

THE POWER TO LIVE (A Study in the Spiritual Disciplines)

Introduction

Tonight, we begin a new study entitled *The Power to Live*. I'd like to begin that study with an observation. Every person on the face of the earth is struggling with two main issues in their lives. The first of those issues is identity. People want to know "who am I?" The second issue is empowerment. People want to know "how can I have the power to live?" This study will address the second of those issues. How can I have the power to live?

The power to live refers to the ability to achieve the highest levels of well-being and joy that are possible in life on earth. When I say well-being and joy, I mean a pervasive and habitual condition of love, peace, and joy. Every person on earth, deep down, wants that more than anything else in life.

A person came to me years ago whose father had sexually abused her when she was growing up. She had become a depressed, angry, and anxious adult as a result of it. She asked me what she could do to get some joy and peace in her life. That is an empowerment issue.

I once talked with a wife whose professional successful husband wasn't sensitive and attentive to her needs. She was feeling isolated and lonely and wanted to know what she could do about it. That is an empowerment issue.

A Christian I knew was defrauded of thousands of dollars by a business partner of hers who then blamed her for the missing money. She deeply resented and even hated this former partner and friend of hers but didn't want to. She wanted to love her, she said, but just couldn't. That is an empowerment issue.

A young man who had been looking at pornography for years was now hooked on it. He had gotten into some deeply depraved expressions of it and wanted to stop but just couldn't. That is an empowerment issue.

A highly successful news writer had everything a person could want, wife, children, money, fame, and more but felt empty and even suicidal inside. He wanted to be vibrant and alive again but didn't know how.

Those stories illustrate what the power to live is. It's the ability to achieve the highest levels of well-being and joy that are possible in life on earth. One of my favorite lines was spoken by Mel Gibson in the movie *Braveheart*. He said, "***Everyone dies but not everyone lives.***" How right he was. That is what people want, to truly live.

Having the power to live is probably the single most important issue in people's lives, Christians and non-Christians alike. It's the one issue more than any other that they want addressed.

Addressing the Power to Live

The Poland Library has a bookshelf in one of the main walking areas that displays prominent books. On several occasions, one of the books displayed was written by Deepak Chopra. Chopra is an internationally known new age guru who appears frequently on television programs like *Larry King Live*.

Deepak Chopra has something in common with the following individuals: Oprah Winfrey, Doctor Phil, Sylvia Brown, Wayne Dyer, Richard Robbins, and many more. Let me ask you a question. What is that something that all of those individuals have in common?

The answer is that each one is telling us how to have the power to live. That is what their careers are all about in fact. They are trying to tell us how to achieve the well-being and joy that we and everyone else are seeking. The new age movement in all of its various forms and with all of its various leaders is doing the same thing. It's telling people how to have the power to live.

There are probably more individuals and groups telling people how to live today than at any other time in history – and they're listening.

Take Oprah Winfrey for instance. I've mentioned before what Oprah's website claims and probably correctly so. She is the most influential voice in the world. Tens of millions of people hang on her every word including many Christians. I have a Christian niece, for instance, who devotedly watches her shows, reads her magazine, and takes her advice.

Or take Sylvia Brown. Brown is a nationally known psychic. She supposedly communicates with the dead and teaches a bizarre theology that mixes elements of Christianity, new age, Eastern mysticism and more. People are listening though. Her books make the best seller list and she speaks to large audience of people on a regular basis. She came to the Cleveland arena several years ago, for instance, and the place was sold out.

Winfrey and Brown, like the other individuals I mentioned, are telling people how to have the power to live. They're telling them how to have lives of well-being and joy and they want that so desperately that they're listening to what they say.

Several people from our church have asked me what to do about family members of theirs who have bought into the teachings of these individuals or groups. One, for instance, has a child who is now devoted to the popular *A Course in Miracles*. *A Course in Miracles* is belief system that essentially teaches that the material world isn't real. It's just a dream and that death is waking up from the dream and being one with God. It's a clearly false system and yet her child has bought in to it hook, line, and sinker.

So what do we do when people that we love or care about or even any one that we meet are looking to these individuals and groups for the power to live? How should we respond to them and what should we say about Jesus and His gospel?

In my view, the best approach is to just be realistic with people. If they're looking for the power to live, where is the best place to find it? I would tell them this: ***"You and I have something in common. We are seeking the power to live. These other individuals and groups are telling you how to have the power to live. Jesus is also telling you how to have the power to live. If you can go to those other individuals and groups and do better or even as well you going to Jesus, then God bless you. Go to them. But the truth is that you can't."*** The proof is in the pudding as we say it and I have no hesitation at all in stacking Jesus up against Oprah or *A Course in Miracles* or any other individual or group.

That is why you are here tonight and not following some guru or attending some new age group. People who go to those people and places to find the power to live will not find it. Those who go to Jesus and do what He says will. If you learn the material that you hear the next months and apply it, you will find the power to live. That isn't my promise. It's the Bible's. You will find life and find it abundantly.

Our Current Condition

But if that's true, why do we not see more evidence of it in the church and among the Christians who make it up. Listen to a statement that Dallas Willard makes in his book The Great Omission: ***"Most statistical measures and anecdotal portraits of evangelical Christians, not to mention Christians in general, show a remarkable similarity in the life-texture of Christians and non-Christians."*** That is a dramatic and even disturbing statement. Simply put, surveys, studies, and the stories of Christians themselves clearly reveal that Christians are really not much different than non-Christians in terms of character, psychology, and behavior. Or to couch it in the terms of our study, Christians in general don't really have the power to live any more than non-Christians do.

A leading American pastor named James Boyce makes this observation in that regard: *"Why is today's church so weak? Why are we able to claim many conversions and enroll church members but have less and less impact on the culture? Why are Christians indistinguishable from non-Christians?"* Notice that last line. According to Boyce at least, Christians are indistinguishable from non-Christians.

A Gallup Poll conducted several years ago surveyed people who go and don't go to church on a wide range of issues like calling in sick when you're not, cheating on tests, gossiping, and so on. Gallup himself then concluded this from that survey: *"There is little difference in ethical views and behavior of the churched and unchurched."*

That is true in all contexts including the family. Different studies show us, for instance, that Christians divorce at pretty much the same rate as non-Christians.

But it isn't just behavior. It's the psychological reality of Christians as well, which, by the way, is what leads to the behavior. The psychological reality of Christians isn't really all that different from that of non-Christians. Christian counseling itself confirms that to us.

Christian counseling burst on to the scene in the late 60's and early 70's. In my opinion, many aspects of it are not beneficial. But it has made one significant contribution whether it intended to or not. It has caused the church to focus on the psychological health of its members. It has caused us to examine ourselves and to see what is in us.

Well, what's in us, as it turns out, isn't really all that different than what is in non-Christians. Christians don't really seem much healthier psychologically than non-Christians do. They have the same kind of mental, emotional, and relational problems that non-Christians do. Their bodily and psychological responses to everyday things are quite similar to those of non-Christians.

Here is part of the anecdotal evidence that Willard mentions in that regard. I know a long established Christian, the head elder of his church, who has what he calls "a daughter-in-law from hell." I'm not going to get into it except to say that she's just a mean person who dominates his son and grandchildren and rejects his wife and him.

Now, let's think about this situation in terms of psychological reality.

What would a normal non-Christian father's response be who was in the same situation as the elder? He would probably despise and maybe even hate his daughter-in-law. He most certainly would be angry and bitter toward her.

In contrast, what would a normal American Christian father's response be who is in the same situation as the elder? Could we not safely assume that it would be this elder's response, since he's a long established Christian and leader?

But what is this elder's response? He expressed it quite bluntly when he told me one time, "*I sometimes feel like taking a shotgun and blowing her head off.*" He despises his daughter-in-law and is gripped with bitterness and animosity toward her.

May we judge this elder as representative of the current condition of Christians in general? Is he an exception or is he the rule. The evidence indicates that he's the rule. He exemplifies the current state of affairs in our world and churches. Most professing Christians have not found the power to live.

The Reason for Our Current Condition

But why haven't they? That is the critical issue that we absolutely must face. We must ask and answer this question. Why do the vast majority of professing Christians not have the power to live?

One possible answer is that the Bible does not promise Christians such power. If it is not part and parcel of following Jesus, then the issue is clearly resolved. So we must examine Scripture to determine whether or not it promises the power to live to those who decide to follow Jesus. If we do that, we find that it does – in vivid and various ways. Let examine several passages in that regard as a sampling of what I mean.

#1 – John 4:13-14; 7:37-39: Being thirsty is metaphorical language that stands for being driven and ruled by unsatisfied desires. But through the Holy Spirit (7:39), those desires will be so satisfied that from us will flow an abundance of joy that those around us will clearly see and want.

#2 – Galatians 5:22-23: This celebrated passage is about conditions of being that characterize those who walk by the Spirit. The first three of those, in my view, are foundational to all of the rest – love, peace, and joy. Think about it for a few moments and you'll be struck by the significance of this "*fruit of the Spirit.*" They show us the condition of being and of life itself that everyone on earth wants and seeks. Those who desperately pursue all of the spiritualities out there are in the end seeking the conditions that Paul enumerates in verses 22-23. They can achieve those, according to Paul, in and through the Holy Spirit who dwells within those who follow Jesus.

#3 – Ephesians 3:16-21: God strengthens our inner dimensions through the Holy Spirit so that Jesus will dwell in our hearts through faith. The psychological advancement that the counseling professions seek in human power, God brings about through supernatural power. That advancement, in nature and degree, is to what verse 19 calls “the fullness of God.” We can be filled up with to the fullness of God, to all of His positive qualities or traits, *“according to the power that works within us,”* to quote verse 20.

#4 – Philippians 3:10: Paul claims here that He can actually know Jesus and have the same power that resurrected Him at work in and through Him. Imagine the extent and degree of power it would take to resurrect a corpse. Paul indicates here that he had that same power available to him and that we can as well.

#5 – Hebrews 6:4-6: This passage contains one of my favorite Biblical expressions, *“the powers of the age to come.”* The age to come refers to eternal life in heaven. We will have supernatural powers in that life that boggle the mind. This passage teaches that we partake of those powers, to some degree, in our lives now.

#6 – 2 Peter 1:2-4: This passage teaches that whom God calls, He enables. Verse 2 says that grace and peace are multiplied to us. Verse 3 points out that the very power of God Himself gives us everything that we need to have abundance of godliness and life. Verse 4 then makes one of the most startling declarations in the Bible. The person, power, and promises of Jesus make us partakers of the divine nature. What God is like, we become like in other words.

#7 – 1 John 3:6-9: Verse 9 mentions the “seed” of God. “Seed” is a metaphor that stands for God’s nature. Notice what this verse tells us in that regard. The very nature of God abides in us if we’re following Jesus. That’s John’s way of saying what Peter did in 2 Peter 1:4. We can actually become like what God is like.

Now, you and I must come to terms with these passages and many others just like them. We must let them speak for themselves, removing any biases that our own condition and experiences may have imposed on us. If we do that, we find that their message is clear. Those who follow Jesus will have the power to live and supernaturally so.

Let’s take these passages and apply them to the elder who has the “daughter-in-law from hell.” Let’s suppose that the passages that I read were true of him. Would he respond to his daughter-in-law differently than he does now if they were? He undoubtedly would. The Sermon on the Mount reveals that. He would value her as a person and love her, turning the other cheek and going the extra mile with her. He would forgive her for wronging him and have pity on her

It's an indisputable fact to anyone who knows and understands Scripture. It promises the supernatural power to live to those who follow Jesus. It gives us an astonishing vision of the kind of person we can become and the kind of life we can live in and through Him.

That in turn eliminates one possible explanation for our current condition. The reason that the vast majority of Christians don't have the power to live isn't that such power isn't part of following Jesus. The Bible teaches that it clearly is and so we have to look for another explanation.

A second possible explanation is that what the Bible teaches is pretty words. The authors who wrote such things about the power to live didn't really mean it. It's just nice talk. They wanted to encourage people and attract them to Jesus and so wrote things that aren't true to do so.

If that is the case of course, then we might as well shut down our doors and close our Bibles forever. Christianity in general and discipleship to Jesus in particular are just a farce. They're cruel jokes that have deceived billions of people through the centuries of history. They're no better than any of the other spiritualities out there that are offering people help.

But there is substantial evidence that what the Bible teaches isn't just pretty words. That evidence is historical and anecdotal. The Bible is true and countless followers of Jesus have experienced the power to live that it promises through Him. Hopefully some of you are one of those followers.

There's a third possible explanation and in my view, it's the correct one. That explanation is this. Pastors and other Christian leaders have failed to teach people how to have the power to live – how to experience the astonishing kind of personhood and life that the Bible promises.

There is a saying among management experts that helps explain what I just said. It goes like this, "***Your system is perfectly designed to yield the result that you are getting.***" That simply means that what a particular business is accomplishing or failing to accomplish is a result of the way that it is set up.

The application to the church and the issue we're discussing now is a profound one. Churches are producing people who don't have the power to live because they're designed and set up to do just that. What they're preaching and teaching and what they're doing aren't capable of helping people find the power to live.

Certainly, the power to live is something that the Holy Spirit gives us. Without Him working and ministering in us, we cannot have it.

But there is something that you and I have to do. I've said that over and over again through the years. We have to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. We have to do things that place us before Him in such a way that He can give us the power to live.

But what are those things? It's in the answer to that question that we begin to identify why so many Christians don't have the power to live.

In his book The Trouble with the Church: A Call for Renewal, Helmut Thielicke asks a question that many of us have asked. Do the celebrities who advertise foods and beverages actually consume what they're selling? Remember when Michael Jordan advertised for Wheaties. Did he really like and eat them on a regular basis like he told us to?

Thielicke then draws an analogy from that. Referring to the massive moral failures among Christians, he theorizes that Christians must not be eating what they're selling. They must not be doing what the church and they are telling others to do. They'd be different than they are, he contends, if they were. Or as we'd say it in this study, they'd have the power to live if they were.

But that really isn't the problem. The problem isn't the Christians aren't eating what they're selling. It's that they are eating what they're selling. The problem isn't that they aren't doing what the church and they are telling others to do. It's that they are doing that.

So, what is it that Christians tell others to do? Stop and think of your own experience in that regard. After you made the decision to follow Jesus, what did Christians tell you to do? I know what they told me to do. I decided to follow Jesus early on in life, as a boy. As I understood what my church taught me, I needed to do three things: read the Bible, pray, tithe, and attend church. So that's what I did and that's what I told others to do. I was eating what I was selling.

It didn't work though. I didn't find the power to live in doing those four things. And the truth is that no one does. Don't misunderstand me. Reading the Bible, praying, going to church, and giving are essential spiritual exercises that those who want the power to live must practice. But they aren't enough. The jury is no longer out on that issue. It's in and the verdict is clear. Doing those four things alone does not produce the power to live within us.

The elder that I mentioned who hates his daughter-in-law is a classic case in point. He reads the Bible faithfully everyday, prays fervently everyday, has missed church only twice in the past five years, and gives far and above 10% of his income to God. But doing those things has not helped him find the power to live that he needs.

That then is the reason for our current condition in the church. People don't have the power to live because they don't know what their part is in the Holy Spirit's empowering of them.

The Solution for Our Current Condition

Understanding that cause of the problem helps us understand its solution. That solution is to learn what our part is in the Holy Spirit's empowering of us and then to carry it out. We must sell the right things in other words and then eat what we sell.

That's what I'm trying to do here at Bethel Friends. I believe that the power to live is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. But I also believe that we have a part to play in that. So, I've diligently searched out what that part is and am now doing two things with regard to it. First, I'm selling it. I'm preaching and teaching it to others, to anyone who will listen in fact. And second, I'm consuming it myself. I'm doing what I'm telling others to do.

Our previous study, *The First Aim*, was an installment on that. We need to do the things that we learned in that study in order to have the power to live. We need to build a purposeful, objective, and thorough vision of God and practice His presence.

But as foundational as doing that is, it isn't enough. We must do more and our study now, *The Power to Live*, is about that more. If you examine the persons and lives of those friends of Jesus through the centuries who had the power to live, you'll find that they devoted themselves to doing what you'll learn in our present study.

What we learned in *The First Aim* and what we will learn in our current study is the means to the end finding the power to live. Learn it and live it out and that's exactly what we'll find – the power to live.

The Initial Decision

The power to live begins with a decision. That decision is to become a disciple of Jesus. I've explained in detail many times before what it means to become a disciple of Jesus. It means that we firmly make and carry out the decision to be His apprentice. We firmly make and carry out the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says.

I preached a sermon several weeks ago about "making a decision for Jesus." I said that there are three decisions for Jesus that people make. One is to let Him forgive them. A second is to let Him help them. And a third is to let Him govern them. The third is the decision to discipleship.

I also said in the sermon that God's promises in the Bible are only for those who make that third decision. One of those specific promises is the power to live. In my view, no person can find the power to live without first of all deciding to follow Jesus. The secular world would undoubtedly consider that a sectarian statement and reject it outright. But it's true. Only disciples of Jesus can find the power to live.

So, if we want to find the power to live, we must decide to be a disciple of Jesus. We must firmly make and carry out the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says.

Once we make that decision, we're then ready to do the things that we need to do that enable the Holy Spirit to give us the power to live.

One of those things that we need to do is to practice spiritual disciplines. We must not only practice the presence of God, we must practice spiritual disciplines as well and that is what the rest of our study is about.

Spiritual Disciplines

In our first study, *The First Aim*, we learned what we had to do with our minds in order to have the power to live. But as all of us are well aware, we aren't just mind, we are body as well. Thus, the power to live depends as much on learning what to do with our bodies as it does learning what to do with our minds.

We can never know what we need to do with our body until we understand what is just a critical characteristic of it.

That characteristic is that it's "plastic." The word "plastic" means that it's pliable and capable of being formed in various ways. It comes from physiologist, psychologist, and philosopher William James. James was anti-Christian but did have some grasp of human personality and condition. In his book *The Principles of Psychology*, he shared a critical insight about the body with us. He wrote: "***Plasticity means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once . . . Organic matter, especially nervous tissue, seems endowed with a very extraordinary degree of plasticity of this sort; so that the phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed.***"

Dallas Willard explains this by way of analogy. The analogy is a metal rod. Suppose that the structure of the rod is weak enough so that when we push against it, it can bend. But the structure is strong enough so that it doesn't bend all at once. We have to keep pushing against it and it slowly bends as we do. That is plasticity.

According to James, and he's right, the body is plastic. It's pliable and capable of being formed in various ways. The actual dynamics of that are that the tissues of the body and thus the internal activities of the body that they determine can actually be altered.

As James correctly points out, that is what habits are all about. Habit occurs when the tissues and thus the internal activities of the body are formed in a specific way. They occur when our physical substance is shaped to an action. Once our body is actually shaped to the action, the mind is no longer involved. We simply do the thing without even thinking about it.

Driving a stick shift, typing, shaving, running a cash register, using a computer, and much more are examples of this. The substance of our body can actually be altered and shaped to those actions. When it is, our arms, hands, legs, and feet move automatically, in a habitual way, so that we shift, type, shave, and so on without even thinking about it.

It's clear of course that the shaping of the substance of our body can be a good or bad thing. We can have good habits or bad ones. Washing our hands before we eat is a good habit. Using filthy language is a bad one.

We come now to a critical question, the answer to which is one of the keys one of the keys to fulfilling our destinies as creatures of God. That question is this. What is it that forms habits? What is it that shapes the substance of our body to a certain action?

The answer is "the action itself repeated over and over again. It is the things that we do, over and over again, that shape our physical substance. If we do something frequently and long enough, doing it will eventually form our body to what we're doing. At first, our rational processes are involved. We have to actually think about doing it. But once we do it frequently and long enough, our rational processes quit being involved. We now find ourselves doing it without even thinking about it.

Typing is an excellent example of this. Think about typing class those many years ago. When we began typing, our rational processes were primarily involved. Remember how we had to think so hard about positioning our hands on the keyboard and where the different letters on it were. With our mind directing us, we typed each key and combination of keys over and over again until eventually the very substance of our body was shaped to typing. We now type without even thinking about the placement of our hands or where the keys are. Our mind isn't even involved anymore. I typed the words on our sheets of paper for tonight, for instance, and wasn't thinking at all about typing when I did. I was only thinking about the words themselves.

When I learned to type 40 years ago, I disobeyed the teacher and did it wrong. When we type, we touch the shift bar on the right side of the keyboard with our right pinky finger to capitalize letters on the left side. We do just the reverse of that to capitalize letters on the right side, using our left pinky finger. But when I learned to type, I always capitalized all the letters, even those on the right side, with my right pinky finger.

Several years ago, I decided to do it correctly. So I simply repeated the right action over and over again. At first, I had to really think about it to correct this bad habit of mine and do it the right way. But I've done that so consistently enough and so many times that I now do it correctly without even thinking about it. It's just automatic. Repeated action enabled me to get rid of the bad habit and replace it with a good one.

Plasticity is an incredible, even awesome, quality that the body possesses. If it didn't have that quality in fact, we'd really struggle through life. If you stop and think about it, the substance of our body has been shaped to most of the routine things that we do in daily life. Most of the routine things that we do have become habits we've formed. I shave without even thinking about it because my body is shaped to shaving. Women cook without even thinking about it because their body is shaped to cooking. People drive stick shifts without thinking about it because their body is shaped to driving a stick shift. And so on. It's a good thing that our body is plastic.

But it can be a bad thing as well, which bring us to three of the most important chapters in the Bible – Romans 5, 6, and 7. Anyone who wants to find the power to live must master these chapters. So I would like for you to do that. I would like for you to read and study these chapters for the next month or so. Read them all at once a number of times until you get a feel for the flow of them. Then take them section-by-section and verse-by-verse until you know their contents like the back of your hand.

We must do that because these chapters teach us specifically what we must do with our body in order to have the power to live. You'll see as we discuss them how the plasticity of the body that we discussed fits in. Plasticity explains one of our biggest spiritual problems on the one hand and the solution to that problem on the other. You'll see what I mean when we get to chapter 7.

I'll introduce these chapters with a real life scenario and then a question about it.

That scenario is this. I once talked with a young man in his later 20's who had made a decision for Jesus a year earlier. His life had changed remarkably in many ways including overcoming alcoholism.

