

Spiritual Disciplines

"The question then is: How, precisely, I am to go about doing my part in the process of my own transformation? By practice of spiritual disciplines, or disciplines for the spiritual life....What is discipline? **A discipline is an activity within our power--something we can do--which brings us to a point where we can do what we at present cannot do by direct effort....**The aim of disciplines in the spiritual life--and, specifically, in the following of Christ--is the transformation of the total state of the soul. It is the renewal of the whole person from the inside, involving differences in thought, feeling and character that may never be manifest in outward behavior at all....

"An intelligent, balanced, persistent course of the standard disciplines, well known from the sweep of Christian history and sources, can serve the individual well and are in fact essential to the development of her cooperative relationship with Christ. While they are by no means all that is involved, not everything in this process, they are indispensable. They do not take the place, and they cannot be effective without, the word of the gospel and the movements of the Spirit of God in our lives....people who are not totally shattered, and who have experienced the "birth from above," can usually, with simple instruction and encouragement, begin to make real progress toward wholeness by practices such as solitude and silence, fasting, scripture memorization, regular times of corporate and individual praise and worship, and so on....

"**Solitude and silence** are primary means for correcting the distortions of our embodied social existence....Indeed, solitude and silence are powerful means to grace. Bible study, prayer and church attendance, among the most commonly prescribed activities in Christian circles, generally have little effect for soul transformation, as is obvious to any observer. If all the people doing them were transformed to health and righteousness by it, the world would be vastly changed. Their failure to bring about the change is precisely because the body and soul are so exhausted, fragmented and conflicted that the prescribed activities cannot be appropriately engaged, and by and large degenerate into legalistic and ineffectual rituals. Lengthy solitude and silence, including rest, can make them very powerful....But we must choose these disciplines. God will, generally speaking, not compete for our attention. If we will not withdraw from the things that obsess and exhaust us into solitude and silence, he will usually leave us to our own devices. He calls us to "be still and know...."

"**Fasting**, another one of the central disciplines, retrains us away from dependence upon the satisfaction of desire and makes the kingdom of God a vital factor in our concrete existence....Fasting, which primarily concerns voluntary abstention from food, all or some, and can also be extended to drink, has the function of freeing us from having to have what we want. We learn to remain calm, serene and strong when we are deprived--even severely deprived. If our desires are unsatisfied, we learn, so what?...Positively, we learn that God meets our needs in his own ways. There are "words of God" other than "bread" or physical food, and these are capable of directly sustaining our bodies along with our whole being. (Deut. 8:3-5, Matt. 4:4, John 4:32-34) Fasting liberates us, on the basis of experience, into the abundance of God. The effects of this for the reordering of our soul are vast. Christian practitioners through the ages have understood that to fast well brought one out from under domination of desire and feeling generally, not just in the area of food....

"**Scripture memorization** is the final specific discipline we will mention here. It is, in fact, a subdivision of the discipline of study. Study as a spiritual discipline is, in general, the focusing of the mind upon God's works and words. In study our mind takes on the order in the object studied, and that order invariably forms the mind itself and thereby the soul and the life arising out of it. Thus the law of God kept before the mind brings the order of God into our mind and soul. The soul is "restored" as the law becomes the routine pattern of inward life and outward action. We are integrated into the movements of the eternal kingdom.

"The primary freedom we have is always the choice of where we will place our minds. That freedom is enhanced by the practice of solitude, silence and fasting. We can then effectively fill our minds with the word of God, preserved in the scriptures. To that end memorization is vital." --Dallas Willard