

Spiritual Formation

Essential Disciplines

Susan Lafferty

A few years ago, a seasoned servant of the Lord in South Asia asked, “Do you want to seem holy? Or be holy?” She warned against the lukewarm state of seeming—the problematic practice of keeping up outward appearances instead of living with integrity.

The Lord instructs us to be holy. Wholly. In real time. And we want to run this race well. But how? Living a life holy and pleasing to God seems impossible until we remember what is necessary for life and fruitfulness: abiding in Christ. He is the Vine and we are the branches. Without Him, we can do nothing (John 15:4-5).

We *depend* on Him and we *discipline* ourselves. We *trust* the Lord and we *act* in obedience. Spiritual disciplines offer a framework for spiritual formation in this moment-by-moment walk with Him.

Paul pointed to discipline as a necessary part of living a holy life. He said to Timothy, “But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness. For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way and also for the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:7-8 CSB).

Spiritual disciplines

Lists of spiritual disciplines are many and varied. These habits and patterns for growth have been tested and tried through the ages.

We read about them in the Word of God. We see them practiced in church history. Classical works and more recent books provide insights and truths about incorporating them into the daily rhythms of our lives (see *Spiritual Formation Resources* below).

But there are some disciplines that inform everything else we do as we abide in Christ. They are essential parts of a daily walk with the Lord and the first things we teach new believers.

Submission. Prayer. Word of God. Silence and solitude. These disciplines don't stand alone. They depend upon each other as we practice them.

Submission

Spiritual formation begins with submission to the Lord and His ways. Every day. Jesus says, "If anyone wants to follow after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross *daily*, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23 CSB—*emphasis mine*). He calls his disciples to deny themselves and take up what they know is the instrument of death.

Dying to my rights was excruciating during our first term. Selfish pride and a sense of entitlement surfaced like never before as we navigated a new culture and field issues. Team dynamics challenged my full surrender to His path. I questioned our calling, place of service, and field leadership.

The Lord spoke to me one morning through Psalm 86:11 and this became a persevering prayer of my life during that first term.

Teach me your way, O Lord,
and I will walk in Your truth;
give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name. (NIV)

God faithfully revealed the ugly sin that was dividing my heart. Through confession and surrender, I entered what became a joyful submission to His sanctifying work.

Paul gives a startling image of submission in Romans 12:1-2 CSB. “Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.” The bodies (plural) in the Body of Christ are presented as a living sacrifice (singular). Together we learn to give all that we are to Him in absolute surrender. We submit to His transformation for the purpose of obedience to His will. Sometimes we learn the necessity of obedience the hard way, but submission to Him is worth it all.

Prayer

Prayer is the breath of our spiritual growth. It puts words to our submission. And reveals our dependence on the Lord as we take in His Word and live out His Truth.

During a difficult season for our family, I cried out to the Lord for help. One of His directives through Scripture was, “Be devoted to prayer. Pray continually” (from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). So, I asked, “What does that mean, Lord?”

Over the next two years, during daily times with Him, I began to see the “always” of prayer in His Word. In the Old Testament, Nehemiah prayed in the midst of various situations, moving between telling what was happening and talking with the Lord (e.g. Nehemiah 2:1-5; 4:1-9; 6:8-14). In the New Testament, Jesus told a parable to teach His disciples “the need for them to pray always and not give up” (Luke 18:1).

In Ephesians 6, Paul describes the spiritual forces believers are struggling against in this world. He says to put on the full armor of God in order to

resist evil and stand firm. Then he focuses on prayer, beginning with: “Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. Pray also for me...” (Ephesians 6:18ff CSB).