But there was one way in which it hadn't changed. He was still using filthy language. Something would happen and he'd blurt out a four-letter word just like he had done for years before deciding for Jesus. He didn't want to use filthy language and always felt horribly guilty after he did but just couldn't quit. He knew that he was letting God down and was miserable because of it.

That's the scenario. Now here's the question. Why was this follower of Jesus still using filthy language even though he didn't want to? Paul tells us in Romans 5-7.

Romans 5

Let's look briefly at chapter 5. One of the things that Paul discusses in this chapter is the condition of unsaved people, people apart from Jesus.

He states in verses 8 and 19 that they are sinners. He explains why they are. According to verse 12, sin entered the world when Adam sinned and spread to every human being who has been and will ever be born. That sin has the unsaved in its grip and is twisting them. The motivation, organization, and direction of their physical existence are toward sinning. Sin has a life of its own in them and they are not capable of consistently standing beyond it. The power of sin is what moves and directs them.

I once counseled a young husband whose mother-in-law was treating him badly. He was bitter against her and quarrelling with her all the time and asked me what he should do. So I answered the specific question he asked. Notice he asked what he should do and not how he could do it. I told him that the answer to that question is an easy one because the Bible makes it clear. He shouldn't be angry with her but should forgive her and do good to her as a person of value and worth. ***"But I couldn't do that even if I tried,"*** he said. That implied of course that he didn't want to do that, which was the case. But even if he did want to do that, he said, he couldn't.

He didn't realize it but that was a profound psychological and theological insight. Sin has a life of its own in him and he's in the grip of it. He isn't capable of wanting to do the things I said. And even if he did want to do them, he couldn't. He couldn't stand beyond the reach of the sin that was in him. It wasn't "in him" so to speak to do what I said. Instead, the motivation, organization, and direction of his physical existence were being angry and quarrelling with those who wronged him.

But the condition of saved people, those who are following Jesus, is different than that. Verse 19 tells us that through the obedience of Jesus, meaning His perfect birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, saved people are made righteous.

That doesn't mean that they don't have the normal feelings, desires, and drives that every human being has because they do. Just as it does in the unsaved, sin has a life of its own in the saved. But they're made righteous. Paul explains what that means in 6:1-10.

Romans 6:1-10

Let's start with verses 3-5, which explain the incredible thing that happens when we decide to be a disciple of Jesus. We are baptized with Jesus and brought into experiential union with Him. We are united with Him, in other words, in the likeness of His death and in the likeness of His resurrection. That means that what He experienced in His life on earth, we also experience in our life on earth. What He experienced and we experience is two things.

First, according to verse 2, we experience death to sin. Jesus was dead to the powers of sin. They were not what moved Him. It is the same way with us that we are now dead to the powers of sin. They do not move us. It is still possible for us to sin but as with Jesus, we find practicing sin uninteresting, even disgusting.

Second, we experience newness of life. Jesus was alive to the powers of righteousness. They are what moved Him. It's the same way with us. We are now alive to the powers of righteousness. They are what move us. It is still possible for us not to do what is righteous but as with Jesus, it's practicing righteousness that interests and appeals to us.

I knew a young man who had indulged himself sexually for over 10 years. During that time, he had sexual relationships with a host of women. What our culture calls "casual sex" appealed to him greatly and he indulged himself in it. But then he became a disciple of Jesus and as Paul explains in verses 3-5, the Holy Spirit baptized him with Jesus. He united him with Jesus in the likeness of His death and resurrection.

Two things then happened. First, he died to sin. He still had the same sexual desires that he had before and it was still possible for him to lust and fornicate. But now he didn't want to. Before he decided to be a disciple of Jesus he wanted to but afterwards he didn't. He died to sin. A second thing happened to him. He arose to newness of life. What appealed to him now wasn't sexual promiscuity but sexual purity. It was still possible for him not to be sexually pure but that's what he desired and strove for. He arose to newness of life.

I'd sum up verses 1-5 this way. When we get saved, we still have the same normal feelings, desires, and drives that any human being has. But the motivation, organization, and direction of our physical existence is now toward righteousness and away from sin.

In verse 6, Paul tells us something else that happens when we decide to be a disciple of Jesus. He says that our old self was crucified with Jesus. That means that we now have the ability to rise above the old person that we were. He also says that our body of sin is done away with, so that we no longer serve it. That means that we now have the ability to stand beyond sin's reach.

Verse 7 reveals the result of that. We are freed *from* sin. That is one of the most critical insights that you will ever learn. Notice he didn't say that we are freed *of* sin. We are still capable of turning back to the old person that we were. But we are freed *from* sin. We are able to do otherwise. Unsaved people don't have a choice. They can't stand beyond sin's reach. But saved people do have a choice. They can stand beyond sin's reach.

David Ruda was a Ph.D. in psychology, a professor of logic, and a researcher in psychology at Argentine University. His major field of teaching and study as personality development. Ruda was converted after trying to show a Christian neighbor of his the error of his ways. Listen to what he writes about his experience: *"Today, the most important proof to me of Christianity is the amazing change that has come into my own life . . . My troubles increased when I became a Christian but Christ gave me the power to have victory over them all, even sin."*

Ruda was right. When we decide to follow Jesus, we aren't freed *of* sin but we are freed *from* sin. We have the power to rise above the old self that we were and to stand beyond sin's reach if we choose to.

Romans 6:11

Now, that's all well and good but how do we do that? How do we rise above the old self that we were and stand beyond sin's reach?

The first and primary answer is through the power of the Holy Spirit. He works and ministers in us and gives us the ability to do that.

But as always, we have to cooperate with Him and His ministry and work. We have to do something in other words and Paul tells us what that is in verses 11-14. It's two things. There are two things that we do that enable the Holy Spirit to empower us over our old self and sin. The first thing is in verse 11 and the second is in verses 12-14.

Let's start with the first thing in verse 11. This is one of the truly significant commands in the Bible. Paul commands us to "consider" or as the KJV translates it "reckon" ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. The Greek word translated "consider" or "reckon" means to purposely think about something in a certain way.

We've discussed the mind before. We've learned that it's the place of our widest and most basic freedom and that it is a direct freedom. We can place our mind upon whatever we choose to. We have the power to direct how we think. So, we direct how we think in two ways.

First, Paul says in verse 11, we regard ourselves as dead to sin. That means that we choose not to dwell on thoughts that come from our old self, from the sin that is in us. This is largely a matter of dismissing wrong thoughts.

Second, we regard ourselves as alive to God in Christ Jesus. We choose to dwell on thoughts that come from our new self, from the new life in Christ that is in us. This is largely a matter of embracing right thoughts.

Those two things together reveal one of the most basic activities of our life in Jesus. We identify bad thoughts and reject them from our mind. We also identify good thoughts and place them in our mind. We choose to dismiss bad thoughts and dwell on good ones in other words. It is absolutely essential that we purposely do that. Again, doing so is one of the most basic activities in our life with Jesus. Some of His most familiar friends down through the centuries have understood and practiced that.

A 4th century leader named Abba Evagarius, for instance, taught that there are eight principal thoughts from which all negative thoughts come. They are worth learning and looking out for: gluttony, fornication, love of money, discontent, anger, despondency, vainglory, and pride. Having identified those eight principal thoughts, Evagarius went on to write: ***"Whether these thoughts disturb the soul or not does not depend on us; but whether they linger in us or not and set passions in motion or not – does depend on us."***

In the mid-fourteenth century, an anonymous follower of Jesus wrote a wonderful work entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In it, he advised his readers to weigh each stirring and thought within themselves as soon as they appear. He then wrote that they should ***"Travail busily to destroy the first stirring and thought"*** of the things that they might sin in.

Martin Luther, the Father of the Protestant Reformation, said it far more colorfully. We can't stop the birds from flying overhead but we can keep them from building a nest in our hair. In the same way, he said, we can't stop thoughts from coming into our mind but we can stop them from staying there.

We understand what these men were saying. Bad thoughts often pop into our mind without us wanting them to. If those bad thoughts linger there, they disturb our soul and set passions in motion. We cannot control whether bad thoughts pop into our mind but we can control whether they linger there and disturb our soul and set passions in motion.

What I've just shared is an issue that faces us far more than most of us realize. A lot of the spiritual funks that we get into could be avoided by simply doing what Paul tells us to in verse 11. I've found that to be true in my life at least. I've much more sensitive now than I used to be to the negative thoughts that enter my mind. I used to let them linger but I now evict them as quickly as I can. Doing so has affected the entirety of my person and life.

Last month, for instance, I had several board meetings and encounters with various persons, not in our church, that left me with negative thoughts about people in general in my mind. You know the kind of thoughts I'm talking about. "People are so nasty and mean." "People just don't get it." And so on.

In the past, I would have rehearsed those thoughts, which in turn would have led to other similar thoughts. That would then have affected my morale and mood. I would have been "fed up with people" as we say it for days. If aliens had invaded the earth, I would have rooted for the aliens.

But that didn't happen because I did what Paul commands in verse 11 instead.

First, I considered myself dead to sin. I identified the negative thoughts about people as originating from my old self and then dismissed them. I refused to let them be before my mind.

Second, I considered myself alive to God in Christ Jesus. I identified the thoughts that would flow from the new self that I am, the one that is like Jesus. Those thoughts were that people are immortals. They're ones for whom Jesus died. They're someone's son or daughter. And so on. I identified those as thoughts that would flow from the new self that I am and chose to dwell on them instead of the negative thoughts.

Doing that affected my morale and mood. I quickly recovered from being "fed up with people" and didn't get into the funk that I would in the past have gotten in.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of verse 11 and making and carrying out the commitment to live it out. Doing what I've just described will open you up to the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit and will dramatically enhance the quality of your person and life.

That then is the first thing that we need to do in order to stand beyond the power of sin. We must consider ourselves dead to our old self and alive to our new one. We must dismiss wrong thoughts and embrace right ones.

Romans 7:15-24

The second thing that we must do is found in 6:12-14. On the negative side, we do not present the members or parts of our body as instruments of unrighteousness. On the positive side, we do present the members or parts of our body as instruments of righteousness.

You and I can never find the power to live until we do this. The spiritual life is about what we do with our minds as we've seen. But it's just as much about what we do with our bodies. Abundance of life is dependent upon our directing our bodies in certain specific ways.

Now, we cannot fully grasp why and how we should do that until we first of all grasp the problem that makes doing it necessary in the first place. Paul quite descriptively explains what that problem is in 7:15-24. So we need to study this passage first and then come back to 6:12-14.

Paul describes a person here who is in an awful state of conflict. That conflict is between the spirit on the one hand and the flesh on the other.

Jesus Himself analyze the conflict better than anyone ever has in Matthew 26:41. You know the story. He took Peter, James, and John with Him into the Garden of Gethsemane just before His death. The only thing that He asked them to do, in verse 38, was "***watch with Me.***" That simply meant to stay awake and be with Him. It wasn't much to ask but they weren't able to do it. He came to them, in verse 40, and found them sleeping. He then precisely pinpointed what their problem was. He declared in verse 41, "***The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.***"

That's exactly what we have here in Romans 7:15-24. We have a person, like Peter, James, and John, whose spirit was willing but whose flesh was weak. As Paul so simply describes it in verses 15, 18-20, it's a person who does the evil that he so desperately wants not to do and who doesn't do the good that he so desperately wants to do.

This passage raises an issue that Christians have debated down through the centuries. Is Paul describing the experience of a Christians or non-Christians? Several excellent commentators contend that it's the experience of non-Christians. Others contend that it's the experience of Christians.

Based on Jesus' incisive comment in Matthew 26:41, I think that it's the experience of Christians. Peter, James, and John, who were clearly redeemed followers of Jesus who illustrate in particular what Paul describes in general here. They're experience in Gethsemane, in other words, is an example of the experience that Paul describes.

So, this is the experience of Christians but what are the dynamics behind it. Dallas Willard answers that question thoroughly in his book The Challenge of the Disciplined Life. The dynamics put simple are this.

First, there is a non-material element in Christians that is genuinely turned to God. Non-Christians don't have that element in them but Christians do and it's what Jesus calls "the spirit." The Holy Spirit produces this element in them when they decide to follow Jesus. It's part of what we call "regeneration." Using Paul's terminology, that spirit is the part of them that strongly desires to do what is good and not do what is evil.

I met a policeman at a pickup basketball game one time at a park in Akron. We started talking after the game and he told me that he was a recent convert to Jesus. He explained to me some of the changes in him that deciding to follow Jesus had made. One of those concerned filthy language. Before deciding to follow Jesus, he used it constantly and didn't care whether he did or not. But after deciding to follow Jesus and being regenerated, he desperately desired not to use it. That's a remarkable change if you think about. The Holy Spirit had created a new and non-material element in him that was genuinely turned to God. It was what Jesus called his "spirit." He was now willing, that is, desiring to do good and not to do evil. So, all true Christians have a spirit that is willing.

But many, like Peter, James, and John in Matthew 26 and Paul in Romans 7, also have a flesh that is weak. The word "flesh" as Jesus used it refers to their physical bodies and their natural powers. That the flesh is weak means that the natural powers of their bodies are not aligned with their spirits. Thus, their bodies are not directed toward that which their spirits are directed toward. They may even be directed away from it. Thus, Peter, James, and John wanted to watch with Jesus but their bodies directed them otherwise, to sleep.

Those same dynamics were at work in the life of the policeman I met. His spirit was willing. He desired not to use filthy language. But his flesh, specifically his tongue, was weak. He found himself using filthy language almost like he always had even though he didn't want to.

That's the conflict that Paul describes and all of us have experienced and maybe even still do. There are good things that we want to do or bad things that we want not to do. But we find ourselves not doing the good things or doing the bad ones. We're like Peter, James, John, Paul and the policeman.

So what's the problem here? Why does this conflict exist between our flesh and spirit exist? What is the source of that conflict? Paul tells us in verses 20-24.

That source is what he calls in verse 23, *"the law of sin which is in my members."*

Let me share a quick aside here. What we have here in chapter 7, and many other passages in the Bible, is some of the best psychology that we will ever read.

Please understand that. Paul, the other Biblical writers, and Jesus Himself viewed and taught salvation as a matter of the transformation of the whole person. That very fact itself required them to be psychologists and they were. Understand that. Jesus, Paul, and the other Biblical writers were unexcelled psychologists. They were profound theorists of the human self and human life.

In the end, teachings about salvation are unavoidably psychological. Theology and psychology go hand in hand and that's exactly what we have here in Romans 7 – some of the best theology and psychology in the world. Grasping that helps us appreciate the relevance and value of Paul's teachings (and the other Biblical writers) to us.

Keeping that in mind, let's go back to verse 23 and Paul's great declaration that *"the law of sin"* is in our *"members."* The word "members" there refers specifically to our body parts.

Recall what we've already discussed about our body and its parts. Our body is plastic, capable of being shaped or formed. What shapes or forms it is repeated action. Our body parts repeating an action shapes those parts to that action. At first, our mental processes are involved in doing the action. But once it's repeated enough, the action then becomes a habit in those body parts. At that point, they do the action automatically, without the mind even thinking about it.

When that point is reached, the parts of our body "know" so to speak what to do. Using some of the examples we discussed, our hands and fingers "know" to type, or our hands, fingers, and feet "know" to shift the stick, or our hands and fingers "know" to shave or cook. Or as Paul would say it here, "the law" of typing, shifting, shaving, and cooking are in our body parts.

That makes the phrase *"the law of sin which is in my members"* explicable. It refers to sinful actions that, by sheer repetition, have become automatic habits in our body parts. Our body parts "know" to do them when the occasion arises without us thinking about them or even willing them. Our body parts act on their own, apart from our mental and volitional processes, to do them. Those actions are in the true psychological sense a "law" in our body parts that govern them and us.

I know a long established professing Christian who has been a leader in his church for years. He has several besetting sins, two of which are criticizing and complaining. I've never known anyone who criticizes people and complains about things as much as he does. There is what I call the "complement-complaint ratio." We all have one but his is off the charts. His ratio is literally 20 or 30 complaints to every one complement. The striking thing is that he doesn't seem to know how he is. Everyone else knows it, and even talks about it, but he doesn't seem to know. Paul explains to us what his problem is. He has the laws of criticism and complaint in his tongue.

All of us though are in the same boat, hopefully not to the degree that he is, but we're there in the same boat. We too have the law of particular sins in our body parts. Our body parts "go off on us" so to speak and do sinful things without us even thinking about or willing them.

There is a process behind this that all of us have experienced. We're born into a fallen world and are soon caught up in the destructive patterns of behaviors of those around us, family first and then outward in an ever-broadening circle of relationship. We see those behaviors first and eventually being imitating them. We do what we see and over time, sinful behaviors become programmed into our body parts. Sinful habits become part and parcel of the bodily person that we are.

Now, there's something that we absolutely positively must understand. We'll be defeated in our walk with Jesus if we don't. Deciding to follow Jesus and entering into His kingdom doesn't remove the different laws of particular sins that are in our body. The habits of sin that are ingrained in our body parts before we decide to follow Jesus are still ingrained there after we decide to follow Him. Our body parts still "know" to do the evil things that they've been doing.

Now, the Holy Spirit does often deliver a person from some sinful habit when he or she decides to follow Jesus. I've seen Him deliver people from alcohol addiction, for instance, at the moment of their conversion. The addict quit drinking immediately without even trying because the desire for it was taken away.

But having said that, I'd also say this. Most of the ingrained habits of sin that are in our body before we decide to follow Jesus remain there after we decide to follow Him. C.S. Lewis teaches that in his book The Screwtape Letters. The superior demon, Screwtape, chastises his underling demon, Wormwood, for not preventing the person he's assigned to from becoming a Christian. But there is still hope, he informs Wormwood, and explains why this way: *"There is no need to despair; hundred of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the enemy's camp and are now with us. All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favour."*

That is a critical insight. It explains several things, including why so many people who decide to follow Jesus backslide and fall away. The habits in their body parts that compelled them to sin before they decided to follow Him still compel them to sin after. That in turn frustrates and defeats them so much that they quit trying to do what Jesus says and fall away from following Him.

But the sinful habits in our body parts don't just explain why Christians fall away. It also explains the bad behaviors of those who don't.

I know a long established Christian in Barberton, for instance, who has been banned from several stores in the area. He's raised such a fuss in those stores for one reason or another that they told him to leave and not come back. They don't want his business anymore.

How can a long established Christian possibly act like that? It's because the laws of particular sins, including tongue-lashing people, are still in his body parts. The old ingrained habits of sin that ran his life before Jesus are still running his life many years after.

That then is the psychology and teaching of Paul that we find in Romans 7. Followers of Jesus do what they don't want to do and don't do what they want to do because the law of sin is in their members. Old habits of sin are still ingrained in their body parts.

Romans 6:12-14

Once we decide to follow Jesus then, our challenge is to move beyond the law of sin that's in our body parts. It's to break the old habits of unrighteousness that are programmed into them.

We cannot do that by ourselves and on our own. As you well know by now, we must rely on the power of the risen Jesus to live the life that He calls us to live. It is in that power that we're able to break the hold of sin in and on our persons and lives.

But as always, there is something that we have to do in order for that to happen. And Paul tells us what that is in Romans 6:12-14. We've examined the problem in 7:15-24. We now examine the solution to that problem in 6:12-14.

Let's start with verse 12 and the command, "***do not let sin reign in your mortal body.***" That command implies that we can do otherwise and that is in fact the case. So, all of us as followers of Jesus have two options open to us.

First, we can let sin reign in our body. That is in fact how many professing Christians handle sin. They essentially learn to live with it.

I know a person who suddenly developed a ringing in her ears. After a whole battery of tests, a specialist finally told her that there was nothing that could be done about it, that she'd ***"just have to learn to live with it."*** So, that's what she's doing, living with it.

Many Christians are doing the same thing when it comes to sin. They're living with it.

There's a cute little bookmark that illustrates what that means. It's adorned with flowers, bows, green sprigs, and fourteen tiny pink hearts with a tassel at the top. In the center is a wide-eyed teddy bear that looks as if it was just caught doing something naughty. Underneath it is the popular slogan that we've discussed so much, ***"Christians aren't perfect; just forgiven."***

That shows us what it means to live with sin. We don't focus on controlling *it*. We focus on controlling *its effects* instead. We resign ourselves to the fact that we're going to sin. But we limit the effects of that sin by immediately seeking and getting forgiveness.

That's what many Christians do and the inevitable result is another old slogan that's been mainstreamed and popularized today. They sin in word, thought, and deed every day. The person and life of Christians, as we discussed, end up being pretty much the same as that of non-Christians.

There's a second way that Christians can handle sin. The first is to live with it. The second is to conquer it.

Paul's language in Romans 6 expresses the possibility of doing just that. Verse 6 – ***"sin might be done away with"*** and ***"no longer slaves of sin."*** Verse 7 – ***"freed from sin."*** Verse 11 – ***"dead to sin."*** And verse 14, ***"sin shall not be master over you."***

That victorious language shows us that we as Christians aren't "just forgiven" as the slogan says. We're "empowered" as well. It shows us that we don't have to just live with sin. We can actually conquer it instead. We aren't limited to controlling its effects. We can actually control it as well.

One of America's most well known preachers was tried to explain the difference between Christians and non-Christians this way. The non-Christian gets mad, retaliates, and feels good about it. The Christian retaliates, gets mad, and feels badly about it. Consequently, he asks both God and the person he retaliated against to forgive him.

Notice what the Christian in this picture does. He focuses on controlling the effects of sin. He asks both God and man to forgive him.

But the verses I read focus on controlling the sin itself. They would picture the difference this way. The non-Christian gets mad, retaliates, and feels good about it. The Christian doesn't get mad and retaliate but loves instead. He has conquered the urges, impulses, and inclinations to anger and retaliation that reside in him. It's as simple as that.

So that's how we should handle sin. Don't live with it. Conquer it. Don't focus on controlling its effects. Focus on controlling it.

That doesn't mean that we'll become perfect or sinless because we won't. But let's face it, there's a lot of room between "just forgiven" on the one hand and "perfect" on the other. And as our life in Jesus proceeds, we'll move ever further from "just perfect" and closer to "perfect." We'll eventually get to the point where sin is the exception and righteousness the rule or norm in our person and life. We will not sin in word, thought, or deed every day.

So which will it be for you? Are you going to just live with sin or are you going to conquer it? Our call of course, in verse 12, is to conquer it, which takes two things.

