

Spiritual Disciplines



I grew up in a time when many churches emphasized strict obedience to dress codes and other behavioral standards as measurements of Christian faithfulness. As a teen who gained strength, direction, companionship, and a sense of belonging from my local church, the rules did not bother me. I simply conformed.

Looking back on those days I'm grateful for the opportunities to grow beyond that early conformity, because my youth group experience also included intensive Bible reading, study, prayer, and encouragement for one another.

Admittedly, much of my motivation to observe basic Christian disciplines came through the Sunday morning requirement to fill out a checklist. I hated the embarrassment of not performing well, so I tried to read my Bible and pray daily. Fortunately, the underlying benefits of those practices were making a difference in me even without my realizing it.

Today, after passing through multiple life stages and experiences, I realize more than ever just how transformative spiritual exercises such as Bible reading and prayer have been for me. When given the opportunity, I try to encourage other Christ followers to seriously and intentionally participate in spiritual exercises for growth in godliness, not because the exercises are goals in themselves, but because of their potential benefits.

Write out Paul's words to his young disciple in 1 Timothy 4:7-8.

What are "spiritual exercises" (in general) and how can they be more profitable than physical exercise?

According to Dr. Stanley Outlaw, the spiritual exercises Paul admonished Timothy to practice would result in "godliness, a style of life which in both doctrine and practice brings one to a closer

fellowship with God.” (*The Randall House Bible Commentary: 1 Thessalonians through Philemon*, Robert E. Picirilli, General Editor, p. 240.)

Throughout the ages, Christ followers have kept certain disciplines that have helped them on their journey of growth toward godliness. Lengthy lists of disciplines can be found in contemporary and classical resources, but the basic fundamental disciplines I wish to address are Bible intake and prayer.

These two disciplines observed faithfully have great potential for good outcomes in the life of the believer. Although this study does not include a “how to” list, we do need to understand these basic disciplines and potential benefits of each.

This understanding can help us remain faithful in the practices, and that is the main point of this lesson: faithfulness in observing the basic disciplines of Bible intake and prayer.

Bible Intake

Bible reading, one of the most encouraged spiritual disciplines, is one part of a larger category labeled by Donald J. Whitney as “Bible intake.” Bible intake includes reading, hearing, studying, memorizing, and meditating upon the Word of God. Whitney wrote, “No spiritual discipline is more important than the intake of God’s Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture” (Donald J. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, p. 28).

The more a person’s mind is

filled with Scripture that is correctly read or heard, understood, and applied, the better that person can know God,



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- Donald J. Whitney

position herself for the Holy Spirit’s transformative work and development of His fruit (Romans 12:1-2; Galatians 5:22-25), and maintain a life of faithful service in the Kingdom of God.

Read the following Bible passages related to this topic and jot down what the Word says about its value to those who ingest it (really consume or take in). Psalms 19:7-11; 119:9, 11, 24, 28, 35, 49, 50, 105, 165; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Knowing the importance of the Bible is not the same as taking it in and allowing God's very words to make a difference in our lives. Owning several Bibles, including journaling versions, intensive study versions, and contemporary language versions is not the same as ingesting the Word for the health of our spirituality.

Recently my pastor, Randall Wright of Clear View Church in Princeton, Texas, said, "We can allow the consumerism related to the Bible to replace the personal consumption of the Bible." Personal consumption of the Bible requires that a person

at least read, hear, and study the Word regularly, taking it to heart and applying it as God directs through His Spirit.

Unfortunately, knowing the Bible's importance personally does not insure faithfulness in regularly taking it in and allowing it to transform us. Remaining faithful in that discipline can be encouraged by a few simple suggestions. Before considering those, a quick look at the discipline of prayer is needed. Bible intake and prayer are a combined discipline necessary for spiritual living and active relationship with God.

Prayer

God's expectation that we pray is clear in Scripture. An example of this is in the words of Jesus when He responded to the disciples' request that He teach them to pray. He started His response with,

“When you pray...” (Matthew 6:5-7; Luke 11:2). Jesus prayed and taught His followers to pray always and not give up (Luke 18:1). Paul prayed and admonished recipients of his letters to give thanks while praying always and continually (Philippians 4:6-7; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

It is said “Martin Luther expressed God’s expectation of prayer this way, ‘As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray’” (Whitney, page 68, from John Blanchard, *Gathered Gold*, 227). Probably everyone reading this study believes we should pray regularly.

