A Brief Theology of Discipleship

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

(Colossians 2:6-7)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

(I John 2:6)

Spiritual Growth is an assumption of the normal Christian life. Just as it is assumed that a newborn baby will mature, the same expectation should be made of spiritual birth. Paul in his letter to the believers in Galatia described this as “Christ formed in you.” Some express this process as “spiritual formation.” Many churches use the term “discipleship” to denote this transformation. Although the word itself is not found in scripture its intent is at the heart of biblical teaching. The act of following Jesus should result in one disciple making other disciples which is in scripture and we know it as the “Great Commission.” (Matthew 28:18-20) Discipleship can be briefly defined as the expression of Christ’s presence in one’s life. This expression can be vibrant and healthy or it can be dormant and undistinguishable from the life of a nonbeliever.

The question for us as Christ followers is how can we keep from drifting back to a non-God focused lifestyle? How can our lives be continually marked by a hunger for intimacy with God and a lifestyle that pleases him? Spiritual growth is not accidental. We often act as if we will automatically mature spiritually if we will just attend church, BCM gatherings, or any other place where Christians are. Living a God-focused life is a learned practice for Christians. It doesn’t just happen.

Paul instructed Timothy his spiritual protégé to “train yourself to be godly.”

(See I Timothy 4:7-8)

The question now becomes, “How can we train ourselves to be godly?” The answer lies in developing spiritual habits or disciplines (from the same root word that disciple comes from). What are spiritual disciplines? You will not
find a list of them in the Bible, but a spiritual discipline is any activity that results in one becoming more intimate with Christ Jesus and living a life that pleases him. That includes many activities. There have been many excellent and helpful books written on the subject. Let me mention four that I can personally recommend to you if you would like to delve deeper into this subject. I would encourage you to do so because the practice of spiritual disciplines is of utmost importance if your desire is to spiritually mature.

- *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster
- *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard
- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald S. Whitney
- *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele A. Calhoun

While there is no master list of spiritual disciplines, biblical teaching and time has identified a number of “classical” disciplines, i.e., habits that are more foundational that others in assisting spiritual growth. I want to comment on three of these and speak to their importance for all Christ followers.

**Bible Study (Lectio Divina)**

There is a dimension of sacred reading from Scripture known as lectio divina that is reading, not for assignment, but for life. Tony Jones in his insightful book, *The Sacred Way*, describes the Bible reading experience of a friend:

He came to the Bible naked, so to speak, and let himself be clothed by God’s Word. He came neither as a Bible scholar nor a teacher getting ready for a lesson; he didn’t have to stop every two verses and answer questions in a study guide. No, he read the Bible as a sacred object, as a living, dynamic revelation of God to him.

This is lectio divina. It is reading from Scripture for the purpose of growing in intimacy with God, of discovering how the written Word can become the living Word in our lives. Such reading does not focus on the historical aspect.

---

of Scripture, but on the devotional component. From the scripture one is reading, how can one more fully practice God’s presence?

The practice of lectio divina can be traced back to St. Benedict around 500 years after the birth of Christ and has been a part of monastery life ever since. However, it must be noted that this practice is not peculiar to the Catholic Church. Lectio divina is a helpful method of Bible reading for anyone desiring deeper intimacy with God. It consists of four steps or phases:

1. **Reading of the passage**-This is a time for reading scripture without Bible notes or helps like you would read a novel. An easily read translation will be a big help. Reading aloud is preferable because it requires more focus and concentration. Paying attention to surroundings like comfort and light is important. A brief prayer before reading asking the Holy Spirit to interpret for you is appropriate. Finally choose a time to read when you are more fully awake and alert.

2. **Meditating on the passage**-This is a time to pay attention to the emotions you experience in reading the passage. How does the particular scripture you are reading make you feel? Spend some time thinking about your emotions resulting from the passage. One way to practice this step is to imagine that you are a part of the scripture. In your mind place yourself in the environment. What are you experiencing through your five senses? Do not rush this time. It can be very insightful in making the scripture come alive to you.

