

Turning Your Heart Toward God

A 12-Week Exploration
of the Spiritual Disciplines

by Paul Thigpen
with Sue Kline

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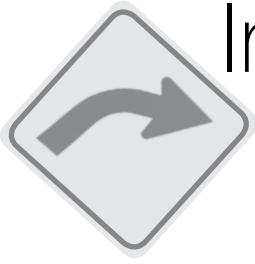
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Introduction to the Spiritual DISCIPLINES

WHAT COMES TO mind when you hear the words *spiritual disciplines*? You probably associate those words with Bible reading, prayer, and fasting. Yet those just scratch the surface: The list of practices that have, for centuries, turned people's hearts toward God is a long one. Most of us have barely begun to explore these practices.

Did you catch that word *explore*? Because that's what this guide is intended to help you do. It's not designed so that you will master every imaginable discipline in twelve weeks. Rather, it offers a sampling of disciplines from a rich menu, a menu that includes stillness, forgiveness, reticence, stability, and more. As you get a taste of each discipline, you'll discover which you want to savor at a more leisurely pace.

Among the early Christians who practiced the spiritual disciplines was a group called the Desert Fathers. One of the Desert Fathers, the elder Dioscorus, offers a helpful model for how to approach the spiritual disciplines. He trained the brothers of his desert community to make a resolution each year to concentrate

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on one discipline. Then, if they had mastered that by the end of the year, they could go on to the next.

Instead of introducing you to one discipline per year as Dioscorus did, this guide introduces you to one discipline per week (or two weeks, or month, depending on how often your group meets). It begins with an opening chapter that highlights the value of the spiritual disciplines, gives an overview of the ten disciplines you'll explore in the coming weeks, and explains how to proceed so you (and your group) receive the most benefit from this study.

The remaining chapters each describe a specific discipline, show what it looks like in practice, and explain how it might enrich your walk with Christ. A "how might I start" section gives you some specific ways to explore that discipline in the week(s) ahead. Then, at the end of each chapter, you'll find a few questions to help you think through your recent experience with a particular discipline and to evaluate its place in your life.

As you explore the ten disciplines featured in this study guide, ask the Holy Spirit to show you where you need the most spiritual growth or encouragement. Those are the disciplines you may want to practice for a longer period of time and explore in more depth after this study ends. The final chapter will give you practical advice for continued participation in these time-tested, God-focused practices.

Ready to begin? Turn the page and explore some old and new ways to turn your heart toward God.

1

Ancient Practices for Today

They were called “the athletes of God.”

Ancient Christians from many cultures and walks of life, they gathered in the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East beginning in the third century. There, they created communities where they could train themselves in godliness (1 Tim. 4:7) and run together “the race marked out for [them]” (Heb. 12:1). Anything that could not help them “gain Christ” they discarded as worthless (Phil. 3:8). In their everyday lives they kept in mind that an athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules (2 Tim. 2:5).

What were those rules? These men and women learned over a lifetime of focusing on God that spiritual strength, growth, and stamina—like physical strength, growth, and stamina—come from following certain rules or principles that arise from the way God has made us. Spiritual muscles, like physical muscles, require proper nurture and exercise through disciplines that build up the soul.

Because of their emphasis on spiritual disciplines, “the athletes of God” are known as the pioneers of the Christian ascetic

4. When you think of growing strong spiritually, what practices immediately come to mind?

A BLESSING, NOT A BURDEN

Perhaps all this talk about spiritual athleticism makes you tired. Isn't contemporary life demanding enough as it is? Aren't we already overextended, driven to distraction by overflowing schedules? Aren't spiritual disciplines just one more thing to add to our impossibly long to-do lists?

On the contrary. The disciplines aren't something we pile on top of everything else. They are *a way of approaching everything else* that keeps us from being overwhelmed or veering off course. They offer an alternative to the weary, cluttered, scattered lives so many of us are living.

Let's look closely at the athletic imagery used in Hebrews to talk about spiritual discipline:

Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . . . Discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen

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your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet,
so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but
rather be healed.

— 12:1–2,11–13, NRSV

Notice, first, that discipline doesn't add to our encumbrances; it extricates us from them. Through discipline, we "lay aside every weight," which leads to *freedom*.

Second, discipline doesn't wear us out. Instead, it strengthens the parts of us that are "drooping" and heals the parts that are "lame." Discipline builds *fortitude*.

Third, discipline doesn't dissipate or distract us. Instead, it directs and presses us toward "Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Discipline gives us *focus*.

So though discipline may at first be "painful rather than pleasant," ultimately it rewards us with these three qualities: freedom, fortitude, and focus.

PAUSE AND PROCESS

1. Does anything in the paragraphs you just read surprise you or challenge your previous understanding of spiritual disciplines? If so, what?

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LOOKING AHEAD

The following disciplines are featured in upcoming chapters.

Disciplines of Freedom

Abstinence: Forbearing from indulging a natural appetite (such as for food, drink, sleep, sex, or leisure)

Simplicity: Taming the desire for possessions

Stillness: Withdrawing for a season from a normal activity (such as work, play, or conversation) to place oneself—alone and silent—in God’s presence

Forgiveness: Letting go of anger and bitterness toward those who have injured or offended us

Disciplines of Fortitude

Meditation: Setting aside time to think carefully about what God may be saying through Scripture, spiritual reading, or the thoughts He brings to mind

Prayer: Conversing with God (spontaneously or in another’s words, silently or aloud)

Obedience: Subjecting oneself to God by submitting to the Scriptures and to others for guidance and correction

Reticence: Controlling the tongue by listening before speaking, listening more than speaking, or abstaining from speech

Disciplines of Focus

Stability: Staying put when one ought to stay put

Worship: Taking one’s eyes off oneself to focus on who God is

PAUSE AND PROCESS

1. Which disciplines from this list, if any, are already a part of your life?
2. How have you benefited from the practice of that discipline?
3. Which of the disciplines on the previous page holds the least appeal for you? Why?
4. Which discipline are you most eager to explore? Why?

