our deepest weaknesses and failures. This will nourish our faith in God's provision for our needs through his people, our sense of being loved, and our humanity before our brothers and sisters. We let some friends know who we really are, not holding back anything important, but ideally allowing complete transparency. We lay down the burden of pretending and hiding, which normally takes up such a dreadful amount of human energy. Confession brings healing and forgiveness – but confession also helps us to avoid sin, because persisting in sin when living in transparent relationships is unsupportable unless hidden. Restitution often follows.

Conclusion

Using these disciplines will deepen our relationship with God and help us to grow in Christ-likeness. Different ones will be appropriate at different times and should be practised in addition to our daily walk with God – they are tools for training us to last the course. The temptation in our driven society will be to get legalistic about their practice and burdened with guilt when we fail – that is not the way that God operates. That is why mentoring and accountability relationships are so good for us.