

Discipleship 101: The Spiritual Disciplines
By Jason Huff
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Joshua 1:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24; Matthew 25:1-13

Our final Scripture reading today is Matthew 25:1-13. May God bless the reading of His infallible, trustworthy, and holy Word. “Jesus taught, “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ ‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ “But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.””

How many of you had to play the piano as a kid? I didn’t – I played bagpipes for a year until I realized I had a taste for rock and roll. And, quite frankly, I didn’t want to practice. Years later, I got into guitar, and practice was still an issue, though because I really wanted to play, I learned enough to get by. I still practice guitar and learn new things – you can ask Catha who’s been subjected to an acoustic version of the old Michael Jackson hit “Billie Jean” all week.

Practice can be boring, even painful, but our skills gradually ramp up. We were proud of Cameron when he shaved a couple of minutes off his cross-country time. And that simply came from running every day after school, consistently practicing. It makes us wonder what things we might become quite good at if we just dedicated the time to practice.

And that brings us to our third discussion in our Discipleship 101 series – the Spiritual Disciplines. It’s important that we establish them early, even before a lot of theology, because they undergird everything that is to come. The spiritual disciplines are practices that draw us closer to God. Without the most basic spiritual discipline, prayer, it’s impossible to be a Christian. Some disciplines are necessary for growth as a disciple. Following Jesus means there’s some work. But it’s good work, and the spiritual disciplines pay off in the Christian life.

In our first week, we laid out the structure of God’s story – how everything that has happened in human history is a part of the overarching narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. We also were reminded that God’s grace, shown to us in Jesus Christ, shown to us in giving us faith that we might believe in Jesus and follow Him and be given eternal life, that grace is the foundation on which Christianity rests. Where once we were estranged from God, by His grace alone, all who turn from sin and turn to Christ are redeemed and brought into the family of God. And we believe that it is not just a story, but the true story, the truth of how all human history has played out and continued to play out, with Jesus at the center.

Now we reach the spiritual disciplines, the practices that help us grow in our walk as Christians and connect us more and more to the heart and mind of God. We're talking here specifically today, about quiet time with God, prayer, reading Scripture, and worship. There are more spiritual disciplines we practice as a Christian, and we'll talk about them in coming weeks, but these are the essential spiritual disciplines a Christian needs to connect with God.

I talk a lot about the fact that we are adopted as sons and daughters into God's family. And I think the best way to think about the spiritual disciplines is in light of that fact. There are some questions we need to ask for us to understand the need for the spiritual disciplines and the desire to do them well. And those questions are best answered in the context of family.

We might ask ourselves, "If God is real and Jesus did come down to save us from our sins, if God *wants* a relationship with us, why is there so much asked of us – so much work to be done on our part?" We also have to ask, "With all that I have to do in life, isn't adding on more things I have to do to please God just going to make me feel guilty and ashamed when I fail?" A lot of people fall away not because they hate God but because they've been guilted about the spiritual disciplines and feel they are "bad" Christians because of their failings with them.

So let's take these two questions and dissect them. Why do we have to work so hard to get to know God and speak to Him? Why is it so hard for us to hear His voice and know His presence? It is not because God is far away from us or wants to make it so difficult on us. Remember back to week 1 and the fall of humanity into sin. When our ancestors sinned, we became spiritually dead. We as human beings became supremely self-interested, not concerned about the things God created us to love – namely Himself and one another. We lost the ability to commune with God face to face; as the Father would say, "No one may see my face and live." This wasn't because of God's anger with us but the nature of His very being; being spiritually dead and impure, His purity and holiness would destroy us.

Where once it was obvious that God was near, now we get whispers and shadows, glimpses from creation, the Spirit's small voice speaking to us. Because we who believe are made alive in Christ, we have the possibility of communing with God again, knowing and sensing His love and presence, having been brought into His family. But the old sin nature still haunts and plagues us. Until we are taken into our eternal home, we still have to deal with the ramifications of sin in our lives and in the world. And so we practice the spiritual disciplines, to draw close to God in spite of the world and the sin nature making it difficult for us to see God and see Him at work.

