

Some Main Disciplines for the Spiritual Life

But to obtain these gifts, you need more than faith; you must also work hard to be good, and even that is not enough. For then you must learn to know God better and discover what he wants you to do. Next, learn to put aside your own desires so that you will become patient and godly, gladly letting God have his way with you. This will make possible the next step, which is for you to enjoy other people and to like them, and finally you will grow to love them deeply. The more you go on in this way, the more you will grow strong spiritually and become faithful and useful to our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 PETER 1:5-8, LB

A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom. When we understand that grace (*charis*) is gift (*charisma*), we then see that to grow in grace is to grow in what is given to us of God and by God. The disciplines are then, in the clearest sense, a means to that grace and also to those gifts. Spiritual disciplines, “exercises unto godliness,” are only activities undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of his life and power without harm to ourselves or others.

Though we may not be aware of it, we experience “disciplines” everyday. In these daily or “natural” disciplines we perform acts that result in a direct command of further abilities that we would not otherwise have. If I repeat the telephone number aloud after looking it up, I can remember it until I get it dialed. Otherwise, I probably couldn’t. If I train rigorously I can bench press 300 pounds; otherwise not. Such ordinary activities are actually disciplines that aid our physical or “natural” life.

The same thing happens with disciplines for our spiritual life. When through spiritual disciplines I become able heartily to bless those who curse me, pray without ceasing, to be at peace when not given credit for good deeds I’ve done, or to master the evil that comes my way, it is because my disciplinary activities have inwardly poised me for more and more interaction with the powers of the living God and his Kingdom. Such is the potential we tap into when we use the disciplines.

THE DISCIPLINES

What then are the particular activities that can serve as disciplines for the spiritual life? And which should we choose for our individual strategy for spiritual growth?

In answering these practical questions, we need not try to come up with a complete list of disciplines. Nor should we assume that *our* particular list will be right for others. Quite a few well-known practices will have a strong claim to be on every list. On the other hand, there are a number of good activities that may not usually be thought of as disciplines, and yet others that have served through the ages as spiritual disciplines but are now largely forgotten. For example, there is the *peregrinatio*, or voluntary exile, introduced by

the Irish St. Brenden (born 484) and widely practiced for some cen-

turies thereafter. We have mentioned several times the vigil or “watch,” where one rejects sleep to concentrate on spiritual matters. The keeping of a journal or spiritual diary continues to be an activity that serves some individuals as a vital discipline, though it probably would not show up on any “standard” list. Sabbath keeping as instituted in the Old Testament can be a most

productive discipline. Physical labor has proven to be a spiritual discipline, especially for those who are also deeply involved in solitude, fasting, study, and prayer. (1 Thess. 4:11–12)

One unusual activity that can be an effective spiritual discipline for those who are used to “the better things in life” is to do grocery shopping, banking, and other business in the poorer areas of the city. This has an immense effect on our understanding of and be-

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havior toward our neighbors—both rich and poor—and upon our understanding of what it is to love and care for our fellow human beings.

In shaping our own list of spiritual disciplines, we should keep in mind that very few disciplines can be regarded as absolutely indispensable for a healthy spiritual life and work, though some are obviously more important than others. Practicing a *range* of activities that have proven track records across the centuries will keep us from erring. And if, later, other activities are really more what we need, our progress won't be seriously hindered, and we'll probably be led into them.

So, to help us make our all-important choices, let's list those activities that have had a wide and profitable use among disciples of Christ and approach them in a prayerful, experimental way. The following list is divided into the disciplines of “abstinence” and the disciplines of “engagement.” We'll discuss what each of these activities is and how each can make an especially important contribution to spiritual growth.

Disciplines of Abstinence

solitude silence fasting frugality chastity secrecy sacrifice

Disciplines of Engagement

study worship celebration service prayer fellowship confession submission

THE DISCIPLINES OF ABSTINENCE

“Abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

Reminding us that the word “asceticism” is the correlate of a Greek word for *training*, as in athletes training for a race, W. R. Inge notes that disciplines of abstinence should be practiced by everyone, leading to a sober and moderate use of all God's gifts.

If we feel that any habit or pursuit, harmless in itself, is keeping us from God and sinking us deeper in the things of 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

He concludes his discussion of abstinence by quoting from Bishop Wilson of the Isle of Man: "Those who deny themselves will be sure to find their strength increased, their affections raised, and their inward peace continually augmented."³

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. "Normal" desires include our basic drives or motivations, such as those for food, sleep, bodily activity, companionship, curiosity, and sex. But our desires for convenience, comfort, material security, reputation or fame, and variety are also considered under this heading. Psychologists have no generally accepted classification of these "normal" drives or of their precise interrelationships, though obviously most of the ones just mentioned must be satisfied to some degree for the sake of human life and health.

Keep in mind that the practice of abstention does not imply that there is anything essentially wrong with these desires as such. But in today's distorted condition of humanity, it is these basic desires that have been allowed to run a rebellious and harmful course, ultimately serving as the primary hosts of sin in our personalities.

ourselves and God.

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We can clearly see this by considering the nature of the major types of sin. The seven "deadly" sins recognized throughout church history are pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lasciviousness. Gregory the Great (A.D. 540–604) described these as "a classification of the normal perils of the soul in the ordinary conditions of life."⁴ Each is a case of one or more legitimate desires gone wrong. An adequate course of spiritual discipline will single out those tendencies that may harm our walk with God. By the carefully adapted arrangement of our circumstances and behavior, the spiritual disciplines will bring these basic desires into their proper coordination and subordination within the economy of life in his Kingdom.

SOLITUDE

We have already seen what a large role solitude played in the life of our Lord and the great ones in His Way. In solitude, we purposefully abstain from interaction with other human beings, denying ourselves companionship and all that comes from our conscious interaction with others. We close ourselves away; we go to the ocean, to the desert, the wilderness, or to the anonymity of the urban crowd. This is not just rest or refreshment from nature, though that too can contribute to our spiritual well-being. Solitude is choosing to be *alone* and to dwell on our experience of isolation from other human beings.

Solitude frees us, actually. This alone explains its primacy and priority among the disciplines. The normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God. Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviors that hinder our integration into God's order.

It takes twenty times more the amount of amphetamine to kill individual mice than it takes to kill them in groups. Experimenters also find that a mouse given no amphetamine at all will be

dead within ten minutes of being placed in the midst of a group on the drug. In groups they go off like popcorn or firecrackers. Western men and women, especially, *talk* a great deal about being individ-

uals. But our conformity to social pattern is hardly less remarkable than that of the mice—and just as deadly!

In solitude we find the psychic distance, the perspective from which we can see, in the light of eternity, the created things that trap, worry, and oppress us. Thomas Merton writes:

That is the only reason why I desire solitude—to be lost to all created things, to die to them and to the knowledge of them, for they remind me of my distance from You: that You are far from them, even though You are in them. You have made them and Your presence sustains their being and they hide You from me. And I would live alone, and out of them. *O beata solitudo!*⁵

But solitude, like all of the disciplines of the spirit, carries its risks. In solitude, we confront our own soul with its obscure forces and conflicts that escape our attention when we are interacting with others. Thus, “Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us...[and] discloses the fact that these abysses are haunted.”⁶ We can only survive solitude if we cling to Christ there. And yet what we find of him in that solitude enables us to return to society as free persons.