The first thing is grace. When I say grace, I'm talking about God's supernatural action through the Holy Spirit. That is primary. We can conquer sin only as the Holy Spirit infuses kingdom power, the resurrection power of Jesus, in to our person and life. Conquering takes grace.

But it takes effort as well. Grace is something that the Holy Spirit does. Effort is something that we do. Make no mistake about it. Effort is secondary to grace. But it's absolutely essential nonetheless.

The truth is, with exceptions here and there, that grace can't be experienced without effort. Effort puts us into a position to receive grace. It opens our person and life to the Holy Spirit's power and work.

Those then are the two things that conquering sin takes – grace and effort. Grace is the Holy Spirit's part. Effort is our part. So, let's do our part. Let's do what we need to do to conquer it.

But just what is it that we need to do? Paul tells us here. As Dallas Willard says it, we must downsize sin. That would sound strange to most Christians and perhaps it does to you as well. That's because so many Christians and churches today have upsized it. They've made it out to be far more than it really is. So, downsizing it sounds strange. But that's exactly what we have to do. We have to downsize it – in two ways.

The first way is in our thinking. We've already discussed that to some extent when we examined verse 11.

Remember what the word "reckon" or "consider" in verse 11 means. It means to purposely think about something in a certain way. That something, in verse 11, is sin and God.

Now, according to that verse, there are two ways that we can think in that regard. We can think that we are alive to sin and dead to God, which does make sin an irresistible force. Or we can think that we are dead to sin and alive to God, which makes it a defeatable force.

Several years ago, I talked with a Christian who disagrees with me about the matters we've been discussing. He believes that Christians cannot do otherwise than to sin in word, thought, or deed every day. He believes that because, *"After all, we're only human."*

That is probably the majority view among Evangelical Christians. We're only human and because we are, sin is an irresistible force and we're pretty much helpless against it. That explains why so many Christians aren't ashamed of so many of the bad things that they do like gossiping or losing their temper or lusting and so forth. They're only human and because they are, can't really help but do those things. So, why should they be ashamed of them?

But let me ask you a question. From a Biblical point of view at least, are we *"only human?"* No, we are not. As we saw in verse 5, for instance, we're united with Jesus in the likeness of His resurrection when we decide to follow Him. That isn't just nice talk. It's experiential reality. We can actually experience Him and His resurrection power in the very core of our being. So, are we human? Yes, we are. But are we only human. No, we are not. We're much more in the power of Jesus.

If we were only human, like that Christian thinks, then sin is an irresistible force and we cannot stand beyond it. But if we're much more than human, as I think, then sin isn't an irresistible force and we can stand beyond it.

I'd analyze the difference between that other Christian and me this way. He upsizes sin in his thinking. He thinks that it's an irresistible cosmic force that we're pretty much powerless against. But I downsize sin in my thinking. I think that it's a resistible force that we can defeat.

Well, how we think is decisive. If we upsize sin and think it's irresistible, we'll resign our self to sin and just live with it. But if we downsize it and think it's resistible, we'll try to conquer it. How we think about sin determines how we handle it.

So downsize sin in your thinking. That's what Paul does in this passage, Romans 6, and many others and so should we.

There's a second way that we have to downsize sin – in our acting. You can see that in verses 12-13. Paul gives us a simple two-sided command here. On the negative side, don't present our body parts as instruments of unrighteousness. Don't use them to do bad things. On the positive side, present our body parts as instruments of righteousness. Use them to do good things.

This command teaches us something that so very few Christians grasp. Obedience to Jesus, if we have the resurrection life of Jesus in us, isn't as hard as most of us make it. I was in a prayer group of five people at a Greater Youngstown Coalition of Christians meeting. One of the five people was another pastor. He prayed and asked God to help our people because *"doing what the world wants is so easy and doing what You want is so hard."* That little prayer represents the view of most Christians. But it simply isn't true.

The fact is that doing good and not doing evil isn't usually as hard as we make it out to be. It usually doesn't take the wisdom and strength that we think it does. What it really takes instead is intent. We decide that we are going to stand beyond sin, that we are going to do good and not evil, and then do it.

Carrying out our intent and doing good and not evil involves two things on our part. I said that standing beyond sin requires grace on God's part and effort on ours. Our effort must be directed toward two things.

The first is trying. In trying, we directly submit the members of our body as instruments of righteousness. The word "direct" means that we put our body through the motion of an action that God commands in order to obey the command. God gives a command. We're willing and able to obey it and do. That's what trying means. We're willing and able to do what God commands. We're willing and able to do the good He wants us to do and not do the evil He wants us not to do.

Dallas Willard gives a personal testimony that illustrates trying quite well. Willard was having dinner with his family one day and thoughtlessly began placing a second helping of a casserole onto his plate. It was one of those casseroles with the three essential food groups – fat, salt, and cholesterol. Anyway, his son, who had heard him say how much he wanted to lose 40 pounds, spoke up and said, *"Dad, I don't think you want to do that."* *"You're right,"* Willard replied, and put down his spoon. What's helpful is Willard's analysis of this. He writes about it: *"A skirmish with gluttony was simply and quietly defeated – without drama or heroic will power."*

That really is what most of our temptations to sin are. They're skirmishes with evils that don't take heroic will power to overcome. All they take is the intent to follow Jesus. All they take is trying.

We simply decide to do good and not evil. We decide not to speak the word of gossip, not take the lustful look, not promote our self, give the benefit of the doubt, be patient, speak truthfully, read the Bible, pray, and so on.

In Matthew 5:27-28, for instance, Jesus talks about looking at a person for the purpose of sexually desiring him or her. It's what we call "the look." We see a nice looking person and keep looking or look a second time. For most of us, doing so is just a weak habit that can be easily broken. We just exert ourselves a little and refuse to continue looking or to look a second time. We are soon in the habit of not looking.

I'm going to make a statement now and tell me whether or not you agree with it. Most of us who follow Jesus can do 80% or more of what the Bible and He tell us to do by simply trying to. I believe that.

But there are things that Jesus and the Bible tell us to do that we can't do by just trying to do them. All of us have certain inclinations to evil that are so strong that we can't successfully resist them, especially when we're on the spot so to speak, when circumstances arise that give rise to those inclinations.

In Matthew 5, for instance, Jesus pictures kingdom people and how they respond to those around them. Those of you who have been through our Sermon on the Mount studies know this chapter thoroughly. In verse 40, Jesus says that we should care about the welfare of people who sue us. We should care about them so much, in fact, that if they win a judgment against us, have a further need, and we can meet it, we do with hearts full of love and joy. Then in Luke 6:27-29, Jesus tells us to love those who mistreat us and to do good to them when they do. So, I come up to you and spit in your face. Jesus says become the kind of person who will feel compassion for the spitter and just naturally act kindly toward him.

Let me ask you a question? How many followers of Jesus out of 100 can do those kinds of things simply by trying to? It's obviously not very many because rare is the person who does them.

Something more is required and that something is training. We can do some of what Jesus and the Bible tell us to do only by training to do them.

I'd explain the difference between training and trying this way. Trying is the direct submission of our body to righteousness. "Direct" means that we put it through the motion of an action in order to obey a specific command to do so. In contrast, training is the indirect submission of our body to righteousness. "Indirect" means that we put it through the motion of one action to prepare it for another action that Jesus and the Bible commands.

You might compare it to practicing and performing. The first kind of submission, direct, is the performance. We are doing what God commands us to do. The second kind of submission, indirect, is the practice. We are doing one thing or several things that we can do now that will eventually enable us to do another thing that we can't do now.

Take quarterbacking a football team for instance. The quarterback lifts weights, does flexibility exercises, and goes through the playbook over and over again. He puts his body through the motion of those actions so that he'll be able to do another action, throw and perform well in the game. Suppose the quarterback chooses not to practice all week but to just perform in the game. He will most certainly not perform well. The point is that he isn't able to do the second action, thrown and perform well in the game, without first of all doing the first actions. The first actions are an indirect submission of his body. He does several things, the practicing, that enable him to eventually do another thing, the performing.

Training is like the practicing and being on the spot is like the game. By being on the spot, I mean, for example, when someone spits in our face or serves us with a legal complaint or criticizes us and so on. Training means that we do certain things when we aren't on the spot, in between the moment of crisis, so that we can do good and not evil when we are on the spot.

That then is what Paul means in Romans 6:13 when He tells us to present the parts of our body as instruments of righteousness. It's two things. First, we try. We submit our body parts directly to righteousness by doing the good and not the evil that God wants. Second, we train. We submit our body parts indirectly to righteousness by doing what we can do now that eventually enables to do what we can't do now – the good and not the evil that God wants.

Spiritual Disciplines

Now, this training that I'm referring to isn't a vague thing so that we scratch our heads and wonder how we're supposed to do it. It's a quite specific thing so that we know exactly and precisely how to do it. That quite specific thing is practicing the spiritual disciplines, which is what the rest of our study is about.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 is our thematic passage for discussing the spiritual disciplines. Let's examine carefully what Paul teaches us in it.

Verse 27 reveals the primary subject of this passage. It's our body. A foundational truth is behind Paul's discussion of this subject. That truth is that the body is a battlefield.

Few Christians grasp that. Most believe that the real battlefield of our life with God is our mind. I know many books that were written about the mind as battlefield. I know of none that were written about the body as battlefield. We've already discussed the forces that make it so – the laws of sin that are in our members. Most Christians don't understand the battlefield that the body is but as we see in this passage, Paul did. And we need to pay close attention to what he tells us about that.

Paul tells us what we should do with our body in verse 27. We should make it our slave. That statement clearly implies that in our natural state, it isn't our slave but our master and that's true. It is. We've already addressed that in Romans 7 and our discussion of the laws of sin that are in our body parts. The natural condition of most people is that their body is their master. They are slaves of it.

But they and we don't need to be. We can become the master of our body and Paul tells us how in this passage – by way of analogy. That analogy is sports. What he's referring to here is the Isthmian Games that were held every three years in Corinth. The Isthmian Games were like the Olympic Games but on a smaller scale. Paul, like the Corinthian Christians to whom he was writing, witnessed those games and alludes to them in verses 24-27.

Look at verse 24. He mentions a specific sport here – running. He's referring to both the marathon and the shorter races. Notice what his point is. A race yields only one winner. So runners put forth every effort to win. I had an attorney friend, for instance, who was going to race in a marathon. Doing that required running 17 miles a day for two months. Only one person wins a race. Consequently, runners put forth every effort to win.

Christians should too, Paul says in the last line in verse 24. This debunks what I call "the myth of passivity." So many Christians think that we're passive in spiritual growth in general and the mastery of our body in particular. Since it's by grace, the Holy Spirit does everything and we do nothing. But as we've discussed countless times before, that simply isn't so. Grace is opposed to earning not effort. The fact is that mastering our body requires effort on our part and as Paul teaches us in verse 24, the effort must be vigorous.

The great Oswald Chambers understood that as well as anyone ever has. He wrote that once we're saved and experience initial regeneration, we must not only talk about it but exercise it as well. He was purposely forceful in the way that he said it. He said that we must work out what God has worked in. Hear that again. We must work out what God has worked in. He contended that we must show our regeneration *"in our fingertips, in our tongue, and in our bodily contact with people."*

Chambers elaborated on that in his book The Psychology of Redemption. I want to read an entire paragraph that he wrote in it. It is, I believe, an extended commentary on verse 24. It goes like this: *"The question for forming habits on the basis of the grace of God is a very vital one. To ignore it is to fall into the snare of the Pharisee – the grace of God is praised, Jesus Christ is praised, the redemption is praised, but the practical everyday life evades working it out. If we refuse to practice, it is not God's grace that fails when a crisis comes, but our own nature. When the crisis comes, we ask God to help us, but He cannot if we have not made our nature our ally. The practicing is ours, not God's. God regenerates us and puts us into contact with all His divine resources, but He cannot make us walk according to His will."* Let's consider the implications of this absolutely profound paragraph.

Chambers talks about crisis coming. This refers to what we've called being "on the spot." He means things like someone spitting in our face, someone criticizing us, losing our job, getting sick, having a rebellious child, losing a loved one to death, failing, being slandered, and so on.

He says that when a crisis comes, we need two allies in order to do good and not evil in it. The first is the grace of God and the second is our own nature. That is one of the most critical truths that we will ever learn. Our own nature, including our bodily nature, needs to be our ally not our enemy in our lives with God.

And we make it that by "practicing" as Chambers says it. We must do something with our body in other words, which is the very point that Paul makes in verse 24. Mastering our body requires effort and as this verse makes clear, that effort must be vigorous.

But it must be thoughtful as well. We see that in verse 26. Paul mentions two sports that were part of the Isthmian Games – running and boxing. Runners run with aim he says and boxers swing with purpose. They have a strategy for winning in other words. I mentioned the attorney who races in marathons. Talk to him and you'll find that he has a carefully planned strategy both for preparing for and running the race. His effort isn't just vigorous. It's thoughtful as well.

And so should ours be as followers of Jesus. The effort that we put forth in mastering our body must be thoughtful. We must not only do things. We must also do the right things. It's what Dallas Willard calls *"the purposeful, strategic use of our bodies."* It's what I would call the intentional and intelligent use of our body. We must intentionally and intelligently do certain things with it.

So that's what we should do and why. We should master our body through vigorous and thoughtful effort.

Now, Paul tells us in verse 27 what our effort should be directed to. He observes about himself, *"But I discipline my body."* Again in verse 25, this is just like athletes who discipline theirs. What Paul did, he commands Timothy to do in 1 Timothy 4:7, *"discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."* As Paul declares in several of his letters, he is our example just as Jesus was His. Jesus disciplined his body and so did Paul. Since both Jesus and Paul are our examples, then we should discipline ours as well. That is clearly what Paul has in mind in verse 27. We must discipline our body.

To discipline our body means to relocate and reorient it in our world. We make new uses of it. We do certain things with it that train it to do what we want it to do – good and not evil.

We call those certain things spiritual disciplines and that's exactly what Paul has in mind in 1 Corinthians 9:27 and 1 Timothy 4:7. When he uses the word *"discipline,"* he is referring specifically to the bodily activities that we call spiritual disciplines. But how do I know that? It's because history itself affirms it.

You and I live in a religious climate that is wholly unlike that of the first century world. Influenced by the 18th century emphasis on happiness and the 19th century emphasis on pleasure in Europe, American culture has adopted a feel good mentality that is pervasive and deep. People are devoted and actually in bondage to feeling good. They believe that they have the unquestioned right to fulfill their natural impulses as long as no one gets hurt in the process.

The Christian community has embraced this mentality and adheres to it almost as vigorously as the culture does. How do we judge our worship services for example? They're successes if people feel good during and after it. They're failures if they don't. That illustrates that the Christian community thinks like the culture does.

The result is that the idea of disciplining our body through activities like fasting, solitude, studying, giving, and so on are utterly foreign to Christians today. Most equate such things with the degraded ascetic practices of Hindus in India or priests and monks in the Dark Ages.

But that wasn't the case in the first century world in general and church in particular. Thoughtful and devout people in the Hellenistic world in which Paul lived operated under this non-negotiable assumption. The human body has to be rigorously disciplined in order to have a decent individual and social existence. That was such an entrenched point of view that it was totally unnecessary for Paul to explain it in his letters. He simply said what his readers assumed to be true. For life to go well, they needed to discipline their body through the various disciplines that we'll be discussing soon.

My point is this. Those spiritual disciplines, while unfamiliar to us, were quite familiar to the Christians to whom Paul wrote. They knew exactly what the spiritual disciplines were and how to practice, which explains Paul doesn't elaborate on them in verse 27. He didn't need to.

That teaches us something that we need to grasp. Spiritual disciplines are central activities for a normal spiritual life. They were central activities in the life of Jesus. He Himself studied, fasted, spent time alone, submitted, and so forth. And as we've just discussed, they were also central activities in the lives of Paul and the first Christians. Modern Christians think that they're for the abnormal spiritual life but it's clear that they aren't. They're for the life of all of us who are here this evening. Practicing spiritual disciplines is normal in the kingdom of God. Not practicing them is abnormal.

Now, these spiritual disciplines are nothing more than bodily activities, bodily behaviors. They are, as I've stated before, the indirect submission of our body to righteousness. They're things that we can do now that eventually enable us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to do something that we can't do now by direct effort.

Let's go back to the attorney again who runs marathons. At one point, he couldn't run 26.2 miles no matter how hard he tried. So, he did certain things with his body that he could do – rested it, fed it a certain way, and kept running as many miles as he could. Those things were bodily disciplines. Doing them consistently enough and long enough eventually enabled him to do what he wanted to but at the time couldn't – run 26.2 miles.

It's the same way in our spiritual lives. There are good that we want to do now, like having compassion for someone who spits in our face, but can't. It isn't in our body to do them. So we practice certain spiritual disciplines that eventually enable us to do them. Their ultimate purpose is to shape and transform the very substance of our body so that we can be and do what God wants.

That shows us that the disciplines are not valuable in themselves. They are not the aim of our life with God. They aren't an end but a means to an end and we need to view them that way. The aim is Christlikeness and abundance of life and the disciplines are a necessary means to that end.

That means that practicing spiritual disciplines doesn't make us spiritually superior. We shouldn't take pride in practicing them. I knew a young Christian who let everyone know that he was on a 40 day fast and apparently took pride in the fact that he was. What he didn't realize is this. The need for practicing certain disciplines vigorously indicates weakness not strength.

Dallas Willard in fact lays down a general rule of thumb: *"If it is easy for us to engage in a certain discipline, we probably don't need to practice it. The disciplines we need to practice are precisely the ones we are not 'good at' and hence do not enjoy."* He goes on to quote Pete Rose. Someone asked Rose what the key to his incredible achievements in baseball was. He answered, *"I practice what I'm not good at. Most folks practice what they're good at."* What is true of baseball is true of our life with God as well. We need to identify our weaknesses and sins and practice disciplines that address them.

That shows us then what spiritual disciplines are not. They are not expressions of self-hatred like some of the extreme ascetics down through the centuries took them to be. They are also not the attainment of merit through suffering. They are essentially the body's part in working out what God has worked in at our conversion to Jesus. They are the body's part in bringing us into interaction with God and His kingdom. It is through them that we are able to love our enemies, be grateful for criticism, trust God in our sufferings, and so forth.

To prepare us for the specific disciplines that we'll discuss in our study, I do need to point out that there is no set list of disciplines that all of us absolutely must practice.

That's because each of us have our own besetting sins, alluding to Hebrews 12:1. Your besetting weaknesses and sins may be different than mine. So the disciplines that you practice to address yours will be different than the ones that I practice to address mine.

There will be some commonality though. Most of us, for instance, cannot joyfully bless those who wrong us. Most of us also cannot gratefully receive criticism. So, we would practice most of the same disciplines that address those problems, any differences being the consequence of differences in personality.

There's another reason that there is no set list of disciplines. It's that we ourselves can create disciplines that are tailored to our own weaknesses and needs. We examine our weaknesses and needs and then conceive of bodily activities that would address those.

I do two things, for instance, that most people wouldn't consider spiritual disciplines but they are. One is that I periodically visit cemeteries, usually the Poland Riverside near my home. I visit cemeteries and contemplate my own death. Doing that addresses the issues of pride and praise. Second, I periodically choose longer lines so that I'll have to wait. If I'm in Marc's, for instance, I will select the longest checkout line. Or driving down Rt. 224 east toward South Avenue, I get in the left lane, which always has far more cars than the right one. Doing that addresses the issues of impatience and hurry.

There are other activities that most people wouldn't consider spiritual disciplines but they are. Vigil is an example of what I mean. In vigil, we deny ourselves sleep in order to concentrate on spiritual matters. Another example is Sabbath keeping, in which we abstain from all constructive labor on one day of the week. Still another is shopping, banking, and doing other personal business in poor areas of town.

You can see that there are countless bodily activities that can address our weaknesses and sins in our lives. We need to be creative and prayerfully and carefully consider what those might be.

You can see from what I've just said why there is no set list of disciplines. But having said that, I would also say this. There are some well-established disciplines that have a proven track record. These are the ones that God's best friends through the centuries have found to be the most effective. They are the following: solitude, silence, fasting, simplicity, chastity, secrecy, service, sacrifice, study, meditation, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission.

You've probably noticed that some of those activities sound not like disciplines in particular but necessary spiritual activities in general. The Bible makes clear, for example, that solitude, study, worship, and prayer are essential activities in our relationship and life with God. These activities aren't primarily about our transformation into Christlikeness. They're primarily about our relating to and glorifying God and we normally practice them for those purposes.

But these spiritual practices in general can also be spiritual disciplines in particular. They become that when we practice them primarily for the purpose of transformation. That's what makes them a discipline. We are practicing them for the express purpose of transformation.

Take worship, for example. I normally worship for the express purpose of ministering to and pleasing God. I do that individually, as I move through my week, and corporately on Sunday. But sometimes, I also worship for the express purpose of transformation, specifically to grow in love. We all have times when we don't feel God's presence as much as we do in other times. I've developed a spiritual discipline with regard to that. When I don't feel God's presence as deeply as I want to, I worship Him. I may not feel like it but I do it anyway because I've found it actually increases my love for Him. I've gotten to the point that I actually welcome those temporary dry times as we call them. They're opportunities for me to grow in my love for God through the discipline of worship.

That illustrates what makes an activity a discipline. We do it for the purpose of spiritual growth and transformation.

I'd like to share a final insight before we begin discussing the proven spiritual disciplines that I mentioned before. We don't have to be spiritual giants to practice them.

That is probably the biggest misconception that people have. Several Christians have told me that spiritual disciplines are for long established Christians, not spiritually immature new converts. That is simply and absolutely not true. It's just the opposite actually. As I've explained, new converts will likely need to practice the disciplines more than an established follower of Jesus would. In my view in fact, they're one of the first things that we should teach new converts. It's the medium through which the Holy Spirit replaces their old sinful habits with new habits of righteousness.

We are now ready to begin discussing the spiritual disciplines themselves in detail. I will use three main sources in doing so. The first is the Bible. The second is Dallas Willard's book The Spirit of the Disciplines. The second is Richard Foster's book The Celebration of Discipline.

There are different ways of categorizing the disciplines. I believe that Willard's is the best and so I'm going to use his. He divides them into two categories: abstinence and engagement.