3 **Prayer**- Even though you may have asked God already to bless the reading and interpret it for you, this is a definite time of asking God for illumination. What does the passage mean? What do the emotions experienced say to you?

4. **Contemplation**-This phase is the most difficult because it incorporates the other three. It is a time of envisioning the Lord Jesus explaining how you are to live out the scripture. Journaling can be an advantageous aspect of this step. Write down what the Holy Spirit is saying to you about the passage.
This method of Bible study is a means of intensely focusing on the written word of God. It is devotion prompting a continuing discipline that God will honor. As a result is he will reveal himself to you in a more intimate way.

Many Christians have a habit of daily Bible reading, but the experience seemingly does little to foster their spiritual growth. There can be any number of reasons for this futility. Lectio Divina is not an end in itself, but a means to more intentionally encounter the living Word in the written Word. It is the intent and the focus of the reading that will bless and change the one who perseveres in the discipline. Let me remind you of a two important factors.

First, don’t become disheartened with early attempts. The intensity of the focus may require practice for it to begin bearing fruit. DON’T GIVE UP! Secondly, pay attention to practical issues like using a translation that reads easily with good lighting when you are at your mental best. Allow enough time for the process to work. Seriously consider the journaling component of the contemplation step. Begin by reading passages that are familiar and can be easily visualized. Like any discipline committing a specific time on a regular basis for this event will better enhance the chance that you will actually do it.

**Prayer**

Emilie Griffin has written, “In order to find a person who prays, you have to look for these clues: charitableness, good temper, patience, a fair ability to handle stress, resonance, openness to others. What happens for people who pray are that their inward life gradually takes over from their outward life. That is not to say that they are any less active. They may be competent lawyers, doctors, businessmen. But their hearts lie in the inner life and they are moved by that.”

Praying happens for many different reasons. When crisis occurs there is the belief, both faint and strong that by turning to God circumstances can be different. Dependent praying is God’s desire for us. He never wants us to live independently from him. The discipline of prayer is much more than beseeching God in crisis. It is the consistent practice of living in God’s presence, conversing with him about any and every element of life. The praying person that Emilie Griffin describes above is one who has learned that continually practicing God’s presence largely determines his character.
and how he will live his life. We more easily learn what He is like and how to be like him when we are disciplined to send time with him.

**Solitude and Silence**

While some writers may list these as two different disciplines they are more times than not examined and practiced together and I will do so here. Most of us live in a culture that is permeated with noise. Someone has said we suffer from noise pollution as much as we suffer from air pollution. With the advent of the cell phone and continuing sophisticated technology we are never anywhere without human contact. In addition to the constant flow of conversation the volume of most sound has increased substantially. Maybe this is due to the amount of sound that something is trying to be heard over or maybe it is due to a gradual loss of hearing or both. The problem has not caused a spiritual dilemma; it has amplified it. The constant sound we are bombarded with makes focusing on God and hearing his whispers in our souls much more of a daunting task. The psalmist expressed this need for all of us when he wrote: “Be still, and know that I am God…” (Psalm 46:10)

There is something about silence that enables us to hear with our soul. We need to again deeply sense that God is present and wants to impress us with thought and with awareness of his creation. It is in such silence that there is opportunity for the act of prayer to be completed. More often than not our praying is a time of telling God what we want to tell him, but not allowing time for him to reply. We are off to other responsibilities or engagements. Silence invites God’s response. In some ways silence is the most difficult of disciplines to develop. Many people do not like un-generated sound. It is unnatural. Such silence is void of music and all human sound. It creates the environment for one to better pay attention to God and to himself.