Solitude will also pain and threaten our family and friends. The author Jessamyn West comments: “It is not easy to be solitary unless you are born ruthless. Every solitary repudiates someone.”⁷ Others need us to keep *their* lives in place; and when we retreat, they then have to deal with their souls. True, they need God more than they need us, but they may not understand this. We must carefully respect their pain and with much loving prayer make wise arrangements on their behalf; and we must do all possible to help them understand what we are doing and why.

Of all the disciplines of abstinence, solitude is generally the most fundamental in the beginning of the spiritual life, and it must be returned to again and again as that life develops. This factual priority of solitude is, I believe, a sound element in monastic asceticism.

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Locked into interaction with the human beings that make up our fallen world, it is all but impossible to grow in grace as one should. Just try fasting, prayer, service, giving, or even celebration without the preparation accomplished in withdrawal, and you will soon be thrown into despair by your efforts, very likely abandoning your attempt altogether.

On the other hand, we must reemphasize, the “desert” or “closet” is the primary place of *strength* for the beginner, as it was for Christ and for Paul. They show us by their example what we must do. In stark aloneness it is possible to have silence, to be still, and to *know* that Jehovah indeed is God (Ps. 46:10), to set the Lord before our minds with sufficient intensity and duration that we stay centered upon him—our hearts fixed, established in trust (Ps. 112:7–8)—even when back in the office, shop, or home.

Thomas a Kempis distilled more of what was right in the monastic calling than any other, and he had this to say:

The great holy men, where they might, fled men's fellowship and chose to live to God in secret places. One said: As oftentimes as I was among men I came back a less man, that is to say less holy.... If in the beginning of thy conversion thou keep thy cell and dwell well therein it shall be to thee afterwards as a dear and well beloved friend and most pleasant solace. In silence and quiet the devout soul profiteth and learneth the secrets of the scriptures.... Leave vain things to the vain.... Shut thy door upon thee and call to thee Jesu thy love: dwell with him in thy cell for thou shalt not find elsewhere

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Henry David Thoreau saw how even our secular existence withers from lack of a hidden life. Conversation degenerates into mere gossip and those we meet can only talk of what they heard from someone else. The only difference between us and our neighbor is that he has seen the news and we have not. Thoreau put it well. As our inward quiet life fails, "we go more constantly and desperately to the post office," but "the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while.... Read not The Times," he concludes, "read The Eternities!"⁹

so great peace.

SILENCE

In silence we close off our souls from "sounds," whether those sounds be noise, music, or words. Total silence is rare, and what we today call "quiet" usually only amounts to a little less noise. Many people have *never* experienced silence and do not even know that they do *not* know what it is. Our households and offices are filled with the whirring, buzzing, murmuring, chattering, and whining of the multiple contraptions that are supposed to make life easier. Their noise comforts us in some curious way. In fact, we find complete silence shocking because it leaves the impression that nothing is happening. In a go-go world such as ours, what could be worse than that!

Silence goes beyond solitude, and without it solitude has little effect. Henri Nouwen observes that "silence is the way to make solitude a reality."¹⁰ But silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life. It reminds us of death, which will cut us off from this world and leave only us and God. And in that quiet, what if there turns out to be very little to "just us and God"? Think what it says about the inward

emptiness of our lives if we must *always* turn on the tape player or radio to make sure something is happening around us.

Hearing is said to be the last of our senses to go at death. Sound always strikes deeply and disturbingly into our souls. So, for the sake of our souls, we must seek times to leave our television, radio, tape players, and telephones turned off. We should close off street noises as much as possible. We should try to find *how* quiet we can make our world by making whatever arrangements are necessary.

Silence and solitude do go hand in hand, usually. Just as silence is vital to make solitude real, so is solitude needed to make the discipline of silence complete. Very few of us can be silent in the presence of others.

Yet most of us *live* with others, so how can we practice such a discipline? There are ways. For instance, many have learned to rise for a time in the middle of the night—to break the night's sleep in

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half in order to experience such silence. In doing so, they find a rich silence that aids their prayer and study without imposing on others. And though it sounds impossible, meaningful progress into silence can be made without solitude, even within family life. And sharing this discipline with those you love may be exactly what is needed.

As with all disciplines, we should approach the practice of silence in a prayerful, experimental attitude, confident that we shall be led into its right use for us. It is a powerful and essential discipline. Only silence will allow us life-transforming concentration upon God. It allows us to hear the gentle God whose only Son "shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice above the street noise" (Matt. 12:19). It is this God who tells us that "in quietness and trust is your strength" (Isa. 30:15, NAS).

But we must also practice the silence of *not speaking*. James, in his Epistle, tells us that those who seem religious but are unable to bridle their tongues are self-deceived and have a religion that amounts to little (James 1:26). He states that those who do no harm by what they say are perfect and able to direct their whole bodies to do what is right (James 3:2).

Practice in not speaking can at least give us enough control over what we say that our tongues do not "go off" automatically. This discipline provides us with a certain inner distance that gives us time to consider our words fully and the presence of mind to control what we say and when we say it.

Such practice also helps us to listen and to observe, to pay attention to people. How rarely are we ever truly listened to, and how deep is our need to be heard. I wonder how much wrath in human life is a result of not being heard. James says, "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (1:19). Yet when the tongue is moving rapidly, it seems wrath will usually be found following it. God gave us two ears and one mouth, it's been said, so that we might listen twice as much as we talk, but even that proportion is far too high on the side of talking.

In witnessing, the role of talking is frequently overemphasized. Does that sound strange? It's true. Silence and especially true lis-

tening are often the strongest testimony of our faith. A major problem for Christian evangelism is not getting people to talk, but to silence those who through their continuous chatter reveal a loveless heart devoid of confidence in God. As Miguel de Unamuno says, "We need to pay less attention to what people are trying to tell us, and more to what they tell us without trying."¹¹

Why do we insist on talking as much as we do? We run off at the mouth because we are inwardly uneasy about what others think of us. Eberhard Arnold observes: "People who love one another can be silent together."¹² But when we're with those we feel less than secure with, we use words to "adjust" our appearance and elicit their approval. Otherwise, we fear our virtues might not receive adequate appreciation and our shortcomings might not be properly "understood." In not speaking, we resign how we appear (dare we say, how we *are*?) to God. And that is hard. Why should we worry about others' opinions of us when God is for us and Jesus Christ is on his right hand pleading our interests (Rom. 8:31–34)? But we do.

How few of us live with quiet, inner confidence, and yet how many of us desire it. But such inward quiet is a great grace we *can* receive as we practice not talking. And when we have it, we may be able to help others who need it. After we know that confidence, we may, when others come fishing for reassurance and approval, send them to fish in deeper waters for their own inner quiet.