#1 - Disciplines of Abstinence

We start with the disciplines of abstinence. In these disciplines, we abstain to some degree and for some time from satisfying what are normal and legitimate desires. Those would include the desires for food, sleep, bodily activity, companionship, curiosity, sex, and more.

There is nothing wrong with desiring and experiencing those things. But in our society today, it's those desires run amok that is the primary problem in our lives.

The disciplines of abstinence will help us get these normal desires and even the abnormal ones into their proper coordination and subordination within the kingdom of God. They will program into the members of our bodies patterns and habits of righteousness with regard to them.

Solitude

The first discipline of abstinence is solitude. I discuss this one first because it is the most radical of all the disciplines for life in the Spirit. It is in our culture at least.

To practice solitude means to abstain from human interaction by withdrawing and being alone for a period of time. We close ourselves away and purposely deny ourselves human companionship.

What we do in this aloneness is dwell on our experience of isolation. We don't spend our time alone thinking about our golf game or our Sunday school lesson or what our spouse is doing. We place our mind on the aloneness and silence that surround us and the living God who is immersed in that silence. We focus on just being there in the aloneness of the moment.

The length of time that we'll spend in solitude varies with the settings and the opportunities we have. Some Christians devote one weekend a month, from Friday night to Sunday night, to being alone. We may not be able to do that but we can and must devote certain periods of time to it. That time may be a half hour or an hour a day and in addition maybe one two or three hour period a week. In addition to those regular times, we can take advantage of opportunities for solitude that arise.

I look forward to our Yearly Meeting every year. I go to Canton on Sunday afternoon and stay there until the final business meeting on Tuesday afternoon. In earlier years, I used up any spare time we had between meetings and worship services by fellowshiping with people. But I don't do that anymore. I now spend that time alone in solitude. It's just a wonderful time of being alone with God for me.

On occasions, my wife Jill has a commitment and is gone for the evening. I used to spend that time watching television, working around the house, preparing sermons, or reading. But I now take advantage of it and practice solitude.

My point is this. We need to have regular times of solitude that we supplement with longer periods when the opportunity arises to do that.

Solitude, along with prayer, is the most noticeable discipline in the life of Jesus. He often combined the two in fact, prayer followed by solitude or vice versa. Consider these passages. In Matthew 4:1-11, He inaugurated His ministry by spending 40 days alone in the wilderness. In Luke 6:12, He spent the night alone on the desert hills before choosing the 12 disciples. In Matthew 14:13, He withdrew from everyone to a lonely place after receiving the news that Herod had killed John the Baptist. In Matthew 14:23, He went up into the hills by Himself after feeding the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. In Mark 1:35, He went out to a secluded place before everyone else got up. And finally, in Luke 5:16, Jesus is said to have often slipped away by Himself to the wilderness.

I've taken the time to mention these verses because of what they teach us. Solitude was one of the central activities of Jesus.

It was indispensable to the strength of His person, ministry and life. If it was so for Him, how much more so is it for us. If Jesus needed solitude, then we certainly do too.

But it wasn't just Jesus whose spiritual life centered on this discipline. It was His disciples and friends as well. Solitude was a main discipline in the spiritual life of the desert fathers, Thomas a Kempis, George Fox, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Mother Teresa to name a few.

We can deduce from that the priority of solitude in our spiritual lives. When people get saved and ask us what they should do to grow, we almost automatically tell them to read the Bible, pray, and worship. But I believe that we should just as automatically include solitude in the list of things that we tell them. It is probably the most fundamental discipline in the early stages of the spiritual life and must be returned to over and over again.

But it's actually more than just a discipline. Remember that disciplines are addressed to our weakness. But some of them are addressed to our strengths as well and in that regard we practice them not as disciplines but as necessary components of our life with God.

Spiritual gifts offer us a helpful analogy here. Spiritual gifts are particular abilities that the Holy Spirit gives to specific Christians. Evangelism, for example, is a spiritual gift. Graces are in contrast to spiritual gifts. They are activities that the Holy Spirit calls all Christians to do. Evangelism is one of those. It's something that God calls all of us to do. Evangelism is thus a gift and a grace at the same time.

Some of the spiritual disciplines are like that. On the one hand, they are a discipline, an indirect righteousness, a bodily activity that enables us to eventually do the righteous thing that we can't do now. But on the other hand, they are also a necessary component of our life with God, a bodily activity that enables us to know and love God. Solitude is one of those along with study, prayer, fasting, and others. Please keep that in mind as we discuss those particular activities.

Anyway, for our purposes now, we need to know that solitude is both a discipline and a central activity of our life with God.

But as fundamental as it is, very few American Christians today practice it. There are a host of reasons for that including the busyness, rush, and noise that our culture programs into our personalities. The great 20th century poet T.S. Eliot described our culture well when he wrote: ***"Where shall the world be found, where will the world resound? Not here, there is not enough silence."*** Notice that Eliot talks about silences here. There is not enough silence.

I mention silence because it's a basic component of solitude and its essential completion. Withdrawing from people and listening to music or television or any other noise isn't solitude. We must escape from sounds and noises other than the gentle ones of nature. There must be silence to be solitude.

With that in mind, Jessaymn West tells us what it's going to take for us to practice this discipline. He writes, *"It's not easy to be solitary unless you are born ruthless. Every solitary repudiates someone."*

Do you understand what he means when he says that solitude repudiates people? He means that our withdrawing from them offends them. They don't realize that we're going to God. They take it to mean that we're getting away from them and they don't like it. Solitude has caused more than one relational problem with people who refuse to hear about and understand it.

That's why West says that we have to be ruthless to practice it. We must do it even when what is in us cries out that it doesn't want to. We must do it even though our circumstances are conducive to it. And we must do it when our families and friends don't like it. In the end, we practice solitude because we're relentless in our life with God. We make and carry out the decision to practice it no matter what.

But why should we? That's the question. With so many things to do like reading the Bible, praying, worshipping, evangelizing and so on, why take the time to withdraw and be alone? What good is it? The answer is "much good" or else Jesus Himself wouldn't have made it a priority in His life. Let's examine now what solitude does in our persons and lives.

It frees us from the pollution of human interactions.

Dallas Willard tells about the results of a fascinating experiment. Researchers gave individual mice a shot of amphetamine, which of course hyped them up. If the mouse given the amphetamine was placed in a group of mice, he got caught up in their activity, went ballistic as we say it, and was dead within ten minutes. But if the mouse given the amphetamine was placed by itself, it took 20 times the amount of amphetamine to kill it in 10 minutes. The group activity of mice in other words had a deleterious or detrimental effect on the injected mouse.

It's like that with human beings.

We live in a world set against God. We constantly hear the call of commercials and friends, for example, to materialism and worldly definitions of success. We are constantly exposed to illicit sexual sights and sounds. We are immersed in a daily cauldron of anger, malice, and contempt. And on it goes.

The result of that is that our daily interactions with others lock us into ungodly patterns of thought, feeling, and action. The things that the people around us say and do pollute or taint how we think, feel, and will. Most of us aren't the rugged individualists that we think we are. Our conformity to those around us is far greater than most of us realize.

I think, for instance, of all the bragging that goes on at the rear end of automobiles. I know a Christian physician who wants everyone to know that he's a successful physician. So he drives a BMW that probably cost \$60,000 and has the letters "MD" emblazoned on his license plates. I know a pastor who wants everyone to know that he's a successful pastor. So he drives a huge SUV that probably cost \$45,000 and has the letters "Rev" and then his initials printed on his license plates.

Those individuals are clearly locked into the world's patterns of thought, feeling, and action. They aren't rugged individualists. They aren't non-conformists. They're conformists whose daily interactions with others have dramatically affected what they will and do.

What they and we need is reoriented and that's exactly what solitude does. It reorients us away from our human interactions and the world and to God and His kingdom. It gives us the distance we need to see our world as it really is and the detrimental effects it has on our person and life. It also give us the distance we need to see God and His kingdom for what they really are and the blessing they are to us. Solitude moves us closer and closer to God and His ways and further and further away from the world and its ways.

It also frees us from the ingrained behaviors that cause us blow it when we're on the spot. It dramatically lessens the tendencies to evil that dwell in us in that regard. So, when someone rubs us the wrong way, we don't immediately react but have the necessary distance to be aware of what we're about to do. We're then able not to do it.

Take gossiping for example. Normal interactions with human beings, most of whom are what Paul calls "busybodies" in 2 Thessalonians 3:11, lock us into patterns of thought, feeling, and action that gossip. But solitude helps free us from that. Quiet and alone with God, we feel the awesomeness and value of human beings and the distastefulness of saying or listening to bad things about them. That has been my experience at least. I have found to practice solitude is not to gossip.

Two things happen in solitude that make it the transforming discipline that I just described.

First, we know and hear God. That's because when you and I are alone and silent, God is there in the aloneness and silence.

Anthony Bloom tells the story of an elderly woman who had been working at prayer with all her might but without sensing God's presence. When she asked her archbishop about that, wisely counseled her to do this: *"Go to your room each day and for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God. But I forbid you to say one word of prayer. You just knit and try to enjoy the peace of your room."* So that's what the elderly woman did and in time, she began to enter into the silence created by her knitting. She described her experience this way: *"I perceived that the silence was not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance. It was not the absence of something but the presence of something."* As she continued her daily knitting, she ultimately discovered that *"at the heart of the silence there was He who is all stillness, all peace, all poise."*

That story illustrates what happens in the quietness and isolation of our solitude. We experience and hear God. I know that's true because I experience it. My closest and most meaningful times with God are in solitude. Theresa of Avila said it so well, *"Settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself."*

A second thing happens in solitude that makes it so powerfully transforming. We know ourselves. What we are can escape us when we're caught up in our interactions with others. But it becomes quite clear to us when we're alone and silent. The Holy Spirit is able to show to us what our strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, and besetting blessings and sins are.

That kind of discovery can destroy us if we aren't walking closely with God but if we are, it will transform us. Knowing what our weaknesses or strengths are, we can then act appropriately to overcome or use them.

It's been in solitude that the Holy Spirit has shown me many of the things that I needed to know about myself. I've talked before about coming to the realization that I constantly sought the praise of others. That realization came to me one night when I was practicing solitude.

I do need to point out that we shouldn't seek any of the benefits of solitude that I discussed tonight. Don't go into it expecting to experience or achieve them because you probably won't if you do. Just be there and God will take care of the things that you need to experience and achieve.

I close out this discipline with a keen insight. We read in Matthew 4:1-11 that Jesus practiced solitude and fasting for 40 days before the devil tempted Him. Most Christians believe that doing so made Him weak and thus the temptations of Satan real. I believe that just the opposite was true. The aloneness and fasting didn't make Him weak but strong and ready for the temptation.

Solitude will do for us what it did for Jesus. It will make us spiritually strong and alive to God and the realities of His kingdom. Thomas a Kempis described as well as anyone ever has the benefit of solitude. He wrote several centuries ago: *"The great holy men, where they might, fled men's fellowship and chose to love God in secret places . . . Shut thy door upon thee and call to thee Jesus thy love: dwell upon Him in thy cell for thou shalt not find elsewhere so great a place."*

Silence I

Our next spiritual discipline is silence. Actually the word silence is used to identify two different disciplines.

The first discipline is the partner of solitude. In that context, silence means closing ourselves off from sounds. I'm talking here about sound of any kind – words, music, traffic, and even the sounds of nature if we can.

There's something that we need to grasp about our modern world – how noisy it is. It is radically different in that regard than earlier times. What has happened is human invention. Human invention, especially during the industrial revolution, has created an environment that is far noisier than we realize.

My wife Jill likes to read historical diaries. One that she read was the diary of a young woman in the 19th century who moved with her family from Kansas to Minnesota. Well, that young woman complained in her diary how noisy Minnesota was; how she missed the quiet of Kansas. Jill and I got a kick out of that because the noise she was talking about was the rustling of the leaves in the trees. Minnesota had far more trees than their flat farmland in Kansas had and the noise bothered her greatly.

Think about something – how quiet 18th and 19th century America must have been. But the industrial revolution and human invention have drastically changed all of that. You and I now live in the noisiest society in all of human history.

Do something sometime. Stop what you're doing and listen to all of the noises around you as you go through your day. Listen to all the whirring, buzzing, clanging, ringing, and so on that are going on around you. I did that one day and this is what I heard within a several minute time span: the clanging of a garbage truck, the whining of a police siren, the whooshing of cars, the shooting of guns coming from a television set, and the worst of all, rap music coming from a passing car.

My point is that you and I live in the noisiest society in all of human history. Total silence is a rare experience for most of us. What we call silence is actually nothing more than just less noise than we're used to.

Many people have never actually experienced silence and don't even realize it. We think that's normal but it isn't. Imagine that woman who moved to Minnesota suddenly thrust into our modern world. She would think how abnormal all of the noise was.

But it isn't just abnormal. It's affecting us as well.

Did you know that hearing is the last of our senses to go after death. According to Lisa Lotze, in fact, some physicians believe that people can continue hearing up to two hours after death.

I don't know if that's so or not but the very possibility of it illustrates something. As Willard says it, "*Sound always strikes deeply and disturbingly into our souls.*" Sound is as altering to our inner dimensions as sight is, especially over time.

I have a theory in that regard. Noise contributes to much of the tension that grips the lives of Americans. The simple fact is that we weren't made physically, psychologically, and spiritually to live in the noisy environment that we do. We're out of our natural element, so to speak, in that regard. That natural element is silence at least and the gentle sounds of nature at most. That silence and those gentle sounds help produce a tranquility of the soul in us that in turn is conducive to deep relationship with Jesus.

So, we need to be silent. We need to purposely close ourselves off from the sounds of our everyday world.

That is a difficult thing for many of us to do. The fact is that many of us actually find comfort in noise. So, they have the television on even when they aren't watching it or always have music playing in the background even when they aren't really listening to it. But we don't just find comfort in the noise, we find discomfort in the silence. It shocks many of us because it makes us think that we're doing nothing or that nothing is happening, which is the worst of evils in a fast paced world like ours.

But we need to overcome these biases and practice silence. I said in discussing solitude that silence is a vital part of it. It is in fact the partner of solitude. If we withdraw from people but are immersed in noise, music for example, then we are not truly practicing solitude. Silence makes solitude real. Solitude, defined as withdrawing from human interaction, is emptied of meaning without silence.

I've already mentioned one benefit of silence in this context of solitude. It helps produce a tranquility of soul in us. We find in it a release from the tension and anxiety that the abnormal sounds of our culture creates.

There are several other benefits.

One is that it reminds us of death. Think about what death does with regard to our material world. It cuts us off from it and the people in it. The moment we take our last breath, we are separated from both. Solitude and silence temporarily reproduce that experience.

What do we have at those moments in time? It's God alone. There's just God and us. That's it. Let me ask you a penetrating question about that. What do we have when there is just God and us? Much or little? Do we feel isolated and alone with just Him? Or do we find what Psalm 16:11 calls "fullness of joy" in His presence? Silence and solitude reveal much about the quality and depth of our relationship with Yahweh.

Those disciplines together allow concentration upon God and God alone. They allow our minds and hearts to focus on Him as a magnifying glass allows the sun to focus on a particular point or spot.

That in turn dramatically enhances our relationship with God. They allow us to minister to and please Him in a way that perhaps nothing else does. They also allow Him to minister to and please us in many ways. One of those is to speak to us. We talk about the still small voice of God and those very adjectives we use testify to the utter necessity of solitude and silence. He will not run to catch up with us in our rush and then yell over the noise of the world to speak to us when He does. He will speak to us consistently and effectively only when we stop and listen and solitude and silence are the disciplines by which we do that.

My best times with Yahweh are when I do this. I feel closest to Him when I'm alone and silent. I've heard some people say they feel closest to Him when they listen to worship and praise music. Not me! I feel closest to Him when I'm away from people and noise, even the noise of that kind of music.

That in turn helps me to love Him. Encountering God, especially His ministering and speaking to us, is essential to loving Him. We must have the exclusive and intimate times with Him that solitude and silence allow in order to love Him.

We practice silence the same way that we practice solitude – by being ruthless. We make and carry out the decision to get away from noise. Those of us over 50 usually awaken at least one time during the night to go to the bathroom. Take advantage of being awake in the middle of the night when most of the noise around us ceases. Practice silence.

We have a small windowless room between our kitchen and bathroom that contains our washer and dryer. When no one is home, I can go into that room, shut both doors, and hear absolutely nothing and that's what I do.

That's just a sampling of what we need to do. Make and carry out the decision to get away from the noises of life. Make and carry out the decision to practice silence.

Silence II

There is another discipline that is called silence. Foster treats this discipline in the same chapter as he does the discipline that I just discussed. Willard does something similar. He treats the previous discipline and this one under the same heading of *Silence*. Doing so is misleading though. It gives the impression that they are just two nuances of the same discipline but in my view, they aren't. They are two separate disciplines.

The difference between the two is simply this. Silence I is about noise. Silence II is about talking. In the first, we close ourselves off from noise. In the second, we restrain ourselves from talking.

The Bible addresses this second discipline of silence in both the Old and New Testaments. The following are samplings of verses that treat the issue: Proverbs 10:19; 17:27-28; James 1:19-20; 3:1-4.

Those verses show us what we need to do. We need to restrain our tongue. We choose not to talk at all or to limit what we say. We choose to speak either minimally or not at all.

This discipline does directly address one bodily issue we have. That issue is found in James 3:1-12 in general and verse 8 in particular. It's taming the tongue.

I've mentioned before in our study about the law of sin dwelling in the tongue. That means that sinful habits dwell in it. It goes off on us so to speak and does one or more of three things that it shouldn't. #1 – it speaks when it shouldn't speak. #2 – it speaks what it shouldn't speak. And/or #3 – it speaks more than it should speak. All of us have problems with all three of those things and it has gotten us into more trouble with God and others over the years than we can shake a stick at.

Hebrews 12:1 refers to what we've discussed before, besetting sins. Besetting sins are those that we're the most likely to commit. One of those besetting sins for some people is talking too much. Have you ever been around a person who talks too much? It can be almost maddening in more ways than one.

Researchers tell us that the normal word quotient for women is 50,000 words per day and for men 25,000. But for some men and women it seems to be 100,000. They talk too often and too much when they do.

Talking too much may not be one of our besetting sins but there are circumstances in which all of us are tempted to run off at the mouth – circumstances in which even “silent types” are tempted to speak when they should be silent or to say more than they should.

It’s in those circumstances that we can practice the discipline of silence. We restrain our tongue in them. We either say nothing at all or we say less than we want to say, whichever is most appropriate. There are many such circumstances. Let me give you three of those as examples of what I mean.

The first circumstance is when we’re accused. People accuse us of being in the wrong all of the time in many ways big and small.

Sometimes the accusation is justified. We actually are in the wrong. So, we hold our tongue. We don’t defend ourselves by making excuses or putting a positive spin on what we did or a negative spin on the accusers themselves. We welcome the reproof and remain silent through it.

Sometimes, the accusation isn’t justified. We aren’t in the wrong. But we still restrain our tongue. We rest in God’s vindication. He is our justifier. So, we don’t defend ourselves. We say only enough to promote the greater good of God, others, and ourselves in that order or to assist those who need to know the facts.

Several weeks ago, I accidentally left the gate to our fence unlatched and one of the dogs got out. Fortunately, my wife Jill happened to see her just as she did and retrieved her before she went into the street. Jill then mentioned it to me that I had left the gate open and my first impulse was to defend my doing so. I heard the phone ringing as I came into the house and rushed in. So, it isn’t my fault I was thinking to myself and I was going to say it. But I purposely didn’t in order to practice the discipline of silence.

There is a second circumstance in which we can practice the discipline of silence. It’s when we’re uneasy with people. When we’re insecure with people, we just words to adjust how we appear to them. We’re afraid that if we don’t, they might not know how competent or virtuous we are or that they might misunderstand our shortcomings.

But we hold our tongue. We resign how we appear to God. We know, according to Romans 8, that God is for us and that Jesus is on His right hand pleading our case. Knowing that, we don’t worry about the opinion that others have of us except in terms of the effects that it has on God or them. We don’t say things so that they will think either better or less ill of us. We say only enough to promote the greater good.

Some years ago, I was with a group of areas pastors who began discussing the Sermon on the Mount. I know the Sermon on the Mount better than any other portion of Scripture and I found myself wanting these pastors to know that. I found myself wanting them to know how much I know Scripture. So, I purposely practiced the discipline of silence and contributed nothing to the conversation. I just listened to what they had to say about it instead.

A third circumstance in which we can practice silence is when we want to control people, to get them to believe what we want them to believe or do what we want them to do. Let's face it. Most of us can hardly bare to restrain our tongue in that context. It makes us feel so helpless when we do. So, we don't. We use words instead to override or bypass people's judgment and will. The hard fact is that we use words more than any other device to manage people and straighten them out. The tongue really is our most commonly used weapon of manipulation.

So we hold it. We do love people and want them to believe and do what is right. But we don't control them with our tongue in order to achieve that. We go through their judgment and will, not around them. We may say things in order to inform them. But we do not say things in order to manipulate them.

One of my sons was going to do something that I thought was foolish and I clearly communicated to him what I thought and why I thought it. In a subsequent conversation, I found myself wanting to raise the issue and discuss it again. But I purpose practiced the discipline of silence and didn't. I said nothing about the subject.

That illustrates how we practice the discipline of silence. In given contexts and circumstance, we purposely say nothing. Countless opportunities arise for us each day to do this and we do it.

But what good does that achieve? Remember that spiritual disciplines are the indirect submission of our body parts to righteousness. We practice them in order to be transformed, so that we can be what we aren't now or so that we can do what we can't do now – all for God's glory. In that regard, we can use silence to achieve a number of different aims or ends.

First, it can help us get control of our tongues.

I know that sounds almost paradoxical. If our tongue is out of our control, then we by definition cannot control it and remain silent. But almost everyone can control his or her tongue to some degree. So, we do that. We do that by holding it when we're on the spot but not intensely so. It's a situation that we want to say something but our feelings aren't so overwhelming that we have to. So, we don't. We practice silence in the less heroic circumstances of our lives in other words.

In our marriage relationships, for instance, our spouses periodically say or do something that only slightly annoys us. But even when it only slightly annoys us, most of us want to say something negative in response. But since it's a less intense situation and our feelings aren't overwhelming, we can remain silent and for the purpose of transformation do.

Controlling our tongues in the less intense situations allows the Holy Spirit to transform them. We eventually find ourselves being able to control them in the more intense situations.