One can easily see that to experience such silence one has to pay attention to the circumstances surrounding himself. Special attention and planning may very well be needed to arrange such an environment. That is why silence is so often coupled with solitude. Not only is solitude not natural not for us it is often dreaded. We may be comfortable with God’s people, but very uncomfortable being with God alone. However, we need to be reminded that solitary places allow the mind and heart to refocus. If Jesus found it necessary to be alone (Mark 1:35) then how can we not also do the same? It is interesting to note that at the very beginning of his earthly ministry Jesus
went into the desert for forty days of solitude where he would be silent. No doubt it was during that time he received confirmation and direction from his Father concerning his coming ministry.

It is in solitude and silence that one may more fully discover how best to use his words. The writer of Ecclesiastes wrote there is a “time to be silent and a time to speak...” (Ecclesiastes 3:7) Perhaps it is in the silence that one learns when and what to speak. Because of the amount of communication that we are bombarded with there is need for the words of the Christian to be marked by timeliness and wisdom, not frequency.

As earlier suggested this habit may very well be the most difficult of spiritual disciplines to develop and practice with any regularity. Most of our lifestyles have become too fast-paced with too many responsibilities in too little allotted time. There is little margin in our lives. For silence and solitude to happen there will need to be planning to carve out such opportunities. Solitude and silence can occur in the midst of our daily lives, but making such a time will require resourcefulness and creativity. Early morning or late evening schedules may need to be altered. Middle of the day meals may be a chance to spend some time alone in silence.

Discovering a place in our lives where we are less apt to be interrupted is a part of the challenge of the development of the discipline. Even time spent driving a car by oneself can be an opportunity if the intent to spend time alone in silence is there. At intervals in our schedules there is the need for withdrawal from our normal routines to a place away where we can have a more extended time to practice this discipline. Such retreats can last for half a day, a day, a weekend or a week. The longer the time the more planning is required.

Initial thinking may be there are too many reasons why I can’t do this. This discipline, while taught little, is a major pathway to spiritual maturity. Unless we are willing to make lifestyle changes to get alone in silence with the Father our spiritual development will be greatly hampered. This time for study and listening to the Father speak to us is foundational for growth. Being in church activities everyday will not replace what this time alone with God can do.
Scripture Memory

Like all disciplines, Scripture memory must be practiced on a consistent basis to be meaningful. One reason we have so often failed at memorizing Scripture is we have set our goal far too low. We commit to memorizing one verse a week and reason we can do that in one sitting. Consequently, it never becomes a daily discipline. In lieu of committing to memorize one verse a week, choose to memorize passages (several verses together) which will require more consistent practice. For example instead of memorizing Psalm 23:1, memorize all of Psalm 23; instead of memorizing John 3:16 memorize John 3:16-18. It is really easier to memorize passages than isolated verses because passages carry more complete thought patterns and make more sense. You will find an excitement about the possibility of memorizing entire chapters in the Bible rather than verses.

Three additional thoughts are: first, memorize Scripture from the same translation that you primarily use. Switching back and forth between translations is confusing. Second, write out the Scripture you are trying to memorize on cards and carry them with you. You will find opportunities throughout the day to read and meditate on the Scripture. Writing the Scripture yourself is better than pre-printed cards because in the writing you are learning. Third, find ways to use the Scripture you are learning. The more you use it the more you will remember it. Meditating on it while you are drifting off to sleep at night is another idea to enhance the memory process.

Final Thought

To become the spiritually mature people God intends us to be will require a disciplined life that will result in a lifestyle that is marked by being able to recognize and consistently respond favorably to God’s presence in our lives. Brother Lawrence in his insightful book, The Practice of the Presence of God wrote of being so in tune to God’s presence that whatever he did at anytime of the day it would be to please and honor him.

The development of any spiritual discipline is a continuing work of grace in our lives. There is a partnership (disciplined grace) at work in our lives. It is
grace that has been given so discipline can result. When we are faithful to exercise a spiritual discipline we can have confidence in the promise God will meet us in the discipline.

Spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves even though they are wonderful habits or practices for the Christian. Their purpose is to provide a means by which believers can grow into mature disciples of the Lord Jesus. (Ephesians 4:15)