Here is the testimony of a young person entering into the practice of solitude and silence:

The more I practice this discipline, the more I appreciate the strength of silence. The less I become skeptical and judgmental, the more I learn to accept the things I didn't like about others, the more I accept them as uniquely created in the image of God. The less I talk, the fuller are words spoken at an appropriate time. The more I value others, the more I serve them in small ways, the more I enjoy and celebrate my life. The more I celebrate, the more I realize that God has been giving me wonderful things in my life, the less I worry

about my future. I will accept and enjoy what God is continuously

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giving to me. I think I am beginning to really enjoy God.

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FASTING

In fasting, we abstain in some significant way from food and possibly from drink as well. This discipline teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. It will certainly prove humiliating to us, as it reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. It may also bring to mind how we are using food pleasure to assuage the discomforts caused in our bodies by faithless and unwise living and attitudes—lack of self-worth, meaningless work, purposeless existence, or lack of rest or exercise. If nothing else, though, it will certainly demonstrate how powerful and clever our body is in getting its own way against our strongest resolves.

There are many ways and degrees of fasting. The desert fathers such as St. Antony often subsisted for long periods of time on bread and water—though we must understand that their “bread” was much more substantial than what we have today. Daniel and his friends would not eat the king’s meat or drink his wine; they had vegetables and water only (Dan. 1:12). At another time, Daniel “ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled” (10:3). Jesus in the time of his preparation for temptation and ministry seems to have forgone all food for more than a month (Matt. 4).

Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it, we learn by experience that God’s word to us is a life substance, that it is not food (“bread”) alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4:32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on him and on doing his will.

The Christian poet Edna St. Vincent Millay expresses the discovery of the “other” food in her poem entitled “Feast”:

I drank at every vine.
The last was like the first

I came upon no wine
So wonderful as thirst.

I gnawed at every root. I ate of every plant.

I came upon no fruit
So wonderful as want.

Feed the grape and the bean
To the vintner and the monger;

I will lie down lean
With my thirst and my hunger.

Hence, when Jesus directs us not to appear distressed and sad when we fast (Matt. 6:16–18), he is not telling us to mislead those around us. He is instead explaining how we will feel—we really will not be sad. We are discovering that life is so much more than meat (Luke 12:33). Our belly is not our god, as it is for others (Phil. 3:19; Rom. 16:18); rather, it is his joyful servant and ours (1 Cor. 6:13).

Actually fasting is one of the more important ways of practicing that self-denial required of *everyone* who would follow Christ (Matt. 16:24). In fasting, we learn how to suffer happily as we feast on God. And it is a good lesson, because in our lives we *will* suffer, no matter what else happens to us. Thomas a Kempis remarks: “Whosoever knows best how to suffer will keep the greatest peace. That man is conqueror of himself, and lord of the world, the friend of Christ, and heir of Heaven.”¹⁶

Persons well used to fasting as a systematic practice will have a clear and constant sense of their resources in God. And that will help them endure deprivations of *all* kinds, even to the point of coping with them easily and cheerfully. Kempis again says: “Refrain from gluttony and thou

shalt the more easily restrain all the inclinations of the flesh."¹⁷ Fasting teaches temperance or self-control and therefore teaches moderation and restraint with regard to *all* our fundamental drives. Since food has the pervasive place it does in our lives, the effects of fasting will be diffused throughout our personality. In the midst of all our needs and wants, we expe-

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rience the contentment of the child that has been weaned from its mother's breast (Ps. 131:2). And "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6).

Fasting, though, is a hard discipline to practice without its consuming all our attention. Yet when we use it as a part of prayer or service, we cannot allow it to do so. When a person chooses fasting as a spiritual discipline, he or she must, then, practice it well enough and often enough to become experienced in it, because only the person who is well habituated to systematic fasting as a discipline can use it effectively as a part of direct service to God, as in special times of prayer or other service.

FRUGALITY

We turn now to some disciplines of abstinence that may for some not be as basic to the process of full redemption as solitude, silence, and fasting are. But they are still of very great importance, since they allow us to come to grips with behavioral tendencies that can destroy us or at least render us ineffective in the service of Christ.

In frugality we abstain from using money or goods at our disposal in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hunger for status, glamour, or luxury. Practicing frugality means we stay within the bounds of what general good judgment would designate as necessary for the kind of life to which God has led us.

That there is a general sense of what is "necessary" is indicated by the "sumptuary laws" enacted by secular authorities in both the ancient world and in more recent times. The ancient Spartan, for example, was prohibited from possessing a house or furniture that required more elaborate tools than the axe or saw. The Romans frequently wrote laws limiting expenses on entertainments. English law contained many enactments governing the food and clothing of various social ranks.

Such laws are hardly imaginable in the Western world of today, where no extravagance is thought to be shameful, but only a more or less astonishing exercise of one's presumably sacred right to "pursue happiness." The prophetic word from Old and New Testament alike is clear, however. James (5:1) says: "Go to now, ye

rich men, weep and howl for the miseries that shall come upon you." For the sake of subsequent discussions we must note that James's warning to the rich is not simply because they are rich, but because they "have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton" (5:5).

The spiritually wise person has always known that frivolous consumption corrupts the soul away from trust in, worship of, and service to God and injures our neighbors as well. O. Hardman forcefully puts the point:

It is an injury to society as well as an offence against God when men pamper their bodies with rich and dainty foods and seriously diminish their physical and mental powers by excessive use of intoxicants.... Luxury in every form is economically bad, it is provocative to the poor who see it flaunted before them, and it is morally degrading to those who indulge in it. The Christian who has the ability to live luxuriously, but fasts from all extravagance, and practices simplicity in his dress, his home, and his whole manner of life, is,

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While frugality *is* a service to God and humankind, our concern here is with it as a discipline. As such, it frees us from concern and involvement with a multitude of desires that would make it impossible for us “to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God” (Mic. 6:8). It makes it possible for us to concentrate upon that “one thing needful,” the “good part” Mary chose (Luke 10:42).

In our current world, a large part of the freedom that comes from frugality is freedom from the spiritual bondage caused by financial debt. This kind of debt is often incurred by buying things that are far from necessary, and its effect, when the amount is substantial, is to diminish our sense of worth, dim our hope for the future, and eliminate our sensitivity to the needs of others. Paul’s admonition, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another” (Rom. 13:8) is therefore good spiritual advice as well as wise financial counsel.

John Joseph Surin was once asked why, when so many people seem to wish to be great in God’s eyes, there are so few who are

therefore, rendering good service to society.

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truly saintly. “The chief reason,” he replied, “is that they give too big a place in life to indifferent things.”¹⁹ Frugality as a settled style of life frees us from indifferent things. Insofar as *simplicity* (the arrangement of life around a few consistent purposes, explicitly excluding what is not necessary to human well-being) and *poverty* (the rejection of all possessions) are spiritual disciplines at all, they are such largely as expressions of frugality. We shall discuss these points further in the next chapter.