What happens is this. Practicing silence when we can provides us with an inner distance that gives us time to consider our words carefully. It also provides us with the presence of mind to control what we say and how we say it. The end result is that righteousness is programmed into our tongues. They then aren't going off on us and saying things that we don't want them to say in the moment of crisis.

There's a second aim or end that silence achieves. It helps us value people. One of the objectives that all disciples of Jesus eventually attempt to accomplish is to, and I quote Paul in Philippians 2:3, "***regard one another as more important than yourselves.***" That is clearly foreign to human beings. It is imbedded in our nature to regard ourselves as more important than others. So once we become a disciple of Jesus and learn that He commands this, we want and strive to do it. Silence is one of the disciplines that is quite effective helping us do just that. That's because listening is an inherent part of being silent.

As Dallas Willard points out, how deep is people's need to be listened to. What people say to us comes from inside them – from their thinking, feeling, and willing. Not listening to them communicates that we don't value what is inside them. It diminishes their selfhood. But listening to them communicates that we do value what is inside them. It enhances their selfhood. As the old maxim says it, "***A good listener is a silent flatterer.***"

So, if you don't regard others as more important than yourself but want to, practice the discipline of silence and thus listening. Make a point of listening intently to what people say even if you aren't really interested. You will learn to listen in the process and will find yourself valuing people more and more.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains it this way in his classic book Life Together: "***The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.***" That is so true. Being silent and listening helps us value people.

The third aim that discipline of silence achieves is this. It helps us play to an audience of One not many. That is one of the most vital objectives in the life of any disciple of Jesus. I've preached about it before. As Oz Guinness says it, we need to play to an audience of One not many. We need to come to the point that we don't care at all what people think about what we are and do but that we do care completely what God thinks about what we are and do.

Don't misunderstand what I mean. We do care about what people think in terms of the impact of their doing so on God, His kingdom, others, or themselves. But we don't care about it in relation to our own self-concept or ego concerns. We shouldn't desire people's praise or dread their criticism because our love, peace, and joy depend on what they think. Our love, peace, and joy should depend only on what God thinks.

Silence is one of the disciplines that the Holy Spirit uses to achieve this in us. Remember one of the reasons that we talk too much. It's to adjust how we appear to others. But by restraining our tongue, we are directing it away from that concern and toward another, how we appear to God.

There's a fourth and broader aim that the discipline of silence achieves. It helps bring our other body parts into submission to God. We see that in James 3:2-5a. Let's examine these verses.

Verse 2 contains one of the most surprising statements in Scripture. Let me ask you a question. How would you define a perfect person? I've asked Christians that question before. They gave three answers more than any others. #1 – a perfect person is one who loves God supremely. #2 – a perfect person is one who demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit. And #3 – a perfect person is one who is like Jesus.

Those are all excellent answers but not the one that James gives. He is found in verse 2. A perfect person is one who does not stumble in what he says. The word "stumble" means "offend" or "sin." So a perfect person is one who does not offend and sin with his tongue.

James explains metaphorically why he says that in verses 3-5a. He contends that the tongue is like a bit and rudder. If we control the bit, we can control the horse's entire body. If we control the rudder, we can control the entire ship. In the same way, if we can control our tongue, we can likely control our entire body.

Those verses together teach us one of the significant truths about ourselves that we will ever learn. The tongue is central to life. Let me explain what that means to you.

The Holy Spirit wants to do something with your body and mine. He wants to transform it into the image and likeness of Jesus. He wants to impart the grace of Jesus so that it inhabits and governs each of our body parts – our eyes, ears, mouth, hands, feet, and so on. When that happens, those body parts then just automatically act and react the way that the body parts of Jesus did.

In that context, the tongue is central to life. That means that when the grace of Jesus comes to inhabit and govern it, the effects of that spread throughout the whole body. So, if our tongue is transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus, our other body parts are likely to follow.

That's why James defines a perfect person the way that he does. He knew the place of the tongue. It is central to life. He knew that if it is transformed, the rest of the body likely will be as well.

That shows us then the critical part that the discipline of silence plays in our lives. Controlling it can help us through the Holy Spirit to get control of our other body parts as well. It might be appropriate, for instance, for a person who needs to overcome an addiction of some kind to start there, with the tongue. I might, for instance, counsel a person who is addicted to pornography to practice silence. Depending on several factors, it might be an effective discipline for overcoming that particular weakness and sin.

When everything is said and done, silence really is golden!

Fasting

I'd introduce our next discipline with some food for thought. If we drove down Route 224 from West Blvd. To Route 170 in Poland, how many restaurants do you suppose that we would pass? I don't know what the answer is because I've never gone to the bother of counting them. But as all of us know, it would be many.

My point is that our culture is truly in love with and perhaps possessed by food. Which makes our next discipline a difficult one for many of us to understand and practice. I'm talking of course about fasting.

I'll start off by defining what fasting is. It's abstaining in some significant way from eating food and perhaps drinking water for a specified period of time. There are three kinds of fasts.

The first is a partial fast. In this kind, we don't abstain from eating altogether. We just restrict what we eat. We see this in Daniel 10:1-3. Daniel often abstained totally from food but on this occasion he didn't. According to verse 3, he abstained from eating choice foods.

We ourselves can do this. Thus, we might go a week without eating broccoli meat for instance. No, I'm just kidding. What we might do instead is go a week without eating meat. Or we might abstain from having any snacks after dinner for a week. However we do it, a partial fast is one in which we restrict what we eat, not abstain from food altogether.

The second kind of fast is a normal fast. In this kind, we abstain from eating any food, solid or liquid, which include things like broth, grape juice and so on. The only thing that we consume is water. That apparently what Jesus did during His forty days in the wilderness. We can infer that from Luke 4:1-4. Verse 2 says that *"He ate nothing"* but doesn't say that He drank nothing. We can also infer from the temptation, which was to turn stones into bread, that He wasn't thirsty. Otherwise, the devil would have tempted in Him in that direction as well.

Someone in our church has begun fasting two days a week. She is attempting a normal fast. She does drink water but eats no food at all.

There is a third kind of fast – the absolute fast. In this kind, we abstain from both food and water. There is total abstention from nourishment of any kind. In Esther 4:15-17, for instance, Esther called the Jews to a total fast declaring, *"fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days."* Paul practiced a total fast following his Damascus Road experience. According to Acts 9:9, *"And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."*

Active human beings cannot normally live without water for more than three days. So an absolute fast that goes beyond that period of time would also be a supernatural fast. God Himself would have to keep the person alive. Examples of absolute fasts that are also supernatural are the fasts of Moses and Elijah on Mount Horeb in Deuteronomy 9:9 and 1 Kings 19:8 respectively.

We see here that the absolute fast is exceptional not normal. If we do it, it must be commanded by God and last no longer than three days.

Now that we know what fasting is, we need to address an issue that Christians have debated for centuries. Is fasting an obligatory activity in our life with God? Remember that some spiritual disciplines like solitude, study, and prayer are also essential activities in our life with God. Is fasting, like prayer, one of those? We need to approach this issue and address it with openness and objectivity.

My first observation is that Scripture mentions fasting frequently in both the Old and New Testaments but unlike prayer for instance, no verse explicitly commands us to do it. There are salient passages, however, that have a serious bearing on the issue.

The first is Matthew 6:16-18. Verses 1-18 are about doing good deeds in order to be seen by men. We can legitimately infer that the deeds that Jesus mentions here were widely considered by others and Him to be praiseworthy expressions of devotion. Notice what those three are – giving, prayer, and fasting. Also notice the opening words of verse 16, ***“Whenever you fast.”*** Jesus seems to be taking it for granted here that His followers will do just that.

Nevertheless, Jesus did not command it. He was instructing the crowd on how to properly exercise a common practice of the day. He did not declare that it an essential practice or that it should be continued.

The second salient passage is the most revealing. That passage is Matthew 9:14-15. The disciples of John the Baptist were perplexed about something. The Pharisees, John, and they fasted regularly but Jesus’ disciples did not. Why? Jesus answered that it was because He was with them. It would be inappropriate for them to fast just as it would be inappropriate to fast at a wedding reception. But when He was taken away from His disciples, then could then begin fasting again.

C.S. Lewis explains the significance of this passage well. He argues that it reveals the deity of Jesus. Jesus is declaring that His mere presence suspends some of the normal and even necessary spiritual practices. That could only be so, Lewis contends, if Jesus is God.

But here’s the more specific point for our purposes. Fasting is one of those normal and necessary spiritual practices that Jesus’ presence suspended. He clearly implies that after He dies and leaves earth, His disciples would fast. It was something that He expected them to do. Richard Foster draws this conclusion about the passage: ***“Although the words are not couched in the form of a command, that is only a semantic technicality. It is clear from this passage that Christ both upheld the Discipline of fasting and anticipated that his followers would do it.”*** That is a logical and correct assessment of the text.

When everything is said and done, my opinion is this and you are free to express any disagreements that you have with it. An objective reading of the Bible leads us to conclude that fasting is an essential activity in our life with God that He Himself wants us to practice.

Church history itself confirms that conclusion. Study the Bible and history itself and make a list of those who fasted. You’ll find that list includes the best friends of Jesus down through the centuries. Those friends include Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Anna the prophetess, John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathon Edwards, David Brainerd, Charles Finney, and most importantly Jesus Himself.

The fact is that fasting has been a commonly practiced and written about discipline down through the centuries. Passages like Acts 13:1-3 and 14:23, for instance, reveal that the first century church began regularly fasting after the ascension. A second century church manual called *The Didache* reveals church practices and beliefs in that era. It prescribes that Christians should fast two days a week: Wednesday and Friday. Along those same lines, a church council in the sixth century, the Second Council of Orleans, made fasting obligatory on Christians. Martin Luther, the Father of the Protestant Reformation, declared about Matthew 6, ***"It was not Christ's intention to reject or despise fasting . . . it was His intention to restore proper fasting."*** Finally, John Wesley revived the teaching of *The Didache* and urged early Methodists to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. He thought and felt so strongly about that in fact that he refused to ordain anyone to the Methodist ministry who did not fast on those two days.

My point is simply this. There is a great body of evidence both Biblically and extra-Biblically that those who long for a deep relationship with God need to practice fasting in their life with Him. You must study the evidence yourself and come to your own conclusion about that but that is my conclusion. We need to do it.

But why? That is a valid question. What good is it? The answer is much good. Let's examine now what fasting accomplishes or achieves both as a discipline and as a central activity of our life with God.

First, it glorifies and pleases God. Our fasting must always and first of all be "for the Lord." John Wesley understood and expressed this well. He wrote: ***"First, let it (fasting) be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father who is heaven."*** Our overriding motive in fasting isn't to be benefited but to benefit, God. As in the entirety of our life with God, we must love the Blessor more than the blessing that He gives.

We see that in Zechariah 7:5. The exiled Israelites had fasted at certain intervals during their exile. God asks them in this verse what is actually a rhetorical question. Was it for Him that they actually fasted? Or was it for themselves, to get some benefit or gain? God's question clearly implies that we must fast first and foremost to please and honor Him and when that is our motive, it does.

Acts 13:1-2 sheds further light on fasting as a means of glorifying God. Notice that verse 2 links the act of ministering to the Lord with fasting. The two seemed to go hand in hand in the 1st century church. The implication is that combined with a conscious attitude of worship, fasting ministers powerfully to God.

This is my own primary motivation for fasting. I do it because I know that it pleases and honors God as I combine it with worshipping. As I'm fasting, I try to be in a constant attitude of worshipping as well. As we'll discover when we discuss the discipline of worship, we should worship as we move through our day. Well, I intensify my efforts in that regard when I'm fasting. I am aware as I do so that it pleases and honors God.

A second good that fasting achieves is that it primes us to feast on God.

In John 4:31-34, the disciples tried to persuade Jesus to eat food. They did so because He apparently had been fasting and hadn't eaten for awhile and they were concerned about his physical condition as a result. But He responded in verse 32 that He didn't need to eat because He had *"food to eat that you do not know about."* He then explained in verse 34 what that food was – doing the will of Father God.

These verses teach us that there is a source of physical nourishment other than food. That source is the power of God that can actually sustain us bodily just as food does. We experience that power as we do His will generally and fast particularly.

As Richard Foster says it, *"Fasting is feasting!"* As we fast from food, we feast on God and His power. A Christian poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a poem that articulates this truth so vividly. It goes like this:

*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.*

That poem expresses what those who fast experience. God sustains them and gives them both physical and spiritual nourishment. I've never once noticed, for instance, even after 36 hours without food, any diminishment in my energy levels or strength. I feel hunger but not weakness. I feel well physically and spiritually as I feast on God and His power.

There's a third good that fasting achieves. It trains us to suffer happily. If there's one thing that all of us know it's that we will suffer in this life. None of us, if we live long enough, are immune to this. Thus, one of our most important transformations is to become the kind of person who suffers happily.

Thomas a Kempis explained the importance of that. He wrote:
"Whosoever knows best how to suffer will keep the greatest peace. That man is conqueror of himself, and the lord of the world, the friend of Christ, and heir of heaven." All of us should have specific goals in our lives with God. One of those is to become the kind of person who suffers happily.

Fasting helps us become that because in it, we suffer hunger but are still happy as we feast on God and His strengthening power. Those who are practiced at fasting will have what Dallas Willard calls *"a clear and constant sense of their resources in God."* He goes on say *"that will help them endure deprivations of all kinds, even to the point of coping with them easily and cheerfully."*

Consider the following sufferings that people go through: abandonment by a spouse, the mental illness of a child, the loss of a job, physical injury or disease, failure, slander, the death of a loved one, and so on.

Let me ask you a question. How will you handle and experience those things? Will it be with anger and despair or ease and joy as you are energized by God's provision? Hopefully, it will be the latter and fasting is one of the spiritual disciplines that enables it to be that.

A final good that fasting achieves is that it disciplines our wants.

Let's think for a few moments about doing or getting what we want. In our current cultural climate, people doing or getting what they want is everything. I can safely say in fact that not doing or getting what they want is the most insulting of all things in our culture's thinking. It greatly disturbs people when they don't.

Think about anger, for instance, in those terms. Anger is primarily a response to the frustration of what people want. And for most, it doesn't matter how trivial what they want is. If it's frustrated, they get angry. I remember when the seat belt law was passed back in 1976. I was in a barber shop one day and a man was just ranting and raving about it. He had fought in World War II for freedom, he said, and now they were taking it away. He wanted not to use seat belts and the fact that he didn't get what he wanted greatly disturbed him.

Fasting functions to discipline our wants.

It does so because the desire for food is one of our strongest wants. We recognize how demanding our appetite is in one of our favorite idioms. We say that our stomachs are "growling" and "growling" is an accurately descriptive word. Hunger can be intense, which is why food has the pervasive place in our lives that it does.

Think about that for a few moments – the pervasive place that food has in our lives. I’ve noticed that at conferences, retreats, board meetings, and other events. So much time, energy, and money goes into providing so much food for the participants. The very idea of missing a meal would be out of the question for most of them.

But that is precisely what makes fasting so effective in disciplining and restraining our wants. Since food has a hold on us, the effects of fasting permeate the entirety of our persons and lives. It restrains us away from always getting our desires and wants fulfilled. It teaches us to be calm, serene, and strong, not angry or disturbed, when we’re deprived of what we want. That in turn dramatically affects how we live.

I read the testimony of a man who committed himself to fasting. Listen to how he explains the effects of it on him: *“The anger which I unleashed at my wife and children was less frequent and the materialism that was squeezing the life out of my spirituality had loosened its grip.”* Fasting enabled the Holy Spirit to free Him from His desires and wants – and it will do the same for us.

Fasting is valuable in many other ways as the Holy Spirit uses it to work in and through us. According to Foster, numerous people have testified to the following benefits: increased effectiveness in intercessory prayer, guidance in decisions, increased concentration, deliverance from bondage, physical well-being, revelations, and more.

We should not necessarily seek these benefits but instead invite the Holy Spirit to do as He wills in and through us as we fast. In fasting as in all matters, we claim that promise that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Frugality/Simplicity

Our next discipline for discussion is called by different names. Willard calls it frugality and Foster calls it simplicity. Both designations refer to the same discipline. We’ll refer to it as frugality.

This discipline of abstinence, like the remainder that we’ll discuss, may not be as fundamental to the process of salvation as solitude, silence, and fasting are. But this one especially speaks more practically and powerfully to our current culture than to any other in history. It addresses critical issues that you and I, as 21st century Americans, face.

We practice frugality by abstaining from using money to gratify our desire for status, luxury, or glamour. As Willard puts it, it means that *“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 raises two critical issues that you and I, as disciples of Jesus in the most prosperous culture in history, need to address.

The first is the morality of extravagance. Is extravagance a moral or an immoral thing? Is it good or bad? Is it righteous or evil?

One of America's most celebrated actresses and singers was on the Larry King show several years ago. She is lauded as an advocate for the poor and an unusually generous person. Yet, she owns two homes and an apartment, one of which cost her nine million dollars and the cheapest of which was two million dollars. She also owns a fleet of cars that are worth more than most of us will make in our lifetimes. Instead of being criticized for her absolutely lavish lifestyle, she is celebrated and praised for her advocacy and generosity.

But how can that be? It's because of our current culture's worldview. Do you remember the *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* television show? That show vividly demonstrated our cultural consensus on extravagance. Americans don't abhor it. They admire, respect, and long for it. Richard Foster says it this way. In our culture today, ***"no extravagance is thought to be shameful,"*** and he's absolutely right about that.

But the Bible condemns it in many verses and passages. The prophet Amos, for example, decried the extravagance of the wealthy in Israel. In 3:13-15, he mentioned their summer and winter homes and prophesied that God was going to destroy them. In 4:1-3, he pronounced judgment on the ***"cows of Bashan."*** That phrase referred to the wealthy women of Samaria who lived luxurious lives. In 6:1-7, he pronounced judgment on the rich who lived lush lives while neglecting the moral and material ruin of Israel. If Amos were alive and prophesying to America today, he would castigate that movie star and singer that the culture admires and pronounce judgment on her. Extravagance is simply wrong.

But can we really define what extravagance is? That's the second issue that we need to address.

Let's go back to our definition of frugality. It 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 definition assumes that there really is such a general sense of what is "necessary" that we can intelligently establish what that is? But is that so? Or is what is "necessary" such a subjective thing that we can't really even discuss let alone establish what that is?

Most Americans believe the latter. It is such a subjective thing that no objective lines can be drawn beyond which we should not go. It is up to each individual to decide what is necessary and what is decided cannot be morally challenged. So, extravagant people are considered generous.

Even Christians believe this. I once debated this with a sister in Christ. I told her about a professional baseball player who claims to follow Jesus and lives in a \$2.5 million dollar home. After defining frugality as I defined it to you, I asked her this question. Is a \$2.5 million dollar home a necessity or an extravagance? She replied that she and I could not answer that question. Only the baseball player could. He must establish what is necessary and extravagant *for him*.

But that isn't so. Her reply shows that our own culture has shaped her thinking about money and things. But the Bible teaches implicitly and explicitly in many verses and passages that extravagance is shameful and that anyone with a Biblical view would be able to identify what extravagance is.

But historically, it isn't just the prophets and adherents of Christianity that have had the good sense to define what is extravagant and what isn't. Dallas Willard mentions what were called "the sumptuary laws." Secular authorities in various cultures enacted these laws to regulate the use of money and property.

In ancient Sparta, for instance, people were prohibited from possessing furniture or a house that required more elaborate tools than an axe or saw to build. In ancient Rome, laws were passed that limited how much money people could spend on entertainment. And for centuries in England, laws governed how much various social ranks could spend on food and clothing.

That isn't to say that emperors, royalty, and aristocracy always followed those laws. It is to say that those cultures recognized a basic principle of life. There is a general sense of what is "necessary" and what is not. People whose thinking is developed and informed can truly decide what is extravagant and what is not.

Obviously, our thinking must be that if we're to practice the discipline of frugality. Exercising it, we abstain from using money or possessions in ways that gratify our desire for status, luxury, and prestige. We stay within the bounds of what Biblically informed good sense tells us is necessary for living the kind of life to which Jesus calls us as His disciples.

Achieving that requires that we do two things. First, we must inform our thinking. We must study and learn what Scripture teaches about money and things. We must also study and learn what the current condition of our world is materially. Second, we must reason well. We must take the information we've learned and apply it logically and thus correctly to our current situation in all of its details. The end result is that we make conscious decisions on a case-by-case basis not to live beyond what is necessary for us as disciples of Jesus.

Frugality can be the direct submission of our body to righteousness in which case it isn't a spiritual discipline. We are being frugal because God in His written word commands it. We are obeying the Bible's commands to live simply and give the rest away.

But frugality can also be the indirect submission of our body to righteousness in which case it is a spiritual discipline. We are being consciously frugal for the purpose of personal formation.

The classic Biblical example of this discipline is the rich young ruler. Jesus commanded him to give all he owned to the poor. The Bible doesn't command everyone to do that but Jesus did command the rich young ruler to do that because he needed the personal transformation it would bring about in him.

We ourselves can practice frugality in many different ways.

I read about a man, for instance, who gave his bike that he loved to a young person who didn't have one. Having and enjoying that bike wasn't a sin but this man wanted to experience the liberation that such giving would bring.

There is a Friends pastor of a small church who gives away all of the money that he makes doing funeral services. He doesn't make much money and it wouldn't be wrong for him to keep it for himself. But he gives it away as a spiritual exercise to keep him from the love of money.

A Christian I know decided to start drinking water instead of soda and to give the money he saved doing that to World Relief. It isn't wrong to spend money on drinking soda but he gives it away instead to help create in his a compassion for the poor.

We can be creative, as you can see in practicing this discipline. Our own life circumstances and habits influence that way that we can practice it.

But what good does it do? The answer is "much good" as the examples I just gave reveal.

First, frugality helps free us from the love of money. 1 Timothy 6:17-19, along with Ecclesiastes 5:10-12 are the Bible's classic statements on the love of money. But frugality effectively turns us away from that love. It releases us from the power of money.

Second, it liberates us from the desires that make us love money in the first place. People want money and the prestige, security, and comfort it brings. The desires for those things grip our lives and make us unable to fulfill the command of Micah 6:8 to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

But frugality helps free us from those desires. It helps free us from the desire for prestige. It cultivates the desire to get God's praise not people's. It helps free us from the desire for security. It compels us to trust God not money. And it helps free us from the desire for comfort. It makes us more sacrificial and less self-centered.