We don't do the spiritual disciplines out of obligation so much as we do them as part of the responsibilities of being a family member. All of us have chores we do as part of a family, whether it's making meals or loading the dishwasher or taking out the trash. And yes, sometimes they are chores in the worst sense – they're boring, they keep us from doing something we'd rather do. But when we see ourselves as part of a family, it takes the sting out of it. The other day, our washing machine broke down, and I wrang all the extra water out of Catha's clothes so we could dry them. Yes, it was a chore, but it was something I could do out of love for her. She often cooks after a long day not because she loves to cook, but because she loves us.

When we practice the spiritual disciplines, we do it to get to know God better – the God who loved us first, who sent Jesus for us, who even now sends us the Holy Spirit to live in us so we do not face this world alone. We do it out of love for Him, to live into the life He has for us. It's our responsibility, but it's also our privilege and joy. God has honored us by giving us means to know Him and ways to come into His presence.

The spiritual disciplines are work, but they don't save anyone. We don't earn a place in the Kingdom by doing them. No one gets into heaven by reading the Bible cover to cover. They please God and they bring us closer to Him – that is the reward. They are difficult to practice, but not impossible because God has empowered believers through the Holy Spirit to do them.

That answers the first question, but what about the second question? What about the guilt we feel when we don't put prayer and Bible study and worship and quiet time to the top of our list? If God is gracious, why do I feel bad when I'm not good at doing all these? Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls." What rest do I get if I am plagued with shame and doubt about them?

First, we have to remember that the devil is our accuser, not Jesus. As Paul reminds us, "It is God who justifies - who is in a position to condemn? Christ Jesus – who died and was raised to life for us – is at the right hand of God and intercedes, making our plea for us." So if you've never established the habits of quiet time and prayer, Scripture reading and worship, or if you've gotten lax at them, don't give up. Dust yourself off, tell the devil and his guilt to take a hike, and start again. The spiritual disciplines aren't there for us to make us feel bad about our failures in doing them; they are there for us, to grow us, to help us. Use them for your good!

We've talked *around* the spiritual disciplines a bit, so let's dive into the four that are the foundation for all others – quiet time, prayer, Scripture reading, and worship. "Quiet time" is the one you won't see explicitly mentioned in Scripture as such. Instead, we see it practiced, particularly Jesus. He would regularly go away to quiet places to pray. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount commands us to pray in secret, in your closet so that it's not done for the benefit of others but just you and God. That assumes that you will be spending quiet time alone with Him.

Some Christians have made a quiet time into a nightmare of rules and regulations – you must do it in the morning, you must read this much, you must pray this long. None of that is Scriptural. Some Psalms have David approaching God with songs and prayers in the morning; others say he approaches the Lord in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. There aren't hard and fast rules but patterns of regular engagement with God.

It's getting into the habit of meeting with God often. It's setting aside time so a habit can form. Because the other spiritual disciplines benefit us the most when they're given regular attention. I can pray and read and worship whenever, sure. But patterns and habits make it so much easier. And while we might not think so, we are creatures of habit. We shower at roughly the same time, whether morning or night. We brush our teeth. We have our coffee or tea or whatever drink wakes you up in the morning. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner...rarely are you going to have dinner at 5pm one night, 9pm the next, and 7pm the next unless your schedule absolutely demands it. Even those of us who like change don't like too much change too fast.

My best suggestion is to incorporate your quiet time with your pre-existing habits. Do you wake up with a cup of coffee and pick up your phone to check Facebook? Put a pad of prayer notes next to your phone so that you start your day talking to God. Get home at 6 and click on the TV? Put your Bible by the remote so you start there. Before you read that book on the nightstand, check in with God and talk about your day with Him.

A quiet time does not have to incorporate every spiritual discipline. You have a long commute, prayer might be hard, so listen to Scripture or praise songs on the way. Can't focus to read early in the morning? Don't make yourself read Scripture then. If you fall asleep the moment your head hits the pillow? Don't plan to do all your devotions when you're tempted to lie down. It's OK. Despite everything we've thought and learned, God is not the eternal enforcer ready to catch you on every minor code violation. God tells us to call Him Father and wants us to come to Him like a Father. He's more interested in you approaching Him than setting a strict time chart. He makes Himself available for you throughout your days.