CHASTITY

In naming a discipline that deals specifically with the sexual drive we lack appropriate terminology. I shall use the term “chastity,” although it, like “simplicity,” properly refers to the *result* of a discipline under grace rather than to disciplinary activities themselves. In exercising the spiritual discipline of chastity, we purposefully turn away from dwelling upon or engaging in the sexual dimension of our relationships to others—even our husbands or wives.

Sexuality is one of the most powerful and subtle forces in human nature, and the percentage of human suffering tied directly to it is horrifying. The human abuse stemming from sex, both outside of and within marriage, makes it imperative that we learn “how to possess our vessel in sanctification and in honor” (1 Thess. 4:4). And an essential part of this learning consists in the practice of abstaining from sex and from indulging in sexual feelings and thoughts, and thus learning how to not be governed by them.

Abstinence within marriage by mutual agreement was also counseled by St. Paul as an aid to fasting and prayer (1 Cor. 7:5). Contrary to much modern thought, it is absolutely vital to the health of any marriage that sexual gratification not be placed at the center. Voluntary abstinence helps us appreciate and love our mates as whole persons, of which their sexuality is but one part. And it confirms us in the practice of being very close to people without sexual entanglements. Chastity thus has an important part to play within marriage, but the main effect we seek through it is the proper disposal of sexual acts, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes within our life as a whole, inside of marriage and out. Sexuality

cannot be allowed to permeate our lives if we are to live as children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

Is this to say our sexuality is something to shun? That would be impossible. We are sexual beings: “male and female created he them” (Gen. 1:27). This crucial passage ties sexuality to our creation in the image of God. It is a part of our power with which to serve him. In sexuality the intermingling of persons, the knowing and being known that is characteristic of God’s basic nature, is provided in a special form for embodied personality. In the full sexual union, the person is known in his or her whole body and knows the other by means of his or her whole body. The depth of involvement is so deep that there can be no such thing as “casual sex.” It is a contradiction of terms—something very well understood by the apostle Paul, who, accordingly, taught that fornication is a sin against one’s own body (1 Cor. 6:18).

So, our sexuality reaches into the essence of our being. Therefore chastity does not mean nonsexuality, and any *pose* to that effect will certainly do great harm. And this is a *very* important point. The suffering that comes from sexuality does come in large part from improper indulgence in sexual thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and relations. But much also comes from *improper abstinence*.

In no domain of human life is it more true that “hope deferred maketh the heart sick” (Prov. 13:12), and it makes many minds sick as well. Jesus clearly saw that abstinence from sexual relations still allowed for gross sexual impropriety and disturbance—some of which he called “adultery in the heart” (Matt. 5:28)—and that a right abstinence was something that called for very special qualifications (Matt. 19:11–12). This realism about sex is carried on by Paul, who taught about a wrong kind of abstinence when he wrote it is “better to marry than to burn” (1 Cor. 7:9).

Of course, we must understand that the “burning” here in question is something very serious in its implications, not just a trivial “inward” matter. It spills out into human life in many ways: severe distortion of thought and emotion, inability to engage in normal and appropriate sexual relations, disgust and hatred between frustrated men and women, even abuse of children, sexual perversion,

and sex murders. Chastity rightly practiced as a part of an overall rich walk with God can draw the poison from sexual abstinence and prevent the sickness of heart and mind that now runs amok in the sexual dimension of life in today's world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes that "the essence of chastity is not the suppression of lust but the total orientation of one's life toward a goal."²⁰ Healthy abstention in chastity can only be supported by loving, positive involvement with members of the opposite sex. Alienation from them makes room for harmful lusts, and so this discipline must be underscored with compassion, association, and helpfulness. If our family situations were as they should be, a close and compassionate relationship between the sexes would be the natural outflow of the relationships between mother and son, father and daughter, sister and brother, and so forth. A recent study indicates that fathers who care for their children, cleaning, feeding, holding them from their earliest days on, rarely abuse them sexually. That is because they effectively love them, and such effective love prevents our harming one another. To practice chastity, then, we must first practice love, practice seeking the good of those of the opposite sex we come in contact with at home, work, school, church, or next door. Then we will be free to practice the discipline of chastity as appropriate and gain only positive results from it.

SECRECY

In the discipline of secrecy—and here again, the word is not perfectly suited to our purposes—we abstain from causing our good deeds and qualities to be known. We may even take steps to prevent them from being known, if it doesn't involve deceit. To help us lose or tame the hunger for fame, justification, or just the mere attention of others, we will often need the help of grace. But as we practice this discipline, we learn to love to be unknown and even to accept misunderstanding without the loss of our peace, joy, or purpose.

Few things are more important in stabilizing our walk of faith than this discipline. In the practice of secrecy, we experience a continuing relationship with God independent of the opinions of

others. "Thou shalt hide them in the secret of thy presence from the pride of men: thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues," Psalms 31 states.

Thomas à Kempis comments on the "great tranquility of heart" that comes to those who rise above "praisings and blamings":

Thou are not the holier though thou be praised nor the more vile though thou be blamed or dispraised. What thou art, that thou art; that God knoweth thee to be and thou canst be said to be no greater.... For a man ever to do well and to think little of himself is token of a meek soul. For a man not to wish to be comforted by any creature is a token of great purity and inward trust. He that seeketh no outward witness for himself, it appeareth openly that he hath committed

One of the greatest fallacies of our faith, and actually one of greatest acts of unbelief, is the thought that our spiritual acts and virtues need to be advertised to be known. The frantic efforts of religious personages and groups to advertise and certify themselves is a stunning revelation of their lack of substance and faith. Jesus, surely with some humor, remarked that a city set on a hill cannot be hid (Matt. 5:14). I would not like to have the task of *hiding* Jerusalem, or Paris, or even Baltimore. The Gospel stories tell us how hard Jesus and his friends tried to *avoid* crowds

and how badly they failed. Quite candidly, if it is possible for our faith and works to be hidden, perhaps that only shows they are of a kind that *should* be hidden. We might, in that case, think about directing our efforts toward the cultivation of a faith that is impossible to hide (Mark 7:24).

Secrecy rightly practiced enables us to place our public relations department entirely in the hands of God, who lit our candles so we could be the light of the world, not so we could hide under a bushel (Matt. 5:14–16). We allow *him* to decide when our deeds will be known and when our light will be noticed.

Secrecy at its best teaches love and humility before God and others. And that love and humility encourages us to see our associates in the best possible light, even to the point of our hoping they will do better and appear better than us. It actually becomes

himself all wholly to God.

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possible for us to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than ourselves,” as Philippians 2:3 advises. And what a relief that can be! If you want to experience the flow of love as never before, the next time you are in a competitive situation, pray that the others around you will be more outstanding, more praised, and more used of God than yourself. Really pull for them and rejoice for their successes. If Christians were universally to do this for each other, the earth would soon be filled with the knowledge of God’s glory. The discipline of secrecy can lead us into this sort of wonderful experience.