Third, it frees us from the spiritual bondage that financial debt brings. As Willard points out, financial debt diminishes our sense of worth, dims our hope for the future, and eliminates our sensitivity to the needs of others. But frugality helps free us from that. It addresses the desires that lead us to the debt in the first place – the desires for glamour, luxury, and prestige.

Willard quotes something that John Joseph Surin said and I close out our discussion of frugality with it. Someone once asked Surin this question. So many people wish to be great in God's eyes. So why are there so few who are truly saintly? Surin simply said, "*The chief reason is that they give too big a place in life to indifferent things.*" Frugality as a habitual and committed discipline addresses that problem in our lives. It turns us away from indifferent or trivial things to what matters most – God and His kingdom.

Chastity

You and I live in a sex saturated culture. One can hardly walk through the mall or watch a television commercial without being exposed to sexual imagery or innuendo of one kind or another.

That imposes upon then a "double whammy." On the one hand, one of the most potent forces in us is our sexuality and the other hand, one of the most potent forces outside us is our culture's obsession with sex. That makes being and remaining sexually pure one of the most difficult challenges that we face.

That's why the Bible addresses our sexuality so comprehensively. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 is one of the passages that does so. Paul's guiding principle, in verse 4, is that we should learn how to possess our vessel (our body) in honor. The discipline of chastity helps us do that.

Chastity means that we purposely turn away from dwelling upon or engaging in the sexual dimensions of our relationships to others – including our husbands and wives.

It doesn't mean non-sexuality, which is the total and permanent abstinence from sex. We call that celibacy and few people are called to that. That fact is behind Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 7:9 that it's better to marry than to burn. We must not shun sexuality.

But at the same time, we must govern it and put it in its proper place. That is what the discipline of chastity is about. We practice it by deciding for a time not to indulge in what would be proper sexual acts. It isn't that the acts are wrong. It's that we abstain from them in order to experience transformation and growth.

That raises an issue for the single and married alike. What are proper sexual acts? To answer that, we must study what the Bible teaches explicitly about sex and draw as many of the correct implications of that as we can. It's also helpful to study thoughtful extra-Biblical writings that address the sexual side of our nature. The best book that I know of on the subject is Richard Foster's book *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*. Its original title was *Money, Sex, and Power*.

In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "***The essence of chastity is not the suppression of lust but the total orientation of one's life toward a goal.***" Lust and sexual perversion disrupt and distort relationships. Construction workers, for instance, have a reputation for ogling women. The fact is that many men perceive and relate to women as sexual objects. Chastity addresses that sin. It helps orient us toward the opposite sex not as sexual objects but as persons. It helps us love them instead of using them.

Secrecy

We now address a spiritual discipline that can be one of the most stabilizing forces in our walk with God. I'm unable to impress upon you enough the importance of practicing it. I'm going to preach a sermon about it in fact in several weeks.

This is a discipline that only those who are weak in a specific aspect of character and life need to practice. But it's one that 99.9% of Christians, including most of us and certainly me, need to practice. What I'm implying of course is that 99.9% of us are weak in this specific aspect of character and life. I want to impress upon you the depth of the problem that this discipline addressed by sharing what is just a revealing anecdote with you.

I conducted the funeral service of Miles Kennedy years ago. The director of the funeral home in Newcastle, where the services were held, called me and asked me several questions. One was whether or not I wanted my name listed any certain way in the newspaper's obituary. I said that I didn't except that I didn't want it to use the title "Reverend." He immediately apologized and said that it would be listed that way. I asked him why and he told me. The newspaper had so many complaints from ministers over the years about not being called "Reverend" in the obituaries that they made using the designation standard policy.

I have an instructive question for you. Why is it that some ministers insist on being called "Reverend?" What kind of thought life and emotional life would a person have to have to be so concerned about being given that title?

Consider another anecdote. I once got a phone call from a person with whom I had had a conversation several hours before. She called to make sure that I didn't think that she watched television too much. She had commented on several television shows in our prior conversation. Thinking her comments after we parted, she began to worry that I might have concluded that she watched television all the time. So she called up to assure me that she didn't.

Again, I have an instructive question for you. Why did it concern her so much that I might think she watched television too much? What kind of thought life and emotional life would a person have to have to be that concerned about such a thing?

Both anecdotes and the questions I asked illustrate one of the most habitual and noticeable qualities of almost every one's character. They hunger for fame and approval and if they don't get that, at least the attention of others. They desperately long for those things and go to great lengths to assure that they get them.

That is one of the most pervasive weaknesses and, if it goes far enough, sins that characterize people's persons and lives. That includes both the redeemed and the unredeemed alike. Their craving to be known and admired in reality dominate and determine what they think, feel, and do.

Lest you think I'm exaggerating, just consider how you felt the last time that someone criticized or misunderstood you. If you're like almost all people, the fact that they did greatly disturbed you.

That demonstrates one of the universal conditions of our fallen spiritual and psychological state. That condition is our deep concern about what others think of us. That is in fact one of the greatest burdens that most people carry through their one life. I'm talking about the crushing burden of the opinion of others. I call it a burden because it disrupts and, taken far enough, even distorts our persons and lives.

If we're disciples of Jesus, we need to set and seek this aim – to experience continuing relationship with Him independent of the opinions of others. Psalm 31:20 calls us to just that. The opening line speaks of being hidden in the secret place of God's presence. That refers to having a depth of relationship with Him. Notice what that kind of relationship shields David from. It shields him from the "conspiracies" of his enemies and "the strife of their tongues." What they think about and say of him in other words doesn't matter to him because He's tight with God.

That is the condition or state for which all of us should strive. Our friendship with Jesus is so vivid and real that the opinions that other have of us really do not matter to us. People's criticism or praise of us simply does not move us. It simply does not affect us except as we may have to act to promote some good.

Thomas a Kempis commented on "the great tranquility of heart" that comes to those who rise above "praisings and blamings." Listen to what he wrote about that: *"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 inward purity and inward trust. He that seeketh no outward witness for himself, it appeareth openly that he hath committed himself wholly to God."*

That is a power-packed paragraph. Notice what our aims should be. It's "not to wish to be comforted by any creature." It's to seek "no outward witness for our self." Those statement picture a person who simply has no desire at all for the praise and approval of others. It matters not at all that others think highly of him or her. By extension, it also matters not at all that others think poorly of him or her, except for the consequences of that on God and others.

Imagine the peace we would have if that were in fact our true inner condition. Imagine how much less fear and anxiety we would have. That's why a Kempis called that condition what he did, "the great tranquility of heart."

Well, the discipline of secrecy helps us attain that. It is the primary bodily activity by which the Holy Spirit makes us like Jesus in this particular regard. So, we need to know how to practice it.

Jesus Himself teaches us just that in Matthew 6:1-16. He certainly doesn't address secrecy here as a discipline. He addresses it instead as a natural expression of the kingdom person and life. Nevertheless, we do learn from Him in that context how to practice it as a discipline.

Speaking about the good deeds of giving to others, praying, and fasting, Jesus explains how to do those things. With regard to giving, it should be "in secret" (verse 4). With regard to praying, it should be "in secret" (verse 6). And with regard to fasting, it should be "in secret" (verse 18).

That shows us what secrecy is. It's one or both of two things. We abstain from making our good qualities and good deeds known and/or we take steps, when appropriate, to keep them from being known.

Opportunities arise all the time to do that. We need to actively look for those opportunities and then take advantage of them.

Years ago, an elder walked late into our Administrative Council meeting at Barberton Friends Church. He had oil and grease on his hands and face and we asked him what happened. He responded by saying that he had been working on a car and changed the subject. We assumed that he meant his but I found out from his wife several days later that it wasn't. He had passed a broken down car on the way to the meeting and stopped to help. He spent almost an hour in 30-degree temperatures getting it to run. But he purposely prevented his good deed from being known.

A Christian attorney I knew did a great deal of pro bono work, meaning legal work for free. He kept it a secret though so that no one would know. The only person who knew was his secretary and she's the one who told me.

A pastor performed a wedding ceremony. The best man gave him \$150 cash from the groom for his service. The pastor didn't take it. He told the best man to give it back to the groom by way of the gift card box so that he wouldn't know. He purposely prevented his good deed from being known.

Those anecdote illustrate how we practice secrecy. We abstain from making our good qualities and good deeds known. We sometimes even take steps, when appropriate, to keep them from being known.

This discipline supplies the Holy Spirit with fertile ground for making us into the kind of person that I described in detail. It's the kind of person who does not need the approval or praise of others. As we practice this discipline, we learn two things in the Spirit's power: (1) to love to be unknown; and (2) to accept misunderstanding of what we are or what we've done without the loss of peace, joy, and purpose.

Secrecy helps the Spirit accomplish something else in us. It teaches us humility and love before God and others. That humility and love in turn cause us to see those around us in the best possible light and to hope and desire the best for them. We find ourselves living out Paul's admonition in Philippians 2:3, ***"Do nothing from selfishness or empty-conceit, but humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves."*** As we grow and mature in this way, we may even reach the point that we root for our competitors. We may actually hope that they do better and even better than us. It sounds far fetched I know but it is within the Holy Spirit's power to form such a person.

Secrecy is in the end the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is a natural expression of a well-established friend of Jesus who has grown into a kingdom person. But until that is so of us, secrecy needs to be one of the disciplines to which we are most committed. The Holy Spirit will work wonders through it. So give it a try!

Sacrifice

Our next discipline for discussion is one that we need to handle wisely but is quite effective in building our faith when we do. It's the discipline of sacrifice.

In this discipline, we abstain from possessing or enjoying what is necessary for our living. That is different than frugality. In frugality, we abstain from what is superfluous or unnecessary. In sacrifice, we abstain from what is necessary. We forsake the security of meeting our needs with what is in our hands, relying on God Himself to do it instead. This requires the total abandonment of our welfare and existence to Him.

We must practice this discipline wisely and in a Spirit led way. We must not go off "half-cocked" and do foolish things of which God disapproves. But there is a place for sacrifice and we should practice it when it's appropriate.

The purpose of doing so is to enhance or increase our confidence and trust in God. When we sacrifice for Him and He then supplies our need, our faith in Him grows. Many of us have a cautious faith that never steps out on a limb so to speak. In this discipline, we step out on the limb and rely totally on God's provision for the express purpose of growing that faith. God's care in response to our sacrifice does just that. It grows our faith.

Dallas Willard shares his own testimony in that regard. While he was at graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, his wife and he decided to give away the money they had left after paying their bills at the first of the month, which included their grocery money. It wasn't much but they gave it away and told no one. A week later, Willard walked out to his car one day and found a \$20 bill pinned to the steering wheel of his car. This was many years ago and consequently that \$20 fed them for the rest of the month.

A Christian husband and wife had an emergency fund for things like unexpected car repairs. They decided to give it away as an act of faith and did so. They had no emergencies until the fund was built back up again.

Again, we need to be Spirit led in our practice of sacrifice but when He leads us to do it and we obey, our trust in Him and His faithfulness to us grows.

#2 – Disciplines of Engagement

To this point, we have studied eight disciplines of abstinence. They are the following: solitude, silence 1, silence 2, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice.

We're now ready to address the disciplines of engagement. They counterbalance the disciplines of abstinence. Generally speaking, disciplines of abstinence counteract tendencies to sins of commission. Their goal is not to do evil things. But disciplines of engagement counteract tendencies to sins of omission. Their goal is to do righteous things. Abstinence makes way for engagement. It breaks the hold of improper engagements so that we can be properly engaged to God.

Study

The first discipline of engagement is study. We begin there because study, especially of the Bible, is the chief counterpart of solitude. Just as solitude is the primary discipline of abstinence for the early part of our walk with Jesus, so study is the primary discipline of engagement.

But like solitude, study is much more than just a discipline. It is also a well-established and central activity in our kingdom lives. We can never do without it no matter how spiritually advanced we become. It is always a centerpiece of a familiar friendship with Jesus. We can never reach the depths of relationship with Him or experience the formation of person and life that He has for us without it. Almost all of God's best friends through the ages have understood and taught this.

Whether it's as a discipline or a central activity of our walk with Jesus, the methodology of study is the same. It involves two basic activities.

First, we concentrate on something. That means that we center our mind and focus our attention on it. We deliberate on it. We take in whatever we facts we can about it for the purpose of understanding it.

That's what I did when Diana was killed in the car crash. I concentrated on that event, specifically, two aspects of it.

The first aspect was the world's reaction to her death. I carefully observed and took in the facts. Millions of people were overwhelmed with grief, so much so that they took off work and traveled hundreds of miles to lay flowers at Buckingham Palace. They wept and declared that their lives would never be the same. And almost all of them had never even seen her let alone known her.

The second aspect that I concentrated on was the person and life of Diana herself. She did possess great physical beauty and wealth. But apart from that, she was an average person at best. She was no more competent (intelligent and talented) than the rest of us are. She was a disturbed person emotionally and morally who struggled in her private life. She did do some good works but nothing commensurate with the good works that someone with her resources and status could have done.

That illustrates the first basic activity of study - concentration. We center our mind and focus our attention on what is being studied. We deliberate on it and take in whatever facts we can about it for the purpose of comprehending it.

The second basic activity of study is reflection. We analyze the facts we've taken in. We connect them rightly together for the purpose of determining the meaning of what we're studying. The purpose of concentration is comprehension. We want to grasp the nature of what we're studying. But the purpose of reflection is application. We want to grasp the significance of what we're studying - what it means to God and His kingdom, the world at large, others, and/or us.

Going back to Diana's death and the world's response, I wanted to understand the significance of what was taking place and reflected on it to do so. I connected together all the facts that I mentioned before and concluded this.

People's reaction to Diana's death was actually an overreaction because it uncovered their own mortality. People found in her vitality, beauty, and wealth a quality of transcendence in which they themselves shared. But they lost it when she died. That explains the phenomenal outpouring of emotion that her death generated. People who don't cry wept openly and publicly. Her death was more than just her death. It was theirs as well. And when they cried for her, they cried for themselves as well. Sigmund Freud was right when he said that people spend their lives covering up the fact of their own mortality. They do and Diana's death ripped the cover off, even if momentarily.

My wife isn't necessarily convinced that my conclusion is so but it does illustrate well what reflection is. We analyze the facts we've taken in. We try to connect them rightly together for the purpose of determining what we're studying means to God and His kingdom, the world at large, others, and/or us.

Those then are the two activities of study. First, we must concentrate and comprehend. Second, we must reflect and apply.

The problem is that alarming numbers of Christians don't want to do either of those things. They don't want to study in other words.

There are several reasons for that, the primary of which is the nature of our culture. It's one that dictates against those two activities of study. It neither values nor encourages concentration and reflection. On the contrary, it actually discourages and works against them.

Chuck Colson explains what part of the problem is in his book [A Dangerous Grace](#). Discussing the deleterious effects of television, he writes: *"Television, on the other hand, erodes the ability to concentrate with its fast-moving images. It discourages analytical thinking by reducing complex ideas to images and condensing complex events to a forty-five second sound bite. And so, ironically, as our machines grow more complex, our thinking is growing simpler."* He's right but it isn't just television. Video and computer games have only served to exacerbate the situation.

I've discovered in my own personal ministry that many if not most Christians do not like to study. They claim that they can't study but that isn't the case for most. It isn't that they can't study. It's that they won't. It bores them and so they simply don't do it. What they need to do is stop exposing themselves to so many images and start concentrating and reflecting on things. The mind can be retrained in that regard and that's exactly what they need to do – retrain it.

Now that we know that we should study and can, we need to figure out to what it is directed. There are two categories of reality that we should study: verbal and nonverbal. Let's examine both of those.

First, we should study verbal reality. When we hear the word "study", we usually think of books or other written materials. But the written word is only one kind of verbal reality. The spoken word is a second. Spoken word includes sermons, speeches, Sunday school lessons, conversations, and any other kind of vocal communication.

The second category of reality that we should study is nonverbal reality. That refers to that which is unwritten or unspoken. Examples of this are nature, experiences, actions, behaviors, and events. I talked about my study of an event, for instance, Diana's death and the behaviors that accompanied it, the responses of people to it.

Whether it's verbal or nonverbal reality, studying it requires what Foster calls intrinsic and extrinsic aids. His discussion of these is instructive and I'd like to give you a synopsis of it.

Let's start with the intrinsic aids. The first is *understanding*. What is the author saying? *Understanding* refers to grasping exactly what it is that the writer or speaker is saying.

I attended our denomination's mini-pastor's conference yesterday. Our guest speaker was Knute Larson, senior minister of the 12,000 member Chapel Hill Church in Akron. During his presentation, he quoted Philippians 2:12, which says, "***Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.***" He then remarked that the word "salvation" there obviously refers to physical and material well-being since we're saved by grace.

Let's do a little exercise here and apply this first intrinsic aid, *understanding*, to it. What is Larson saying? He's saying that Philippians 2:12 teaches this. We're to work out our physical and material well-being with fear and trembling. It must mean that since we're saved by grace. Suppose that I heard him say that it teaches this. We're to work out our physical, material, and spiritual well-being with fear and trembling. But that isn't what he said. So I didn't understand what he said. I misunderstood it. You can see that understanding requires looking carefully at what is written or listening carefully to what is said.

The second intrinsic aid is *interpretation*. What does the author mean? *Interpretation* refers to grasping what the reasoning processes and logical implications of what the writer or speaker said are.

Let's apply that to what Larson said. What did he mean? The word salvation normally refers to our standing before God. It means He has forgiven our sins and that we're justified before Him. The Bible teaches that we're saved by grace. We can't earn salvation. It's a gift of God. Thus, Larson concludes, salvation can't mean justified. Since that word is used on several occasions in the Bible to refer to physical and material well-being, that's what it must mean here.

The third intrinsic aid is *evaluation*. Is the author right or wrong? Is what he or she wrote or said true or not true?

Once again, let's apply that to what Larson said. What he right or wrong? Does the word "salvation" in Philippians 2:12 mean physical and material well-being? No, it doesn't. For one thing, Paul rarely if ever uses it in that sense. For another thing, the context of the verse shows it doesn't mean that here. People in the church at Philippi were at odds with each other. Paul called them to unity and that's what this verse is really about. The word salvation refers to the corporate spiritual health of the church there. Paul is calling them to work out or put forth effort to become a spiritually healthy church. Larson was clearly wrong in saying what he did.

Do you what I did. I studied the verbal word of Knute Larson. As we discussed before, I concentrated and reflected on what he said. I did that using the intrinsic tools of understanding, interpretation, and evaluation.

Just an aside here. What I did with him, you should do with me. Referring specifically to evaluating, don't accept what I preach and teach hook, line, and sinker. Evaluate it and determine to the best of your ability if it's true or not.

As Foster points out, the intrinsic tools that we've just discussed aren't adequate for study in and of themselves. They need to be complemented with three extrinsic tools.

The first is experience. Experience informs and enlightens our study. What we ourselves have done or gone through enlightens us and expands our ability to understand, interpret, and evaluate.

The second extrinsic tool is other books. What we've learned from reading other books does the same thing that experience does – enlightens us and expands our ability to understand, interpret, and evaluate.

The third extrinsic tool is discussion. Discussion refers to the verbal interaction with others about the thing being studied. The value of this of course depends on the knowledge of the people with whom we're interacting. But we can often come to insights and truths in such a setting that we wouldn't come to otherwise.

My study of Larson's statement exemplifies what I mean. I have studied the book of Philippians carefully on my own and with other commentaries. I was able to bring what I learned from doing that to Larson's statement. Extrinsic tools in other words helped me study what he said.

Our discussion of concentration and reflection and the intrinsic and extrinsic tools show us that study does require effort on our part. There is a vast difference between studying a book and just reading it or studying a sermon or speech and just listening to it.

Our discussion also implies the importance of choosing the right reality to study, especially when it comes to verbal reality. It takes a significant expenditure of time and energy to study books, sermons, and so on. So we need to make sure that the books, sermons, and so on are good enough, beneficial enough, to justify the time and energy that we give them. There is more verbal reality available to us now than at any other time in history. We need to choose wisely what part of it that study.

The first and foremost object of our study of course should be the Bible. That only stands to reason. If I believe that it is the actual written word of God, I also believe that it gives us the best information about the most important matters in human life. And if it does so, it only makes sense that I should study it first and most of all.

I had a friend in seminary named Jimmy Ray. I had played baseball against him in college and then went to the same seminary he did. During our first year there, the San Francisco Giants drafted Jimmy and he left school to go to training camp. Since he would have lots of free time there, he asked our Old Testament professor to suggest some books that he might read. The professor, knowing that Jimmy had only been saved for six years, wisely gave him a list that had only one book on it – the Bible. He told him to read and study the Bible thoroughly before committing himself to other books.

That doesn't mean that we can't study other books. Some like Dallas Willard's *Divine Conspiracy*, with its commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, may actually help us study the Bible. But we should major in the Bible over every other book. We need to establish as one of our aims in life to study and know it well.

Our immediate objective in studying the Bible is to interpret it. Interpretation involves two things. First, we learn what the text being studied means. Not "what it means to me" but "what the author himself actually meant when he wrote it." Second, we apply what he meant to the persons and lives of others or us. We figure out how what he meant impacts the persons and lives of others or us.

Interpreting the Bible is something that all of us can and must learn. Doing so requires studying a discipline called hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is about learning and applying the right principles for interpreting the Bible. Hermeneutics isn't just necessary for seminary students and preachers. It's necessary for anyone who wants to correctly learn and apply the Bible.

Everyone without exception has a hermeneutic. Each of us does. Everyone without exception has a set of principles, even if they don't consciously think about them, which guide how they interpret the Bible. Each of us does. The issue isn't whether or not we have such principles because we do. The issue is whether or not they are the correct ones. Let me illustrate by having you interpret two verses.

The first is Jeremiah 29:11. What does this verse mean? Christians quote it all of the time and apply it to themselves as individuals or to other Christians. They take it to mean that God has a specific plan for our lives and that we can rest easy because our future is in His hands.

If we interpret this verse that way, then we're following several principles of interpretation in doing so. One of them is that context, the verses before and after a verse, isn't important and that the verse can be accurately interpreted without it. The second is that any promise or word of comfort that God gives to the Israelites as a nation automatically apply to individual Christians as well.