Unfortunately, many prayers might be mindless repetitions offered because of habit, such as some prayers before meals. Also, in the busy schedules of

life, many Christians struggle to find time for focused prayer to a listening and responding God.

Many people practice praying during their drive time. Sometimes, I pray on my drives, but this is not the kind of focused prayer needed for a meaningful relationship with the Father. Paying attention to Scripture and talking with God about passages that are read can lead to transformation as the Holy Spirit freely works in the participant of these spiritual exercises.

Eliminating distractions enables a person to focus more on the One to whom prayer is directed and enables the one praying to hear His responses through the ministry of His Spirit and His written Word. Faithful observance of this type of focused praying (with no fancy words or outlines) is possibly challenging to busy women, isn’t it?

Faithfulness in Spiritual Disciplines

As we consider Bible intake and prayer as primary disciplines for Christian life and growth, these disciplines must be practiced together regularly. In *40 Days Through the Prayers*

of Jesus, Tim Cameron wrote, “The Lord’s Word is inseparably linked to prayer... Being able to stand the tests and storms of life necessitates having the Word embedded deep in our souls

with a full measure of prayer daily. A full measure of the Word and prayer daily is indispensable in living the Spirit-filled life" (page 57).

Admittedly, I have struggled with my observance of these spiritual exercises over the years. My faithfulness and the effectiveness of practicing these necessary disciplines of faith has increased as I've moved through stages of life, but it has been a rather up and down journey. Through my own experiences, I have recognized a few factors that have aided my quest to be faithful in these disciplines. These are suggestions that might help you, too, but they should only be understood as suggestions and not rules.

Suggestions for Faithfulness in Spiritual Exercises

1. Ask God to direct your exercises. He is the faithful One, and He, through His Spirit, teaches, encourages, and guides us when we allow Him to do so.

2. Consider the way Paul exercised, or "raced" in His Christian experience and ask God to help you follow his example (1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and Philippians 3:12-14).

3. Schedule time each day for focused Bible intake and prayer. The actual clock time and length of engagement will obviously be somewhat dictated by your stage in life. Examine your life, patterns of daily schedules and possible unstructured time, and try to find an optimal time to spend in Bible intake and prayer. If no time seems possible, ask God to help you discover or make time daily for these two disciplines. It might require getting up early, which might also require going to bed a bit earlier.

Look at your current daily and weekly schedules. When could you insert at least 15 minutes a day for focused time with God, in His Word and in prayer?

Now that I live alone and don't have daily work obligations, I have lots of opportunity to have that focused quiet time... but unless I intentionally schedule this into my days, I can simply move through whatever else gets my attention and come to the end of the day without this valuable time with God. I can end my day


with it, but in my tiredness, focus is difficult. So, I choose morning quiet time, after taking a couple of grandkids to school. I must be intentional and disciplined even in keeping this schedule.

4. Make sure your motivation for practicing these primary disciplines is consistent with the Word itself. Reading the Bible and praying just so you can check it off a Sunday School report form or your own “to do list” is not the best motivation, but it can be an aid toward the higher goals of becoming more like Christ, knowing God more intimately, and growing in “godliness.”

5. Ask a friend to help you remain faithful in these necessary disciplines. Some people call this “accountability,” but whatever the label, a helper to encourage your endurance and to help you keep “running” can be valuable. Two necessary ingredients of this type friendship are honesty and freedom. You must be honest with the person you ask to help you, and that person must be free to speak truth to you. Some people avoid such relationships, but they can encourage endurance, just like a coach or trainer can help someone going through rehab after an accident or surgery.

A few months ago I was forced into painful physical therapy after total knee replacement. Many times I wanted to quit, thinking it was too hard, too painful, and probably would not change things much. I had to schedule rehab time for each day, with or without a therapist, and I’m not one who really likes to exercise.

I endured because my goals were worth more than the difficulty of the rehab. When I finished the required rehab, I immediately moved over to a wellness program with a trainer. The trainer holds me accountable for my faithfulness in moving toward my goals, but he cannot “make me” do what I should. I need God for that!

My goal is not to become a marathon runner or a buff weight lifter. My goal is strength and freedom of movement so I can be active, to go and do what God intends for me in the coming days... years. My practice in spiritual exercises has the same desired outcomes. I hope this is true of you, too. 

About the Writer: Having served in two ministry-related careers, mission work in Japan and teaching at Randall University, Janice (Jan) Banks, now retired, resides in Denison, Texas. She enjoys being part of Clear View Church and participating in women’s meetings or special ministries beyond her local area.