Secrecy has yet another important dimension as a spiritual discipline. The needs that arise in our efforts to serve God can often be handled by looking to God only, not telling others that there is a need, but counting on God to tell them. Over a century ago, George Mueller of Bristol, England, supported a vast ministry, including a number of houses for orphans, without advertising his needs or those of his work. He was inspired to do this in part by the similar work of A. H. Franke in Halle, Germany, during the early 1700s. But his aim was to establish before the world and the church a testimony that God provides faithfully for those who trust in him. He reasoned:

Now if I a poor man, simply by prayer and faith, obtained without asking any individual, the means for establishing and carrying on an orphan house: there would be something which, with the Lord’s blessing, might be instrumental in strengthening the faith of the children of God, besides being a testimony to the consciences of the

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If we see needs met because we have ask God alone, our faith in God’s presence and care will be greatly increased. But if we always tell others of the need, we will have little faith in God, and our entire spiritual life will suffer because of it.

SACRIFICE

In the discipline of sacrifice, we abstain from the possession or enjoyment of what is necessary for our living—not, as in frugality,

unconverted, of the reality of the things of God.

from what is really to some degree superfluous anyway. The discipline of sacrifice is one in which we forsake the security of meeting our needs with what is in our hands. It is total abandonment to God, a stepping into the darkened abyss in the faith and hope that God will bear us up. Abraham knew about such abandonment when he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac. He was actually counting upon his Lord to raise Isaac from the dead to fulfill the promise of lineage, as Hebrews 11:19 explains. The poor widow of Luke 21:2–4 abandoned herself to God's care as she gave sacrificially. She gave more to God with her two pennies than all the rich gentlemen writing out their large, tax deductible checks around her.

Strangely enough, even though sacrifice may seem more of a service, it is always more of a discipline. Our need to give is greater than God's need to receive, because he is always well supplied. But how nourishing to our faith are the tokens of God's care in response to our sacrifice. The cautious faith that *never* saws off the limb on which it is sitting never learns that unattached limbs may find strange, unaccountable ways of not falling.

Once while in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, my wife and I decided to give away what we had left after paying the bills at the first of the month. It was not much to give away, but we did it. And we told no one. How odd then that a twenty-dollar bill was found pinned to the steering wheel of our car a week or so later! With hamburger at thirty-nine cents a pound, we lived like royalty until the next month, convinced we were enjoying the provisions of the King. With the discipline of sacrifice, we practice a different dimension of faith, and often we are surprised at its results.

THE DISCIPLINES OF ENGAGEMENT

“Arise, take up thy bed, and go thy way” (Mark 2:11).

The disciplines of abstinence must be counterbalanced and supplemented by disciplines of engagement. Abstinence and engagement are the outbreathing and inbreathing of our spiritual lives, and we

require disciplines for both movements. Roughly speaking,

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the disciplines of abstinence counteract tendencies to sins of commission, and the disciplines of engagement counteract tendencies to sins of omission. Life, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, does not derive its power of growth and development from withdrawal but from action—from engagement.

Abstinence, then, makes way for engagement. If the places in our blood cells designed to carry oxygen are occupied by carbon monoxide, we die for lack of oxygen. If the places in our souls that are to be indwelt by God and his service are occupied by food, sex, and society, we die or languish for lack of God and right relation to his creatures. A proper abstinence actually breaks the hold of improper engagements so that the soul can be properly engaged in and by God.

STUDY

In the spiritual discipline of study we engage ourselves, above all, with the written and spoken Word of God. Here is the chief positive counterpart of solitude. As solitude is the primary discipline of abstinence for the early part of our spiritual life, so study is the primary discipline of engagement.

Our early experience may be so full that we neglect study. But relationship with God, as with any person, soon requires a contribution from us, which will largely consist of study. Calvin Miller well remarks: "Mystics without study are only spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort."²³

We have already commented a number of times upon the use of Bible study as a discipline, but it would be difficult to overstate the point. Here is David Watson's comment on the days before his operation for the cancer that ultimately took his life:

As I spent time chewing over the endless assurances and promises to be found in the Bible, so my faith in the living God grew stronger and held me safe in his hands. God's word to us, especially his word spoken by his Spirit through the Bible, is the very ingredient that feeds our faith. If we feed our souls regularly on God's word, several times each day, we should become robust spiritually just as we feed on ordinary food several times

Dallas Willard / 177 each day, and become robust physically. Nothing is more important

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In study we also strive to see the Word of God at work in the lives of others, in the church, in history, and in nature. We not only read and hear and inquire, but we *meditate* on what comes before us; that is, we withdraw into silence where we prayerfully and steadily focus upon it. In this way its meaning for us can emerge and form us as God works in the depths of our heart, mind, and soul. We devote long periods of time to this. Our prayer as we study meditatively is always that God would meet with us and speak specifically to us, for ultimately the Word of God is God speaking.

Does this sound like a scholarly pursuit? Actually, study isn't necessarily that at all. It does, however, involve giving much time on a regular basis to meditation upon those parts of the Bible that are most meaningful for our spiritual life, together with constant reading of the Bible as a whole. We should also make every effort to sit regularly under the ministry of gifted teachers who can lead us deeply into the Word and make us increasingly capable of fruitful study on our own. Beyond this, we should read well the lives of disciples from all ages and cultures of the church, building a small library as we make them our friends and associates in The Way.

WORSHIP

The study of God in his Word and works opens the way for the disciplines of worship and celebration. In worship we engage ourselves with, dwell upon, and express the greatness, beauty, and goodness of God through thought and the use of words, rituals, and symbols. We do this alone as well as in union with God's people. To worship is to see God as *worthy*, to ascribe great worth to him.

Here, for example, is worship: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev. 4:11). And again: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power,

than hearing and obeying the word of God.

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and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.... Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (Rev. 5:12–13). As we worship in this manner, giving careful attention to the details of God’s actions and to his “worthiness,” the good we adore enters our minds and hearts to increase our faith and strengthen us to be as he is.

If in worship we are met by God himself, our thoughts and words turn to perception and experience of God, who is then really *present to us* in some degree of his greatness, beauty, and goodness. This will make for an immediate, dramatic change in our lives. Such a thing happened with Isaiah, who once at worship *saw* the Lord, “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple,” surrounded by the seraphim crying to one another: “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Host; the whole earth is full of his glory” (6:1–3). It has happened to many others.

Nevertheless, the direct divine encounter is not essential to true worship, and it may also occur outside of the context of purposeful worship, as it did with Elijah, Ezekiel, and Paul. *Worship is our part*, even though divinely assisted, and therefore it can be a discipline for the spiritual life.

Practically speaking, the Christian’s worship is most profitable when it is centered upon Jesus Christ and goes through him to God. When we worship, we fill our minds and hearts with wonder at him—the detailed actions and words of his earthly life, his trial and death on the cross, his resurrection reality, and his work as ascended intercessor. Here, in the words of Albertus Magnus (died 1280), we “find God through God Himself; that is, we pass by the Manhood into the Godhood, by the wounds of humanity into the depths of His divinity.”²⁵ There is so much to *do* in this worship that we will never finish. And as we worship in this way our lives are filled with his goodness, which is also God’s.