The problem is that those are wrong principles. The right principle is that context is crucial to correctly interpreting most verses, including this one. Another right principle is that promises or words of comfort that God gives to Israel cannot be indiscriminately applied to individual Christians. They can only be applied only if the context or content of the promise or word or any other Scriptures indicate they can. Let's apply these principles to Jeremiah 29:11.

First, we examine the immediate context, verses 10-14. This context identifies to whom God is speaking. The Babylonians had conquered the nation of Judah and exiled many of its people into foreign lands including the land of Babylon. God refers to that in verse 10 and promises to bring the people back. That makes clear to whom God is speaking in verse 11. Who is it? Is it to individual followers of God? No, it is not. It is to the nation as a whole. He isn't telling individuals that He has a plan for them and a future. He's telling the nation that and the specific plan that He's talking about is bring the exiles back to their homeland.

Second, we know that we cannot automatically apply this word of promise to the nation to ourselves as individuals. We can only apply it to ourselves if something in the context or content of it indicates that we should. There is no such indication here.

Consequently, the bottom line is that applying this promise to our selves and relying on it is misapplying it. It has nothing to do with you and I as individual followers of Jesus. It has only to do with the nation of Judah.

The same holds true for verse 13. We often quote this to mean that if we seek God intently as individual Christians, He will let us find Him. But that is not what it is saying. God is telling the people of Judah that if they as a nation seek Him, they'll find Him and His blessings. He will restore their strength and power as a nation. We do know, however, that something like that occurs in our own individual walk with God. Proverbs 8:17 and James 4:8 teach us that if we do seek God as individuals, that is, become preoccupied with His person and will, we will find Him.

Anyway, the bottom line is this. Our immediate objective in studying the Bible is to interpret it. To do that, we have to learn what the text being studied means actually means and then apply it correctly to the persons and lives of others or us. We must put forth effort to do that beginning with learning and applying the right principles of interpreting the Bible.

There are different ways of studying the Bible. My favorite way is to read it through verse by verse with a commentary. Individuals who know the original Hebrew language of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament and the history and culture of the books write commentaries on them explaining what each verse means. So I read the book through using the commentary.

My procedure is this. I read the text that the commentary is discussing and then read what the commentary says about it.

Let's look at Colossians as an example of what I mean. I studied this book with a *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*. The first part of the commentary is an introduction that gives us the background information that we need on the Colossians. The actual commentary begins with the author's thoughts on 1:1-2, which he labels *Salutation*. So I read verse 1 and 2 in the Bible and then go to the commentary and read what the author wrote about it. The commentary proceeds with 1:3-8, which he labels *Thanksgiving*. So I read verses 3-8 and then return to the commentary and read what the author wrote about them. As I follow this procedure, I write down any insights that I think are significant.

Beside 1:2, for instance, I wrote a note that says, "***Saints = status not condition.***" I got that from the commentary. It points out in verse 2 that the Greek word translated saints doesn't refer to our subjective condition, that is, as spiritually mature. It refers instead to our objective standing before God instead as forgiven and declared righteous. Even the newest and most spiritually immature Christian is a saint, as much so as a spiritually advanced Christian. I don't know Greek and wouldn't have known that about the word "saint" apart from the commentary.

3:15 is another example. This verse occurs in an immediate context, verses 12-17. Paul calls for unity and love among Christians and writes about that in verse 15, "***Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.***" I wrote a note beside that verse that says, "***Inner peace should umpire our relationships.***" I got that from the commentary. It points out that the Greek word translated "rule" carries the idea of an umpire who rules in games. Just as he is the who decided how things go in a game, so inward peace, not tension and bitterness, should decide how our relationships go. I don't know Greek and wouldn't have known that about the word "rule" apart from the commentary.

That was a significant insight to me that I now apply in my life in all of my relationships, starting with my wife. When we don't see eye to eye on something, I examine and determine the inner condition that is guiding my behavior and response. I ask a question. Is peace or are tension and bitterness guiding it? If it's tension and bitterness, I realize that my inner condition is a bigger problem than whatever the issue is at hand. So I address that through repentance and prayer.

But reading a commentary is only part of my methodology for studying the Bible. I do a preliminary reading of the Biblical book before reading the commentary. In that reading, I underline or mark in a notebook the things that seem important or that I don't understand. I then read it through with the commentary, taking special note of those things.

Once I've read the book through with a commentary, I reread the book, looking at the notes I've taken as I do.

With some of the smaller books, like Paul's letters, I read the book once a day for seven days both before and after going through it with the commentary. I've done that with all of the books of the New Testament and some of the Old.

Another method of study is to master some of the classic passages or chapters in the Bible. Examples of such passages are Exodus 20, Psalm 119, Isaiah 53, Matthew 5-7, 1 Corinthians 13, and 1 Corinthians 15. We read the passage over and over again paying attention to each verse. We do this until we know it through and through.

We must continue studying the books in the Bible over and over again. Knowledge and experience build on themselves. That means that each time we study a book, we're more capable of learning further truths that we didn't grasp before. Further study also reminds us of previous truths that we've forgotten or reinforces the ones we've remembered.

Our study of the Bible literally never ends in this earthly life. We should study it and continue studying it until the day that we die.

But it isn't just the Bible that we should study. Some of Jesus' best friends through the centuries have written what are considered Christian classics: *The Confessions* by Saint Augustine, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis, *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence, *Pensees* by Blaise Pascal, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* by William Law, *A Testament of Devotion* by Thomas Kelly, *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers, and many more. Richard Foster identifies some of the great classics in a book he compiled titled *Devotional Classics*. He gives samplings of these classics in it.

Then there are some outstanding contemporary Christian writers. In my view, the two best are Dallas Willard and Richard Foster in that order. They're so good in fact that I buy and read literally every book that they write. Willard's books have more profoundly influenced my person and life than any other person or book has apart from the Bible.

I would also quickly note that there are some secular books that are well worth studying. A secular social critic named Neil Postman, for instance, has written two books that every Christian, in my view, should eventually read, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and *The Disappearance of Childhood*.

As Howard Hendricks points out, Americans today have a rich treasure of written resources to supplement their study of the Bible. We should embrace and use those resources as much as we can. Our person and life will be greatly enriched if we do.

Let me share a quick caveat in that regard. As Foster points out, we shouldn't be overwhelmed or discouraged by the books we haven't read. Neither you nor I will read all of the books I've mentioned. They are there though for us though if we desire to do so. Foster contends and correctly so that *"the key to the Discipline of study is not reading many books, but experiencing what we do read."*

What we've discussed to this point is the study of verbal reality, the written and spoken word. We're now ready to take a quick look at non-verbal reality. Remember that examples of non-verbal reality are nature, experiences, actions, behaviors, events, and a reality I didn't mention before, our selves.

We do with non-verbal reality what we do with verbal reality. We concentrate and comprehend and we reflect and apply. We do so using the intrinsic and extrinsic aids that we discussed.

We can study 24-hour television news coverage for instance. Americans assume such coverage is a beneficial thing? But is it really? Or is actually harmful? We have to study non-verbal realities to determine that. We might ask and answer questions like these. What is the content of the news that I'm hearing? Is that content relevant to me, meaning, will it affect some decision I make? What is the psychological impact that it has on us, that is, how does it make us think and feel? Am I better off or worse off for having heard it?

Or we can study the effect of Christmas presents on our children or grandchildren. We can observe their reaction and response when they're opening their presents. Do they seem appreciative for each and every one or do they have so many that they hastily open one to get to another? If so, what does that mean about the impact of presents on them? How does it influence their volitional and value system, if at all?

Or we can study our selves by concentrating and reflecting on our behaviors and responses. A few months ago, I went to a noon meeting for Mahoning County pastors. There were 45 pastors there and only three wore suits, Jay Alford, another pastor I didn't know, and me. Everyone else was dressed in shirts and slacks, which apparently is how they normally dress in their profession. Last week, I attended our denomination's one-day pastor's mini-conference. Out of approximately 100 pastors there, I was the only one in a suit. I felt conspicuous and out of place I admit.

I asked Jay what he thought about pastors dressing so informally these days. He disapproves and believes it reflects a lack of decorum and respect. I don't know if that's true or not but I've been studying myself. Why do I think pastors should wear suits and why do I?

There are several possibilities. Is it because I'm uppity and trying to impress people? Is it because I'm a cranky traditionalist who doesn't like change, including the decline in our culture's standards of dress? Is it because of an experience my church had with a young pastor, who didn't dress very well and embarrassed the congregation, when I was a boy? Or is it because I think that there is a psychology of dress and that how we appear to people in different contexts matters?

Those examples illustrate the study of non-verbal realities. I have a contention in that regard, which is based on study by the way. That contention is this. Almost no one studies the non-verbal realities that so dramatically impact and alter their lives. I'm talking about things like television, fast foods, I-pods, cell phones, the Christmas season, sports, medical treatments, and more. People rarely concentrate and reflect on the effects those things have on their lives but they should. Things would go far better for them if they did.

To this point, I've explained what the discipline of study is and how we practice. Now let's close our discussion of it out by examining what it does. What does study accomplish or achieve in us?

It is one of the central ways by which God changes us. We must grasp this. The primary purpose of study isn't just to learn information. It also isn't even just to trying to live out what we learn. Those are valid concerns and are beneficial to us. But they aren't the primary purpose of study. Its primary purpose is to change us.

And that is in fact what happens. Whenever we study something, we take its order and nature into our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Willard uses a helpful analogy and I want to summarize what he says. At one time, we didn't know the alphabet. But then we vigorously studied it and brought it before our minds and related our body to it. Before long, the very order that is in the alphabet was in my mind and body. At that point, that order enabled us to reproduce, recognize, and use the alphabet and the letters that make it up. That in turn enabled us to do many good things that we couldn't do before we studied the alphabet.

What is true of the alphabet is true of anything, good and evil, that we study. We take its order, nature, and power into our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

That is especially true of the Bible. When we study it, its order and nature are infused into our minds, hearts, souls, and bodies. Quoting Willard, it does the following: *"establishes good epidermal responses of thought, feeling, and action. And these in turn integrate us into the flow of God's eternal reign. We really come to think and believe differently, and that changes everything else."*

I'm studying the Psalms right now. I'm going through them verse by verse with the best commentary I've ever read, Derek Kidner's two-volume set. This detailed study is transforming me into the image of the truths I'm learning. Specifically, I feel my faith strengthened or deepened and my inclination to sin weakened. My mind and inner conditions are taking on the order of what I'm studying in the Psalms.

Another thing I'm studying right now is chemistry. I'm trying to wade through a basic chemistry book. I know very little about atoms and molecules and all that they involve but what I'm learning is transforming me. In my view, the sub-microscopic world of atoms and molecules cries out the presence of God. I just feel closer to Him and more confident in Him as I learn more and more about the foundations of this world He made. My mind and inner conditions are taking on the order of what I'm studying, which is God's order.

You can perhaps see why I said what I said at the beginning of our discussion of study. It is not just a discipline but also one of the central activities in our life with God. It is essential to anyone who wants to become like Jesus. We cannot become what we should be without it.

I close our discussion with Foster's words in *Celebration of Discipline*: ***"Many Christians remain in bondage to fears and anxieties simply because they do not avail themselves of the Discipline of study. They may be faithful in church attendance and earnest in fulfilling their religious duties, and still they are not changed. I am not here speaking only of those who are going through mere religious forms, but of those who are genuinely seeking to worship and obey Jesus Christ as Lord and Master. They may sing with gusto, pray in the Spirit, live as obediently as they know, even receive divine visions and revelations, and yet the tenor of their lives remain unchanged. Why? Because they have never taken up one of the central ways God uses to change us: study."***

Worship

The second discipline of engagement that we now address is worship.

Let me first of all define what worship is. It's two things: (1) engaging ourselves with the person and works of God, that is, bringing them before our thoughts and emotions; and (2) expressing the awesomeness of His person and works through thought, words, rituals, and/or symbols.

We can and should do this alone, all week long, as we move through our days. In that case, our expression will be primarily through thought although we may use words, rituals, and/or symbols as our circumstances allow.

As I read through the chemistry book I mentioned before, for instance, I'm sometimes just overwhelmed by the grandeur of God's intelligence and His incredible design. I think about His knowledge and wisdom and just begin to mentally praise and adore Him for that. Sometimes I even do it verbally either through words or songs. I might recite or even sing the words of a hymn or song like *To Him Who Sits on the Throne*.

But our worship should also be corporate. The Bible pictures God's people gathered to corporately worship Him. That is the primary purpose of our gathering together here on Sunday morning. Together, as a body, we bring God's person and works before our thoughts and emotions. We then express the awesomeness of them through words, rituals, and/or symbols.

There are many forms by which we can achieve the expression part of our worship. Some churches employ high liturgy and others low liturgy. A Lutheran church, for instance, will be much more formal than an Assemblies of God church. It will also use much more ritual and symbol than the Assemblies church.

But that's okay because the Bible nowhere prescribes a particular form for worship. It gives us great freedom in that regard. It teaches us that the forms are not the worship. As Foster points out, they only lead us into the worship. So we can worship in many different ways, which explains all of the worship styles that we see in churches.

Many churches today, for example, worship through choruses or praise songs sung over and over again. My home church, for instance, sings for half an hour and then the pastor preaches and that's pretty much it. Those are the two forms of their worship. I personally don't like that, singing several choruses over and over again. I like a service that has singing but also readings, testimonies, and more. Neither form is right or wrong. Both are acceptable and we choose the one that enables us to best minister to God.

Psalm 95 teaches us what worship is really all about. From ancient times, the church has used this psalm widely as both a call and a guide to worship. So let's examine what it teaches us about that.

I begin with verse 6 and the word "worship." Ezekiel 44:15 tells us what the essence of worship is. It's ministering to God.

I know that sounds odd to a lot of people. They normally think of ministering in terms of human beings. We minister to human beings not God. After all, He's self-sufficient. He doesn't need anyone or anything including you and me.

That's true. But something else is also true. God's heart isn't made of stone. His heart is in fact the most sensitive and tender of all.

Which explains what worship is. It's touching God's heart. It's you and I, finite human beings, moving and pleasing the infinite God. Wow, what an incredible thing that is.

That shows us the priority of worship. Worship comes before work. Ministry to God comes before ministry to man. We talk about people who worship but don't work and serve. That is hypocrisy. But people who work and serve but don't worship are even worse. That is idolatry. It is deifying service and work.

The fact is that worship is the most significant of all human activities. It is the noblest of all pursuits. Our worship reaches not only into heaven but also into the very heart of God Himself. There is nothing as significant and noble as that!

Now that we know what worship is, let's examine how we should do it. The Bible gives us a guiding principle in that regard. We should worship with our whole being. No aspect of our being should be excluded. That means three things.

First, we must worship rationally. You can see that in verses 3-5, which focus on the person and works of God. Our mind must be engaged. We not only have to think about God and His works. We also have to think correctly about them.

Jesus makes that very point in John 4:24. He declares there that we must worship God in spirit and in truth. Worship requires thinking rightly about God and His works. And to think rightly about them we must study and learn them in detail. A.W. Tozer expressed the urgency of this well. He wrote, "*The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.*" Our worship must be worthy of Him and it can only be if we truly understand His person and works.

That is one of the reasons that we need to build the purposeful, thorough, and objective vision of God that we talked about in our study titled *The First Aim*. I made the point there that we must know in detail who God is before we can love Him. But it's also true that we must know in detail who God is before we can worship Him in truth. The study of God and His word and world opens the way for worship.

Anyway, our worship must be rational. Our minds must be engaged and focused on the person and works of God.

Back in 17th century England, Anglican churches armed an usher with a pole with either a feather or knob on the end of it. Then when anyone fell asleep during services, the usher would either tickle his nose or crack him on top of the head with it. Suppose that we armed our ushers with one of those. I wonder how often they'd have to use it.

Ushers can address attendees sleeping but not daydreaming. How many of you have ever thought about something other than God during a worship service? We all have. Years ago, I left for Columbus to take the bar exam on a Monday. During the worship service the day before, I have to admit that my mind was on that more than on God.

Anyway, when people are sleeping or daydreaming during church services, their minds aren't engaged with God. And because their minds aren't engaged with God, they aren't worshipping. Being in a worship service doesn't make a person automatically a worshipper.

Worshipping with our whole being means a second thing. We must worship emotionally. Notice the two different moods of worship in Psalm 95 – the passion and joy of verses 1-2 and the reverence and awe of verses 6-7a. Those moods involve deep-seated emotions and desires that arise *from* God and *for* God.

What would you consider the most exciting moment in sports history – as far as you experienced it at least? I think it was the last ten seconds of the 1980 Olympic hockey game between the USA and the Soviet Union and the minutes thereafter. That was probably the biggest upset in all of sports history. Maybe you saw the movie made about it several years ago. It was aptly titled *Miracle*. Anyway, I saw the game on television and replayed many times since and I've never seen a crowd so "into" a game. It was captivated by what was going on and people who made it up cheered and roared like I've never seen people do before.

What I want you to see is this. That crowd had passion and joy, which rose *from* the team. The Soviet Union had the greatest team in the world. They had beaten an NHL all-star team that year 10-3 and hadn't lost a game in years. The USA team was composed of amateur college players and had lost to the Soviets in a practice game that year 13-1. They surprised everyone by winning their preceding games and making it into the medal round, which no one had expected. Americans had become enamored or taken with the team because of its efforts and success. Thus their passion and joy arose *from* the team.

But their passion and joy also rose *for* it. They wanted it to know how deeply they appreciated and admired what it had done and achieved that through their passion and joy.

It's the same way in worship. Our passion and joy or reverence and awe rise *from* God. His nature and works are so wonderful, so awesome, that we absolutely esteem and admire Him. And that attitude of ours generates the emotions and feelings that characterize our worship. Our worship is, thus, *from* Him.

But it's also *for* Him. We want Him to know how much we esteem and admire Him and achieve that by expressing it in worship.

Worshipping with our whole being means a final thing. We must worship bodily. We must not just think and feel. We must act as well. God wants us to give our body its fair share in worship.

That certainly involves our tongues. We must express verbally what we think and feel about Him and His works. That is primary in worship. We make know what we think and feel by praying, singing, testifying, reading, and other activities of the tongue.

But God wants us to involve the rest of our body as well. We do that by making it have postures that are consistent with what we're thinking and feeling. Verse 6 reveals two of those postures – **kneeling** and **bowing** down. Others include **standing** in Deuteronomy 29:10,15; **clapping hands** in Psalm 47:1; **lifting hands** in Psalm 63:4; **lifting up the head and eyes** in Psalm 123:1; and one that we Quakers don't usually do, **dancing** in Psalm 150:4.

I used to wonder when I was growing up why we stood to sing and pray. I thought it was to limber up the old people or wake up the tired people. I realize now that it's because standing is one of the postures of worship.

Along those same lines, several people have told me that they sometimes feel like stepping out into the aisle and kneeling down to sing our worship choruses. They don't though because they fear it would cause a stir. But it shouldn't. Kneeling down is an appropriate posture that gives our body its fair share in worship.

So that is the guiding principle of how to worship. We should worship God with our whole being – rationally, emotionally, and bodily.

Now, Psalm 95 teaches us three other principles about worship that we need to grasp and act on. Let's look at each.

First, worship is something that we do, not something that God does. Look at the words "let us" in verses 1, 2, and 6. Those words imply that worship is something that we do, not something that God does and that's true. Worship isn't God acting with regard to us. It's we acting with regard to Him. That is in fact what makes it a discipline. It is something that we are able to do if we're willing.

That means that we are worshipping even if God does nothing. I've heard pastors say and I've said it myself that we go into worship anticipating what God will do. There is nothing wrong with that as long as we recognize that what God will do has nothing to do with our worship itself. What we should do instead is to go into worship anticipating what we will do. Our concerns should be focused on worshipping as I've explained it today – with our whole being.

There's a second principle that Psalm 96 teaches us and it's a natural corollary of the first one. Worship is about God not us. I counted on the names, personal pronouns, and metaphors that refer to God in these 11 verses. Would someone like to guess how many there are? There are 26. God dominates this worship psalm and appropriately so. That's because worship is about Him not us.

Most churches and Christians act as if that isn't so.

I've seen several church ads, for instance, inviting people to come to worship services. The emphasis of those ads is how uplifted and inspired people will be if they come. Then there's a church I know that has a separate worship service for its young people on Sunday morning. The youth leader explains that service this way: *"We want our young people to have a good worship experience. So we gear our service to what they want and like."*

Those ads and that service illustrate something. The worship services of most churches are about people not God. Most pastors, and I was as guilty as anyone for most of my life, are more concerned about the impact of the worship services on people than on God. The pressures in that direction are great. We know that if people are pleased, they will come to the services. But if they aren't pleased, they won't.

So, we do two things. First, we plan worship services to please people primarily and God secondarily if at all. And second, we judge their success or failure in those terms. We deem them successful if the people are pleased. We deem them a failure if they aren't pleased or are displeased.

What normally pleases people in that regard is having an experience. That is probably the primary objective of modern American worshippers – to have an experience. Having a worship experience in fact has become the defining objective or goal Christians today. That is so important to Christians that they actually define spirituality in those terms. We're spiritual people if we have a worship experience on Sunday. We aren't spiritual if we don't.

But that is crooked thinking. Again let me say that it is a valid desire to have an encounter with God, an experience, when we worship.

But it is invalid to define the success or failure of worship in those terms. We must grasp that worship is about God not people and act as if that is so.

That means two things. First, we should plan our worship, both individual and corporate, to please God. And second, we should judge the success or failure of our worship in those terms. If our worship displeases the people but pleases Him, it's successful. If it pleases the people but doesn't please Him, it's a failure.

To know what pleases Him of course, must study His word, especially the Psalms, and figure it out. We should then worship that way.

What I said about bodily postures illustrates what I mean. I am a reserved individual and found raising my hands in worship, individually and corporately, an unnatural and uncomfortable thing to do. So I never raised my hands in worship. But then I studied the book of Psalms and learned what I taught you about bodily postures. Since raising my hands in worship pleases God, I did it even though it didn't please me. As I did that over the years, it became more natural to me and comfortable for me. It is something that comes easy to me now and pleases God.

Psalm 95 teaches us a third principle about worship. Worship arises from spirituality. That's the gist of verses 8-11 generally and the words "know My ways" specifically in verse 10. You know what spirituality is. It's purposely and relentless interacting with the spiritual realm. It's engaging our selves daily and constantly with God and the realities of His kingdom. Well, worship experience arises from that.