That leads us into the second spiritual discipline for the morning, which is prayer. Prayer at its simplest level is communing with God – coming near to Him, talking to Him about what is going on in our lives, asking for what we need, examining ourselves in His presence for what needs to change in our lives for us to become better disciples, and the easily forgotten one, listening for His word to us. It's an ongoing conversation with God where we acknowledge Him, thank Him, and lay down everything in our lives before Him, looking to Him for wisdom and guidance so that we can best please Him.

It may seem funny, especially if you haven't done it or done it seldom, to bring everything to God in prayer. It is not as if God doesn't know our needs before we ask – Jesus told us He knows. While we are free to share the details of our days with Him, prayer doesn't need to be us getting God up to speed on our lives. Prayer is not for God's benefit. It's for our benefit. Prayer helps us see that God is listening to us and responding to us.

Regular prayer helps us become truly convinced of this fact. Prayer sets us in proper relationship not only with God but with the world around us, because it requires our humility to acknowledge God and that we are not ultimately in control of our destiny, and that the world's pleasures are not what we are here for. Prayer sets straight what the world makes crooked, which is our intimate communion with God. And ultimately, it is through prayer that we come to Jesus in faith, which is how we start our discipleship journey.

How does time in Scripture tie into this; why is it a necessary spiritual discipline? We live in a spiritually darkened world, and we are easily deluded into thinking that God should be made in our image, rather than conforming our image to Him. The Bible tells us who God really is, and it tells us the history of His dealings with His people over time. When we pray, we want to pray to the real Jesus – not the Jesus of our imaginations, not the Father as we imagine Him to be, but to the real and living God as He presents Himself. Read Scripture, and you will begin to really know the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit you talk to in prayer. We are comforted, challenged, and convicted about the reality of God.

Scripture guides and complements our prayers, too. Many of the things we bring up to God regarding His will for us, God has already told us in Scripture. Many of the trials and temptations we face are addressed in Scripture. When you need to know that God loves you and is working in your life, Scripture helps convince you of that fact.

You might think of it this way – we have wound up a great ways from home, and God is communicating with us so that we make it back to Him safe and sound. He’s sent Jesus to bridge the gap so that it isn’t an impossible journey anymore. Prayer are our calls back home as we travel; as we tell God what we need on our trip, He provides it; we are heard and cared for, reassured of our forgiveness and given a still small voice of direction. Scripture is God’s letters to us, full of details about the journey, the pitfalls to expect, the pathways to avoid, and the road that leads to life in Him. We need both. And the more we practice both, the more we fall in love with the home we’re traveling to and our beloved Savior who is there preparing a place for us.

Finally, we worship. We have a habit of thinking of worship as going to a church service on Sunday mornings. But worship as a spiritual discipline is more than that. Worship is the adoration of God. It can take many forms, just like what we see in our service. Songs, prayers, Scripture, study and learning, quoting the ancient creeds and beliefs handed down through the years. But the core of worship is our love, devotion, and admiration for Him.

Just like prayer, worship is directed towards God but it benefits us. Worship establishes our true north. It sets our hearts on God and helps us stay mindful of Him. Our sinful hearts like to worship themselves, to praise what we like, who we are. But worship redirects us. It calls us out of ourselves. When we worship, we are less concerned about what we will get out of it, how we will benefit from the spiritual disciplines, and more about enjoying God for who He is.

That’s why it’s important that we also choose to worship with songs, praises, and prayers that highlight God’s attributes and actions. If we sing about all we will do for God, then it can become a form of self-worship, a way of congratulating ourselves and commending ourselves to God because aren’t we good people for worshiping? But when our songs center on God and what He has accomplished, on us as we relate to Him in His salvation of us, we start to have the proper focus.

We could spend a Sunday on each of these spiritual disciplines and just cover the basics. Today has been essentially an overview. And yet it’s a starting place. It’s Discipleship 101. These are things disciples do as members of God’s family trusting in Him. Don’t worry if you haven’t been doing them or doing them well. It’s never to late to start. Set aside time for God during your week, and you will see God’s path is laid out far more clearly before you than you ever thought before.