The converted slave trader John Newton penned this hymn of worship:

Content with beholding His face, My all to His pleasure resigned;

No changes of season or place

Would make any change in my mind; While blessed with a sense of his love,

A palace a toy would appear; And prisons would palaces prove,

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Here is one of the most important disciplines of engagement, yet most overlooked and misunderstood. 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 life, our world, *in*

conjunction with our faith and confidence in God's greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on *our* life and world as God's work and as God's gift to us.

Typically this means that we come together with others who know God to eat and drink, to sing and dance, and to relate stories of God's action for our lives and our people. Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 5), and David (2 Sam. 6:12–16) provide us with vivid biblical examples of celebration, as does Jesus' first public miracle at the wedding in Cana (John 2), or the appointed feasting periods of the nation of Israel. Celebration was also maintained by the church in its established feast days up to the Protestant era and is continued to today by the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox communions.

Holy delight and joy is the great antidote to despair and is a wellspring of genuine gratitude—the kind that starts at our toes and blasts off from our loins and diaphragm through the top of our head, flinging our arms and our eyes and our voice upward toward our good God.

The unabashedly sensual and earthy character of celebration or jubilee is nowhere more clearly portrayed than in the instructions contained in Deuteronomy 14. Here a tithe of goods produced was to be used in a feast before the Lord on a vacation trip to the big city of Jerusalem. If the city was too far for individuals to carry their own produce as provision, the tithe was to be sold “for money,” and the money taken to Jerusalem where—are you ready for this?—“Thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul

If Jesus would dwell with me there.

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lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the Lord thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household, and the Levite that is within thy gates” (14:26–27). The “strong drink” mentioned here was, shall we say, not exactly sassafras tea! But the point of this exercise, nonetheless, was precisely “that thou mayest learn to fear the Lord thy God always” (14:23).

The book of Ecclesiastes contains similar admonitions. For example: “Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart” (5:18–20, NIV; see also 2:24 and 3:12–23).

Be assured that I'm not in favor of drunkenness as a spiritual discipline, or even so much as a good thing. Abuse of alcohol is currently a curse upon the earth. Celebration is not the whole life or discipline of the faithful, and it requires supplementation and correction by the rest of a balanced practice. But this world is radically unsuited to the heart of the human person, and the suffering and terror of life will not be removed no matter *how* “spiritual” we become. It is because of this that a healthy faith before God cannot be built and maintained, without heartfelt celebration of his greatness and goodness *to us* in the midst of our suffering and terror. “There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Eccles. 3:4) It is the

act and discipline of faith to seize the season and embrace it for what it is, including the season of enjoyment.

Certainly this will seem far too hedonistic to many of us. But we dishonor God as much by fearing and avoiding pleasure as we do by dependence upon it or living for it. Listen once more to Uncle Screwtape. He is chiding his demon protégé, Wormwood, for allowing his “patient” to read a book he really enjoyed and take a walk in the country that filled him with joy.

“In other words,” says Screwtape, “you allowed him two real positive pleasures. Were you so ignorant as not to see the danger of this?” Then he elaborates:

The man who truly and disinterestedly enjoys any one thing in the world, for its own sake, and without caring twopence what other people say about it, is by that very fact forearmed against some of our subtlest modes of attack. You should always try to make the patient abandon the people or food or books he really likes in favor of the “best” people, the “right” food, the “important” books. I have known a human defended from strong temptations to social ambition

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Elsewhere Screwtape remarks that when demons are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, they are on the enemy’s ground. We’ve won many a soul through pleasure, he says, “All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one.”²⁸

Faith in its celebration sometimes becomes a delectable joy coursing through our bodily being, when we really begin to see how great and lovely God is and how good he has been *to us*. Even those commonly thought to be ruined (Luke 6:20–23; Matt. 5:3–12)—the poor, the depressed, the persecuted—have a godlike well-being in his company and Kingdom. Feasting, dancing, singing, oration become insuppressible. “For by thee,” we shout, “I have run through a troop: and by my God I have leaped over a wall” (Ps. 18:29). “Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness; to the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee forever!” (Ps. 30:11–12). But that is not yet enough. The hills must sing and the trees break out in applause for God (Isa. 55:12). Every created thing must praise the Lord (Ps. 148–150).

Celebration heartily done makes our deprivations and sorrows seem small, and we find in it great strength to do the will of our God because his goodness becomes so real to us.

by a still stronger taste for tripe and onions.

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SERVICE

In service we engage our goods and strength in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world. Here we recall an important distinction. Not every act that *may* be done as a discipline *need* be done as a discipline. I will often be able to serve another simply as an act of love and righteousness, without regard to how it may enhance my abilities to follow

Christ. There certainly is nothing wrong with that, and it may, incidentally, strengthen me spiritually as well. But I may also serve another to train myself away from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, or covetousness. In that case, my service is undertaken as a discipline for the spiritual life.

Such discipline is very useful for those Christians who find themselves—as most of us by necessity must—in the “lower” positions in society, at work, and in the church. It alone can train us in habits of loving service to others and free us from resentment, enabling us in faith to enjoy our position and work because of its exalted meaning before God.

Paradoxically perhaps, service is the high road to freedom from bondage to other people. In it, as Paul realized, we cease to be “menpleasers” and “eyeservants,” for we are acting unto God in our lowliest deeds: “Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as menpleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:22–24, RSV).

Can this be applied by the mother of six who must leave her little children uncared for in a derelict neighborhood to support them by scrubbing office floors at night? Can it be applied by the refugee from Central America who pushes his ice cream cart around the neighborhood, ringing his bell as he goes? Yes it can be, if they have heard and received from the heart the gospel of the Kingdom of God—though this provides not the least shadow of an excuse for others failing to do all they reasonably can to help them.

And, truly, it *must* be so applied by them. For they are where they are, and God has yet to bless anyone except where they are. Needless to say, only clear teaching and example, with much practice in the discipline of service, can make us strong here.

But I believe the discipline of service is even more important for Christians who find themselves in positions of influence, power, and leadership. To live as a servant while fulfilling socially important roles is one of the greatest challenges any disciple ever faces. It is made all the harder because the church does not give special training to persons engaged in these roles and foolishly follows the world by regarding such people as “having it made,” possibly even considering them qualified to speak as authorities in the spiritual life because of their success in the world.

Some of the most important things Jesus had to say concerned the manner in which leaders were to live:

Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant. Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:25–28).

We misunderstand this passage if we read it merely as instructions on how to become great. It is, rather, a statement on how those who *are* great are to behave. To be “great” and to live as a servant is one of the most difficult of *spiritual* attainments. But it is also the pattern of life for which this bruised and aching world waits and without which it will never manage a decent existence. Those who would live this pattern must attain it through the discipline of service in the power of God, for that alone will train them to exercise great power without corrupting their souls. It is for this reason that Jesus told his disciples to wash one another’s feet and set

them an example (John 13:14). But where are our seminary courses that would teach leaders in all areas of life—even the church—how to do this and accustom them to it as the fine and easy thing to do?