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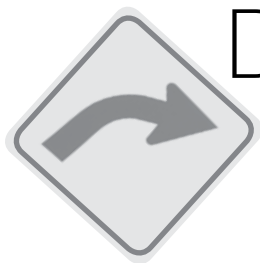
5. Review this chapter, and list below the benefits offered from the practice of spiritual disciplines. Put an asterisk next to the benefits you most hope to experience during this study.

Getting Started

If you are using this guide with a small group, take time now to skim the material on abstinence in the next chapter. As soon as possible after your group meeting, you will want to read this material in more depth and determine how you will practice the discipline of abstinence in the week(s) before your group meets again. The next time your group gathers, the discussion will center on members' experiences in practicing abstinence.

Going Forward >>>>

Pray with your small-group members, asking God to direct each of you in the weeks ahead toward those disciplines most appropriate for your wiring and your season in life. Ask Him to allow you to experience the benefits you listed for question 5 above.



Disciplines of FREEDOM

AS WE NOTED in chapter 1, some spiritual disciplines are designed to give us *freedom*. “The purpose of the disciplines,” said the desert elder known as Moses the Black, “is to free us and keep us free.” They increase our spiritual speed and agility by helping us let go of things we grasp too tightly or love too much — things that weigh us down as we try to run the race.

In fact, the Greek word for “training” used in the New Testament (*gymnasia*) means literally “exercising naked.” Ancient athletes stripped down so that nothing encumbered them as they ran. The disciplines of freedom can also be seen as ways to remove obstacles from the racetrack, to “make straight paths for [our] feet” (Heb. 12:13, NRSV). In the next four chapters, we’re going to look at disciplines that can bring greater freedom to our lives.



Abstinence

DESERT WISDOM

One of the leaders of the ancient ascetics, John the Short, made this comparison: “If a king wants to capture a city whose citizens are hostile, first he seizes the food supplies of the city. Then, when they are starving, he subdues them. So it is with over-attachment to food. If you are earnest in fasting, the enemies that trouble your soul will grow weak.”

WHAT IS THE DISCIPLINE OF ABSTINENCE?

Abstinence involves forbearance from indulging the natural appetites. Often what we give up, whether for a season or for a lifetime, is in itself not evil, but is a natural human pleasure: food, drink, sleep, sex, leisure.

WHY WOULD I WANT TO PRACTICE IT?

Why abstain from something good that God has given us? For the sake of a greater good. As Augustine often noted, our problem

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is not usually that we love too little; it's that we love too much. We love certain things more than we love God, even though He is deserving of our greatest love.

We're like runners who admire pretty rocks too much. Every time we stuff another one into our pockets, we slow down a little more. Practicing abstinence makes us relax our grip on the rocks, empties our pockets, and frees us from disordered loves so that we can run the race unencumbered.

Through abstinence, the soul can get down to “fighting weight.” While indulging ourselves puts us at the mercy of our desires, self-denial weakens the grip of those desires on us, strengthens our will instead, and feeds the virtue of self-control (Titus 2:6; 2 Pet. 1:6).

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Various forms of abstinence include

- ◆ fasting from all foods
- ◆ fasting from particular foods (such as meat) or drinks (such as alcohol)
- ◆ giving up sleep (holding vigils or “watches”), usually to pray
- ◆ refraining from sex
- ◆ forgoing leisure activities

Jesus and the apostles teach us by word and example the importance of these disciplines in Mt. 4:2, 6:16–18, 26:40–41; Acts 13:2–3; and 1 Cor. 7:3–5.

WHAT ARE SOME INDICATORS THAT I MIGHT NEED THIS DISCIPLINE?

- ◆ You often overindulge in eating or drinking. You eat too often for reasons other than meeting your body's need for nutrition.
- ◆ You regularly sleep more hours than you need.
- ◆ You find yourself preoccupied with thoughts about sex.
- ◆ You spend too much time watching TV or DVDs, playing video games, playing golf, or engaging in other leisure activities.

HOW MIGHT I START?

Once you have identified your disordered love—the thing to which you've become too attached—begin to cut back on it or, if necessary, cut it out altogether.

- ◆ If you're too attached to food, try giving up a meal regularly or even fasting for a whole day. Devote to prayer the time you would have spent eating. If giving up entire meals is too difficult or inadvisable for health reasons, cut back on your portions at each meal, or give up particular foods you're too fond of, such as sweets, meats, or soft drinks.
- ◆ If you're too attached to sleep, set your alarm earlier, and spend the extra time in prayer.
- ◆ If you're too attached to entertainment, stop buying entertainment magazines. Designate one evening per week as “entertainment free.” Then spend the evening doing something for someone else.
- ◆ As you make each sacrifice, say to God, “Lord, I'm giving this up for love of You. Teach me to love You above all else.”

◆ your view of God

◆ your view of yourself

3. What benefits did you discover as you practiced abstinence?

4. Is this a discipline you'd like to continue? Why or why not?

5. What obstacles might you need to overcome to make abstinence a habit of your life?

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Going Forward >>>>

Schedule a time in the next day or two to read the explanation of simplicity in chapter 3 and determine how you will practice this next discipline.