In his January 2nd devotion in *Morning by Morning*, after noting “how large a portion of Scripture is occupied with the subject of prayer,” Charles Spurgeon says the following: “We may be certain that whatever God has made prominent in His Word, He intended to be conspicuous in our lives. If He has said much about prayer, it is because He knows we have much need of it. So deep are our needs that, until we are in heaven, we must not cease to pray.”¹

The Word of God

In Exodus, the people of God gathered manna daily (Exodus 16:4-5, 21-22). The Lord provided just enough to meet their need that day. But He was teaching them an important life lesson in the wilderness, as later detailed in Deuteronomy 8:3 (CSB). “He humbled you by letting you go hungry; then he gave you manna to eat, which you and your fathers had not known, so that you might learn that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

We need the Word of God daily. His Word instructs us in the way we should go. It corrects our thinking, and it helps us grow in understanding who God is and what He does.

We are privileged to access Scripture through various disciplines: hearing, reading, studying, meditating, and memorizing. Beginning the day taking in His Truth is only part of the daily rhythm. Throughout the day we can pray the Word. We also repeat it as we share the gospel, make disciples or train leaders.

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Morning by Morning* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2001), p. 10. Used with permission. All rights reserved. www.whitakerhouse.com

Today, more than ever, we must carefully listen to and obey His Word.

Silence and Solitude

When I was young, my parents had a hard time keeping me supplied with books. I was a voracious reader. Every spare minute I wanted my eyes on a page and my mind engaged in a story. Some books on our shelf included Scripture in the text. And, well, I skipped those parts to get back to the author's words. Sometimes I felt frustrated because the Scripture verses were there. "I already know that," I thought.

Maybe the author's insertion of Scripture seemed out of place, or preachy. But in the end, what I was really doing was rushing past the Word of God. Rushing past the gospel. Rushing past the truth.

Sometimes in the middle of our busy lives, surrounded by distractions, we fail to stop for the Word. We may read it quickly, perhaps to check it off a list. But in our hurry, amid all the noise, we can fail to hear His message in the only Word that will remain and never fade in relevance or authenticity.

Jesus set the example for rising early in the morning and finding a place of quiet (e.g. Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35, 6:45-56). Jesus, the Son of God, sought time with the Father alone. How much more do we need a place of silence and solitude?

When we had small children, the silence and solitude looked a little different. One time in my angst over not having alone time, the Lord spoke ever so clearly, "Let the little children come to Me" (Luke 18:16). I learned to pull a child into my lap and read aloud. And often practiced taking short moments of silence throughout the day to be still and acknowledge His Lordship.

Today, distractions seem to only increase. But our need for ears to hear His Truth as we sit in His presence remains the same.

Conclusion

“Do you want to seem holy? Or be holy?” And how does “seeming” begin? The drift can be ever so subtle.

I learned the danger of subtle drift one summer break during college. Our family vacationed at a favorite beach. Early one morning, Dad and I rode the large waves this beach was known for. After a while, he said, “Let’s move back to the right.” We were no longer in line with the spot where the rest of the family was playing in the sand.

We tried to stand up in what we thought was waist-deep water. Our feet couldn’t reach the ocean floor. Undertow began carrying us out to sea. For the first time in my life, I remember thinking, “We’re going to die.” In the end, we needed expert help getting back to shore and safety.

Daily we encounter the currents and undertow of this world. Without ongoing spiritual formation through basic spiritual disciplines, subtle drift can take us off course.

In his correspondence with family members, missionary William Carey referred to the importance of spiritual disciplines in one’s walk with the Lord. In a letter to his son, Jabez, on February 7, 1816, he included the following advice:

“Above all things live near to God. If personal religion be in a lively flourishing state in your heart everything will go well and your work will be an enjoyment, but on the contrary, if personal religion be low, your work will be a burden and your situation unhappy and disagreeable. So great an influence has this one thing upon all we do and say that it may be always considered as the life blood of all our enjoyments and all our usefulness.”²

² Terry G. Carter, ed, *The Journal and Selected Letters of William Carey* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), p. 253.

Missionary steadfastness and resiliency matters. Therefore, abide in Christ daily, submitting to His transforming work. Pray always and sink your roots in the Word of God. Seek times of silence and solitude to sit in His presence and hear His voice.

Spiritual Formation Resources

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