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Service to others in the spirit of Jesus allows us the freedom of a humility that carries no burdens of “appearance.” It lets us be what we are—simply a particularly lively piece of clay who, as servant of God, happens to be here now with the ability to do this good and needful thing for that other bit of clay there. The experience of active love freed up and flowing by faith through us on such occasions will safeguard us from innumerable pitfalls of the spiritual life.

We must, then, strive to meet all persons who cross our path with openness to service for them—not, of course, in any anxious, obsequious, overly solicitous manner, but with ease and confidence born of our vision of our lives together in the hands of God.

PRAYER

Prayer is conversing, communicating with God. When we pray we talk to God, aloud or within our thoughts. In the nature of the case, prayer almost always involves other disciplines and spiritual activities if it is to go well, especially study, meditation, and worship, and often solitude and fasting as well.

It would of course be a rather low-voltage spiritual life in which prayer was chiefly undertaken as a discipline, rather than as a way of co-laboring with God to accomplish good things and advance his Kingdom purposes. Yet prayer *can* be a discipline, and a highly effective one, as we see from our Lord’s advice to those with him in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.”

Indeed, the indirect effects of prayer upon the conduct of our lives is so obvious and striking that they have been mistakenly treated at times as the only point of prayer. Even when we are praying for or about things other than our own spiritual needs and growth, the effect of conversing with God cannot fail to have a pervasive and spiritually strengthening effect on *all* aspects of our personality. That conversation, when it is truly a conversation, makes an indelible impression on our minds, and our consciousness of him remains vivid as we go our way.

O. Hardman has an excellent description of how the one immersed in prayer then meets the world with its stupid policies, its grasping for privilege and security, its suspicion, ingratitude, and resistance to good:

Continuing instant in prayer after the conclusion of each period of definite communion with God, he will set himself to undertake every legitimate risk, to do the right without fear of consequences, and to embrace in loving purpose those who are opposed to him no less than those who are in agreement with him, in the attempt to realise the vision and to exercise the sympathy with which prayer has endowed him. The many groups into which his fellows are divided will be seen by him in the light of the whole, and he will ever strive to bridge gulfs and so assist in the realisation of that living unity which is experienced by him in anticipation when, in his moments of intensest prayer, he is caught up to God and filled with the joy of union. Economic, social, political, national, and racial antagonisms are waiting for this sole solution of the deadlock which they present.

How misguided are those who regard prayer as irrelevant to social conditions! No doubt many things called “prayer” are quite useless in every respect, but nothing is more relevant to social conditions than the transformation of persons that comes from prayer at its best in the life of the disciple of Christ.

Praying with frequency gives us the readiness to pray again as needed from moment to moment. The more we pray, the more we think to pray, and as we see the results of prayer—the responses of our Father to our requests—our confidence in God’s power spills over into other areas of our life. Out of her vast experiences with prayer in the harrowing life of a missionary wife and mother, Rosalind Goforth explains: “Perhaps the most blessed element in this asking and getting from God lies in the strengthening of faith which comes when a definite request has been granted. What is more helpful and inspiring than a ringing testimony of *what God has done?*”³⁰

However, prayer as a discipline has its greatest force in strengthening the spiritual life only as we learn to *pray without ceasing* (1 Thess. 5:17; Phil. 4:6). We can train ourselves to invoke God’s

There is no other way.

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presence in every action we perform. This is an experiential fact that has been proven in the lives of many disciples of Jesus, ancient and modern. God will meet us in love, and love will keep our minds directed toward him as the magnet pulls the needle of the compass. Habit will be confirmed in gracious interaction, and our whole lives will be bathed in the presence of God. Constant prayer will only “burden” us as wings burden the bird in flight.

But prayer will not be established in our lives as it must be for us to flourish, unless we are practicing other disciplines such as solitude and fasting. In many Protestant churches prayer and Bible study are held up as *the* activities that will make us spiritually rich. But very few people actually succeed in attaining spiritual richness through them and indeed often find them to be intolerably burdensome. The “open secret” of many “Bible believing” churches is that a vanishingly small percentage of those talking about prayer and Bible reading are actually doing what they are talking about. They have not been shown how to change their life as a whole, permeating it with appropriate disciplines, so that prayer and Bible reading will be spiritually successful. Examples of those who are especially effective at prayer and study, such as David Brainerd, or John Fletcher, or Charles Finney, are presented in such a way that hearers do not discover the totality of spiritual disciplines which they carefully practiced to pray as they did. The emphasis upon the character of overall discipline throughout the life must not be missed if prayer is to be the powerful work and effectual discipline God intended it to be, one of his most precious gifts to us.

FELLOWSHIP

In fellowship we engage in common activities of worship, study, prayer, celebration, and service with other disciples. This may involve assembling ourselves together in a large group or meeting with only a few. Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force

of his greater presence much better than scattered individuals. The fire of God kindles higher as the brands are heaped together and each is warmed by the other's flame. The members of the body must be in *contact* if they are to sustain and be sustained

by each other. Christian redemption is not devised to be a solitary thing, though each individual of course has a unique and direct relationship with God, and God alone is his or her Lord and Judge. But The Life is one that requires some regular and profound conjunction with others who share it. It is greatly diminished when that is lacking.

The diverse gifts or graces of the Spirit—all of which are needed in some measure by each person from time to time—are distributed among the separate members of the body of Christ, the church. The unity of the body rightly functioning is thus guaranteed by the people reciprocating in needs and ministries. There are no "oughts" or "shoulds" or "won't-you-pleases" about this. It is just a matter of how things actually work in the new life:

Each man is given his gift by the Spirit that he may use it for the common good. One man's gift by the Spirit is to speak with wisdom, another's to speak with knowledge. The same Spirit gives to another man faith, to another the ability to heal, to another the power to do great deeds. The same Spirit gives to another man the gift of preaching the word of God, to another the ability to discriminate in spiritual matters, to another speech in different tongues and to yet another the power to interpret the tongues. Behind all these gifts is the operation of the same Spirit, who distributes to each individual as he wills (1 Cor. 12:7–11, Phillips).

Because of this reciprocal nature within the corporate body of Christ, fellowship is required to allow realization of a joyous and sustained level of life in Christ that is normally impossible to attain by all our individual effort, no matter how vigorous and sustained. In it we receive the ministry of all the graces of the Spirit to the church.

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 humility before our brothers and sisters. Thus we let some friends in Christ

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know who we really are, not holding back anything important, but, ideally, allowing complete transparency. We lay down the burden of hiding and pretending, which normally takes up such a dreadful amount of human energy. We engage and are engaged by others in the most profound depths of the soul.

The New Testament church seems to have assumed that if a brother or sister had some sickness or other affliction, it might have been due to a sin that was separating that person from the full flow of redeeming life. So in the Letter of James we are told: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (5:16). We must accept the fact that unconfessed sin is a special kind of burden or obstruction in the psychological as well as the physical realities of the believer's life. The discipline of confession and absolution removes that burden.

But confession also helps us to *avoid* sin. The proverb tells us that “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13). The “confesseth” obviously is an aid to the “forsaketh,” for persisting in sin within a close community—not to mention the fellowship of a transparent body of Christ—is unsupportable unless it is hidden. It is said confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation, and a bad reputation makes life more difficult in relation to those close to us, we all know. But closeness and confession force out evildoing. Nothing is more supportive of right behavior than open truth.

And the baring of the soul to a mature friend in Christ or to a qualified minister enables such friends to pray for specific problems and to do those things that may be most helpful and redemptive to the one confessing. Confession alone makes *deep* fellowship possible, and the lack of it explains much of the superficial quality so commonly found in our church associations. What, though, makes confession bearable? Fellowship. There is an essential reciprocity between these two disciplines.

Where there is confession within a close community, *restitution* cannot be omitted and it too serves as a powerful discipline. It is

difficult not to rectify wrong done once it is confessed and known widely. Of course not all sin calls for restitution. But it is unthinkable that I should sincerely confess to my brother or sister that I have stolen a purse or harmed a reputation and then blithely go my way without trying to make some restoration for the loss.

In general, our own innate integrity, a force within our personality, *requires* such restitution. This often is not a pleasant experience, but it actually strengthens us in our will to do the right thing. Confession then is one of the most powerful of the disciplines for the spiritual life. But it may be easily abused, and for its effective use it requires considerable experience and maturity, both in the individual concerned and in the leadership of the group—which leads us to our final discipline.

SUBMISSION

The highest level of fellowship—involving humility, complete honesty, transparency, and at times confession and restitution—is sustained by the discipline of submission.

In the letter to the Hebrews we read: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief” (13:7). In 1 Peter those older in The Way are told to take the oversight of the flock of God, not by being forced to do so and not as lords over God’s heritage, but *as examples to the flock* (5:2–3). The younger are then told to submit themselves to this gentle oversight by the elders, and all are caught up together as a community of mutual servants in mutual submission: “Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble” (5:5; see also Eph. 5:21).

The order in the redemptive community here implied obviously is not a matter of an iron hierarchy in which unwilling souls are crushed and driven. Instead, it functions in the power of truth and mercy inhabiting mature personalities, being the expression of a kingdom not of this world (John 18:36)—but truly a kingdom nonetheless. Otherwise the church would revert to the model of

purely human government. Unfortunately, we see this actually happening in certain misguided attempts at Christian community. The Way of Jesus knows no submission outside the context of *mutual* submission of all to all. (Eph. 5:21, Phil. 2:3)

Submission, though, is a call for help to those recognized as able to give it because of their depth of experience and Christlikeness—because they truly are “elder” in The Way. In submission we engage the experience of those in our fellowship who are qualified to direct our efforts in growth and who then add the weight of their wise authority on the side of our willing spirit to help us do the things we would like to do and refrain from the things we don’t want to do. They oversee the godly order in our souls as well as in our fellowship and in the surrounding body of Christ.

But these “wise” people will not be looking at themselves as “leaders” actually. Their being examples we submit to is but one aspect of *their* submission to *servanthood*. It is a case of true leadership, not of the *drivership* that so often prevails in secular society and in some church groups where those “in control” do not know of an alternative. How *truly* blessed is this free “order that is in beatitude.”³¹ Here are the beginnings of that kingdom “cut out without hands” (Dan. 2:34), which will in time fill the earth and make the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of our God and of his Christ!

ARE THESE DISCIPLINES ADEQUATE?

Here then are some main disciplines for the spiritual life. As we have indicated, there are many other activities that could, for the right person and upon the right occasion, be counted as spiritual disciplines in the strict sense stated of our previous chapter. The walk with Christ certainly is one that leaves room for and even *calls for* individual creativity and an experimental attitude in such matters. Yet the range or extension of the disciplines is largely determined by our own established tendencies to sin that must be resisted, as well as by the possible avenues of loving service to God and humankind that offer themselves to such creatures as we are.

Which disciplines must be central to our lives will be determined by the chief sins of commission and omission that entice or threaten us from day to day. Arrogance, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lasciviousness—the seven “deadly” sins of theological and literary history—along with many others are not phantoms or jokes, but hard-bitten realities whose dreadful effects can be viewed hour by hour. They call for a comparably hard-nosed, tough response on our part, supported by infinite grace.

The above list of disciplines provides just such a response. The activities mentioned—when we engage in them conscientiously and creatively and adapt them to our individual needs, time, and place—will be more than adequate to help us receive the full Christ-life and become the kind of person that should emerge in the following of him. Other disciplines can be added, but these are the foundational ones. If practiced faithfully, they will guide us right no matter what other disciplines we may add.

NOTES

1. *Lives of the Saints*, translated with an introduction by J. F. Webb (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1973), 18ff.
2. W. R. Inge, *Goodness and Truth*, (London: Mowbray, 1958), 76–77.
3. *Ibid.*, 77.

4. Quoted in Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1978), 5.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 421.

6. Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, vol. 1 of *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 313.
7. Quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1983, part 4, p. 3.
8. Thomas a Kempis, Irwin Edman, ed., *The Imitation of Christ*, in *The Consolations of Philosophy* (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1943), 153–55.

9. Henry David Thoreau, *Thoreau: Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Joseph Wood Krutch, (New York: Bantam, 1962), 366.
10. Henri Nouwen, "Silence, The Portable Cell," *Sojourners* (July 1980): 22.
11. Miguel de Unamuno, "Saint Emmanuel the Good, Martyr," *The Existential Imagination*, F. R. Karl and Leo Hamalian, eds. (Greenwich, CT.: Fawcett Publications, 1963), p. 103.

12. Eberhard Arnold, "Why We Choose Silence Over Dialogue," *The Plough*, a publication of the Bruderhof communities, no. 11, (July/August 1985): 12.

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13. Communicated to me by Dr. Dirk Nelson.
14. Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. Norma Millay (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 158.
16. Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 174.
17. *Ibid.*, 152.
18. O. Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism: An Essay in the Comparative Study of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 211–12.
19. Quoted in William R. Parker and Elaine St. Johns, *Prayer Can Change Your Life* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts Associates, 1957), 40.
20. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Fontana, 1953), 163.
21. Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 177.
22. Roger Steer, *Admiring God: The Best of George Mueller* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 54.
23. Calvin Miller, *The Table of Inwardness* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 83.
24. David Watson, *Fear No Evil: A Personal Struggle with Cancer*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984), 39.
25. Albertus Magnus, *Of Cleaving unto God*, trans. Elisabeth Stopp (London: Mowbray, 1954), 13.
26. John Newton, "How Tedious and Tasteless the Hours," in *The Broadman Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1940), no. 24.
27. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 60, 41.
28. *Ibid.*, 41.
29. Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism*, 218–19.
30. Rosalind Goforth, *How I Know God Answers Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1921), 2.
31. This marvelous phrase is from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part One of the Second Part, Question 90, Article 2, Objection 3.