That doesn't mean though that people have to be spiritual to have the experience we discussed previously. Sometimes the church service itself provides a highly charged or deeply moving environment. The forms and mediums of the service itself excite or stir people. So they have an emotional experience and a powerful one at that – even though they aren't interacting with the spiritual realm.

I watched a movie about three neighbor ladies who had an intense dislike for each other. They quarreled, gossiped, and competed incessantly all week long. And yet, they went to the same church every Sunday morning and really got down praising the Lord. They had a dynamic experience there – that rose from the highly charged atmosphere that the service itself created.

What a contrast true worship is. In true worship experience, environment is important but secondary. It hinders or assists our passion and joy or reverence and awe but doesn't create it. What does create it is engaging our minds with God and His works. And that creates it because we have an overall life of interaction with Him.

The bottom line is this. True worship experience arises from spirituality not environment. So, let's purposely and relentlessly interact with the spiritual realm. We'll have true worship experiences individually and corporately if we do.

I've said a great deal about worship. If you and I grasp what has been said and live it out, we will worship well.

It is vital that we do that because of what worship is. It is both a central activity of our life with God and a spiritual discipline. As a central activity of our life with God, it deepens our relationship with Him. As a discipline, it transforms us. It alters the person that we are and creates the penchant to righteousness that all of the disciplines of engagement do.

It does so for a reason. Ascribing greatness, goodness, and glory to God (worshipping in other words) imprints those realities on our whole being. They take root in our minds, hearts, souls, and bodies and become a directing force there. That in turn disrupts the powers of evil and cultivates the powers of goodness that are in and around us.

I read about a church going man who was so addicted to pornography that it destroyed his marriage. He eventually conquered his addiction though and explained how he did – primarily through daily worship. His comment is penetrating. Even sexual habits can't stand up under the wholehearted and persistent worship of God.

I personally believe that worship, especially the individual and every day variety, is a powerful spiritual discipline. It engenders in us tones of thought and feeling that direct us to righteousness and away from evil. So use it for that express purpose.

I close out this discipline with the words of William Sperry. Sperry declared, "*Worship is a deliberate and disciplined adventure in reality.*" I hope and pray that it will be just that for you and me – a deliberate and disciplined adventure in reality.

Celebration

I'm going to discuss a discipline now that few people recognize as such and that even fewer understand. I'm talking about the discipline of celebration.

To understand what celebration is, we must first of all understand the world in which we live. It is a world of goodness, much of which we ourselves experience.

Stop for a moment and think about something good that you experienced today in your life. What is that something? I had a nice warm shower this morning and was able to get clean. My dogs excitedly greeted me when I went home for dinner. I had an outstanding dinner just before I came to church. I came three miles to church and was able to make the trip quickly, in 7 minutes, and comfortably, in a heated car. I stand before you now pain free and comfortable. And on it goes.

That illustrates what is just a vital point. There is so much goodness in the world that we constantly experience. There are so many things in it that bring us happiness, pleasure, and joy.

Which helps us understand what celebration is. It's dwelling on and expressing the greatness of God as shown in His goodness to us.

We see a specific example of that in Exodus 15. God delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh's army by parting the Red Sea. Moses and the sons of Israel then sang the song of verses 1-18 in response to that and Miriam and the women of Israel then danced and sang the song of verse 21.

Celebration underlies the instructions that God gives the Israelites in Deuteronomy 14:22-27. The Israelites were to bring the tithes of their crops and flocks to Jerusalem as part of a sort of vacation trip. If the distance was too great to bring their crops or animals, they were to sell them for money and bring the money. Verse 26 then gives this particular instruction about that: ***"You may spend the money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink; and there you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household."*** This instruction strikes many as odd but it only goes to show how greatly God values celebration.

The author of Ecclesiastes recognized the contribution that celebration makes to our lives. He writes about that in 2:24-26, 3:12-13, 3:22, and 5:18-20. These passages call us to eat, drink, and enjoy the good things in our lives. And they call us to do that in conjunction with God.

We see then that celebration has two parts. The first is enjoying our lives, our world, and ourselves by eating, drinking, dancing, singing, and more. The second is enjoying those things in conjunction with God, that is, recognizing them as His gifts to us.

The texts that I mentioned reveal the sensual and earthly quality that celebration has to it. In it, we purposely seek to experience enjoyment and pleasure in the background of our faith in and love for God. We sense and feel and outwardly express the pleasure and joy that doing so brings to us.

Celebration is a discipline that everyone needs to practice. It is absolutely essential to a being a victorious person who live a victorious life in this fallen world.

I'm going to say something now about the world that we live in that very few people grasp. They've never given it enough thought to grasp it. The world that we live in is totally unsuited to human beings.

Imagine penguins trying to live in Arizona where the temperatures hit 120 degrees. They weren't made for that kind of environment and would languish or even die in it.

That same thing is true of you and me. We were made spiritually, psychologically, and physically to live in a garden like Adam and Eve did. But we no longer live there. We live in a concrete jungle instead. We live in an environment of terror and pain, one of incessant and discordant sights and sounds that we were never intended to see and hear.

That kind of world has profound spiritual, psychological, and physical effects on us. It disrupts the proper functioning of our mind, heart, and soul. It brings discord into each of those aspects of us. The result is the pervasive sadness and despair that we see everywhere around us.

But celebration is God's antidote to that. It does two things. First, it makes our deprivations and sorrows seem distant and small. Second, it makes God's mercy and blessings seem close and big. That in turn infuses energy, life, and hope into our mind, heart, soul, and body.

American slaves grasped that as well as anyone ever has. Those slaves lived in appalling conditions and yet, their celebration is legendary. They vigorously embraced the good things they did have, including their eternal destiny, in conjunction with their faith in God. Celebration was their antidote to sadness and despair.

It is the same for us.

I told you before that I've quit listening to the news on television. I did that when I realized that it was dragging me down. Hearing all of that bad news, most of which was irrelevant to me, put me in a negative frame of mind and heart.

Well, the same dynamics, only in reverse, are at work in celebration. Dwelling on the good things God has given us and expressing it lifts us up. It puts us in a positive frame of mind and heart and drives the sadness and despair away.

But celebration isn't just God's antidote to sadness and despair. It's His catalyst to joy as well.

Let's read three verses that are companions: John 15:11; 16:24; and 17:13. What Jesus says in these verses implies several things one of which is this. The problem with His followers isn't that they're too joyful. It's that they aren't joyful enough.

In his book *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce explains his hero's decision not to become a priest. He was afraid that his face would become like the faces of the religious people he knew: "***A mirthless mask reflecting a sunken day . . . sourfaced and devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger.***" There is some truth to that description. Many Christians do think that holy people are gloomy people and that's why there always so stuffy, stodgy, and stiff.

But they shouldn't be. Listen to what Francis de Sales wrote about Satan: "***The evil one is pleased with sadness and melancholy because he himself is sad and melancholy, and will be so for eternity. Hence he desires that everyone should be like himself.***" He is right. Satan wants everyone to be like him – sour and sad.

In the same way, God wants everyone to be like Him. We learned in building our vision of God that He is the most joyful being in the universe. And because He is, He wants His people to be the most joyful people on earth.

And we need to be. I mean that literally. Joy isn't a luxury item in our lives with God. It's a necessity. We need to be joyful.

Nehemiah 8:10 explains why. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Think about that line for a few moments and what it teaches. Explicitly, it teaches that joy is strength. Implicitly, it teaches that joylessness is weakness. And both in fact are true.

First, joy is our strength. It's our first line of defense against dysfunction, weakness, failure, and sin. It has the effect of weakening the power of temptation over us. It makes sin look not good to us.

But its absence is weakness. Lack of it has the effect of strengthening the power of temptation over us. It makes sin look good to us.

The bottom line then is this. Joy strengthens us and lack of joy weakens us in our efforts to do what is right. It really is as simple as that.

That means that no one is more vulnerable to the attacks of hell and of the flesh than joyless Christians. In contrast, no one is more invulnerable than joyful Christians. Joyless Christians are a demon's dream. Joyful Christians are a demon's nightmare. Be a demon's nightmare! Be joyful!

Well, celebration is one of the most essential activities to being that. It adds a note of gaiety, festivity, and hilarity to our lives. The Holy Spirit then works through those things so that they become a wellspring of joy for us. Through the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit, celebration and joy are traveling companions. Celebration in the context of discipleship to Jesus produces not just happiness but joy.

You can see from what I've said just how vital celebration is to our life with God. So, we need to purposely and thoughtfully celebrate. Richard Foster suggests various ways of doing just that in his book *Celebration of Discipline*.

First, we celebrate through singing, dancing, and shouting. We see this throughout Scripture don't we. Exodus 15, which I mentioned before, is a classic example of what I mean. We are so overwhelmed with the goodness of God to us that we simply break forth in praise by singing, dancing, or shouting.

I don't dance but I do run. One of my favorite pleasures, if not my favorite, is the pleasure of running out in the country by myself on a bright, blazing hot, and sunny summer day. I get a rush of gratification from that is difficult both to explain or contain. And sometimes I can't contain it. As I'm running, I'll raise my arms to the sky and just shout out thanksgiving to God for what I'm experiencing. It isn't dancing but it's the closest thing that to dancing that I've ever done. It's a similar dynamic to the one we see in Exodus 15 and hopefully you yourself have experienced it.

There's a second way that we can celebrate. It's through laughing. Develop a sense of humor and purposely find things to laugh at. I preached a sermon one time about "the divine comedy." That's what the world is, a divine comedy. Listen to this great quote, "***Life is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel.***" There is much comedy inherent in our daily lives and world. Those who think recognize it and thus laugh and enjoy it.

G.K. Chesterton is our model for doing this. He found great humor in someone chasing his hat that the wind had blown off, people walking around on two legs, getting stuck in a door, and so on.

We need to follow his lead. We can poke fun at ourselves, enjoy wholesome jokes and clever puns, relish good comedy, and learn to laugh. It's a discipline that frees us from the everlasting burden of always having to be profound.

For a number of years, during the Christmas season, I put together what I called *Family Follies*.

Here's what I did. I'd get pictures that had been taken of my wife, sons, and in-laws during the year, paste them in notebook form and put a funny caption under them. Then, when we got together on Christmas day, we'd sit down together and look at and read it. My father-in-law had a rather large protruding stomach. I had a side view picture of him on the beach with just swimming trunks on. I then put under the picture, "*The 'Abdominizer.' It works wonders!*" The 'Abdominizer' was a product that was widely advertised on television at the time, promising a hard and firm stomach. Anyway, *Family Follies* was loads of fun and we laughed until we almost cried. It was celebration.

A third way we can celebrate is through the creativity of others. This is one of my favorite forms of celebration. I don't know about you, but the incredible creativity that God gives individuals just amazes and inspires me. So we enjoy sculptures, paintings, music, plays, and so on. We bask in the creativity that God has given people.

I just love paintings, for instance, of all kinds. My wife and I often go to Amish country in southern Ohio. My favorite thing to do there is go to one craft type store that is filled with paintings of all kinds. It's attached to a block of shops. While Jill looks around in those, I spend 30 or 40 minutes in that store examining the paintings in detail, imagining myself in the scenes as I do. The peace and joy that gives me is actually rejuvenating.

Family events are a fourth way to celebrate. We can turn family events into times of thanksgiving and celebration. Truly celebrate birthdays, graduations, weddings, anniversaries, and so on. Also form rituals of celebration by gathering on a regular basis. Gather and sing around the piano, play games, watch movies, or read books together. That is something that we really do need to do more.

One of our family rituals is playing *Old Maid* with my son, daughter-in-law, and grandsons. We usually play it when they come over. It's a blast, especially with five and six year old grandsons. There are so many things you can do with them. Once, for instance, I arranged the cards so that all of everyone's card matched and my wife got the old maid. Our *Old Maid* games are a celebration.

The festivals of our own culture are another way to celebrate. Don't just pass the holidays but turn them into celebrations. Be creative and think of new ways to celebrate the goodness of God to us on Christmas, Easter, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving.

I would add a sixth way to celebrate to the first five. It's through the sacrament of small things. A sacrament is a means of grace. It's something tangible that God uses to come to and bless us. Some of the best sacraments are the small things in our everyday lives.

So, learn to spot those small things that can fill us with joy and pursue them doing so.

I referred to Nehemiah 8:10 earlier. Let's read the section it's part of, verses 9-12.

In verses 9, 10, and 11, Nehemiah tells the Jewish people that it's a holy day. So what should they do on that holy day? According to verse 10, it's "***eat of the fat***" and "***drink of the sweet.***" You'd find that on a truck driver's diet program that I read about but probably no other. Eat rich foods and drink sweet beverages. Most of us don't have a problem with those commands at all. It's like being told to eat Toll House chocolate chip cookies and drink chocolate milk.

Nehemiah tells them and us, in other words, to look to and celebrate the good things in life. It's a holy thing that glorifies God when we do.

We once had a Bible school titled *Everyday's a Holyday with Jesus*. We spelled "holiday" as "h-o-l-y-d-a-y." We did that because the word "holiday" does actually come from the practice of "holy days." Holidays are holy days and everyday is a holiday. Every day, with all the good things that it offers to us, is a day of celebration and according to verse 12, that's what we should do. Celebrate! We do that by looking to the goodness of life. We exercise our ability to see and feel the goodness of even the simplest blessings that God gives us. We recognize and get from them all the pleasure and joy that He made them to give.

There's an old saying that helps us grasp that. It's "***Take time to smell the roses.***" That means to focus on them and bring them as fully before our senses and mind as we possibly can. What we do with roses, we should do with all the good things in life – focus on them and bring them as fully before our senses and mind as we can.

Celebration is one of the main disciplines in my life. I've had a besetting sin since I was a teenager - getting angry with God because of the pain and injustice in the world. The Holy Spirit has helped me overcome that sin as I've practiced the disciplines of solitude, silence, and celebration.

What I do is this. I suck the marrow out of life, to quote Walt Whitman. I daily identify good things and celebrate them, get from them as much pleasure and joy as I can.

I don't just take a shower for example. I celebrate a shower. I feel and experience it deeply. I focus on it and the wonderful blessing it is. I always quote the same verses out loud every morning as I take the shower. Those verses are Lamentations 3:22-23: "***The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your Faithfulness.***"

I do the same thing with colors. Being able to see color enriches our lives far more than most people realize. I celebrate that all the time by just stopping what I'm doing and looking at the colors around me. I utter a prayer as I do thanking God for this overlooked detail of life that brings us so much pleasure and joy.

As I've explained to you before, I don't just eat food. I celebrate it. Ask my wife sometime about Coccia House Pizza for instance. She and I don't just eat it. We celebrate it.

Anyway, the sacrament of small things is just one of the many ways that we practice the discipline of celebration. I close out our discussion of this discipline with what really is an ironic statement. Celebration should be the serious business of our lives.

Service

The discipline of service is using our spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, and/or material resources to promote the good of others. We act to meet people's needs or fulfill their wishes with the resources that we have available to us.

Service can be the direct submission of our bodies to righteousness. In that case, we serve someone because God and our own love compels us to. We're serving them for God's good and theirs. In that case, service is not a discipline although it will enhance our lives and us.

But service can also be the indirect submission of our bodies to righteousness. We want the Holy Spirit to cultivate positive qualities of character in us and even eliminate negative ones and we serve others to that end. In that case, service is a discipline.

Service as a discipline addresses different issues of character. It enables the Holy Spirit to eliminate a host of vices including arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, and covetousness. It also enables Him to create the positive counterpart of all of those vices, the cardinal virtue of humility. Most of us struggle with having one or more of those vices and not having the virtue, to the degree at least that we should have. So let's examine those vices and that virtue and how the discipline of service addresses them.

Let's examine what Jesus says in Matthew 20:25-28. In verse 25, Jesus assesses quite clearly and bluntly what dominates the political, social, and personal spheres of human life. It's the will to power. It's the desire to dominate and control others. It's the intent to promote one's own interests over the interests of others. We see this will to power in every sphere of human life – the political, the social, and the personal.

Robert Schuller describes this will to power well with regard to the personal sphere, our everyday relationships. He comments that most people have a subconscious combative attitude that says, *"I'm going to win in this relationship"* and he's right about that. Just examine the personal dynamics in homes between husbands and wives, in offices between co-workers, in churches between Christians, in schools between students, on highways and streets between drivers and so on. We see the will to power expressed and lived out all the time in those contexts.

There's something else that's implicit in verse 25 that we've all experienced to one degree or another. It's what we call the pecking order. Foster explains it well in *Celebration of Discipline*. The pecking order is part of the human game of promotion and authority.

The little idiom comes from what occurs in actual chicken pens. Chickens in the pen have order only after it's determined who is dominant and who is submissive in the group.

That same kind of thing occurs in human relationships. There are three basic positions in those relationships. #1 – those who are considered the greatest and have the highest place. #2 – those who are considered the least and have the lowest place. And #3 – those who are at one level or another in between the greatest and least. Almost everyone of course wants to be the greatest. But apart from that, the one thing that almost everyone wants the most is not to be the least.

Those are the dynamics that comprise verse 25 and a whole host of other vices are spun off from them.

One is arrogance. Arrogance is having an air of superiority over others. It's thinking that we are better than others are and acting accordingly. We are the greatest in the pecking order and think and act as if everyone else is inferior to us. Or we are not the least the pecking order and think and act as if everyone below us is inferior to us.

Another vice spun off from the dynamics of verse 25 is jealousy and envy. Many of those who are the least or not the greatest desire to be the greatest and thus resent those who are and covet their position.

There's another vice spun off from the dynamics of verse 25. It's what Paul calls "men-pleasing" in Ephesians 6:6. It's what we call brown-nosing. That is one of our greatest bondages in life – wanting and seeking the praise and approval of others and even avoiding their disapproval at all costs.

All of those vices tend to be interrelated and pose a problem for every normal person, including those who have decided to follow Jesus.

The truth is that those vices tend to be as prevalent in professing Christians and the communities they form as they are in non-Christians and their communities.

But they shouldn't be. Verses 26-27 contain what I would call "the great inversion." There is an inversion in the kingdom of God. There is a reversal not only of values but of inclinations and desires as well. Verses 26 and 27 reveal what is probably the first virtue in the kingdom of God. That virtue is humility.

Humility is a quality of character and fruit of the Holy Spirit. It's a state of being that has many nuances, one of which we see here in verses 26-27. They're servants of God and people. They aren't inclined at all to dominate and control others. They're inclined to serve them instead.

And they're free of the burden of appearances. They don't care where they are in the pecking order. All they care about is being a force for good in God's life and the lives of others.

Well, that's where the discipline of service comes in. It's one of the disciplines that enables the Holy Spirit to create this condition of humility within us – and eliminate those vices I discussed in the process.

It's clear that the discipline of service is essential to those at the top of the human pecking order. As Dallas Willard points out, to be at the top, to be great, and to live as a servant is one of the most difficult of all spiritual attainments. You've all heard that axiom that power corrupts and that is so true. It's very difficult to have power and authority over others in any context without it going to our heads.

I knew a young Christian who was promoted to a supervisory position at work. It was a big promotion and it quickly went to his head. Before the promotion, he was a humble likable man. But after it, he was a conceited and abrasive man. It got to the point that even his wife didn't like him anymore. The discipline of service is a vital spiritual activity for anyone who is at the top.

But it's just as vital to those at the bottom of the pecking order or anywhere in between. So many people feel demeaned by their lowly positions in life and become resentful, envious, and bitter against those who fare better than they do. Those vices in their lives are often just as bad as the arrogance in the lives of the great. It's obvious that they have no place in the persons and lives of those who follow Jesus.

You can see that the discipline of service transforms in two directions. First, it helps eliminate the resentment and brown nosing of those in low positions. Second, it helps eliminate the arrogance and conceit of those in high positions. All of us need to practice it.

We can do that in many different ways. Let's go back to our definition of service. It is using our spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, and/or material resources to promote the good of others. We act to meet people's needs or fulfill their wishes with the resources that we have available to us. All of us are presented with countless opportunities to do that in a variety of ways. Foster identifies and discusses nine different acts of service in *Celebration of Discipline*. I'd like to briefly summarize those for you.

#1 – the service of hiddenness. We promote a person's good in a way that neither he or she nor others know that we're the one who has done so. As the great Jeremy Taylor points out, ***"Hiddenness is a rebuke to the flesh and can deal a fatal blow to pride."***

#2 – the service of small things. Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains this service well in his marvelous book that we have in our bookcase in the narthex, *Life Together*. He writes: ***"The second service that one should perform for another in a Christian community is that of active helpfulness. This means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. There is a multitude of these things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good for the meanest service. One who worries about the loss of time that such petty, outward acts of helpfulness entail is usually taking the importance of his own career too solemnly."***

#3 – the service of guarding the reputation of others. Nothing is more vile than attacking the reputation of others by gossiping and slandering. So, we act to protect those reputations. On the one hand, we ourselves don't say or do things that diminish them. On the other hand, we don't provide an audience for others to do the same. Guarding the reputation of others is and I quote Foster, ***"a deep and lasting service."***

#4 – the service of being served. Jesus said that it is more blessed to give than receive. So, we allow persons that blessing by letting them serve us. We overcome our pride and graciously and thankfully receive the good that they do for us.

#5 – the service of common courtesy. This refers to the rituals of relationship that are found in every culture including ours. Those rituals have to do with introduction and acquaintanceship. Missionaries know the importance of such rituals and so should we. We acknowledge people's presence, for instance, by cheerfully asking, "How are you?" Or we actually reply when we're sent RSVP responses. Or we send letters or cards of appreciation. Whatever the courtesy is, we use it to acknowledge people and affirm their worth.

#6 – the service of hospitality. Hospitality was vital to the spread of the gospel in the 1st century world. 2 and 3 John, for instance, which are one chapter each, address that very issue. While not as necessary today, it is nonetheless a service we can offer people. We can open our homes to them and offer them amenities that not only affirm their worth but bring pleasure to them.

#7 – the service of listening. I discussed this service at some length in our discussion of silence. Remember what Dietrich Bonhoeffer said. Listening is the first service that we owe to each other in the Christian community. And I would say outside it as well. Nothing affirms people's worth more than someone listening attentively to what they say.

#8 – the service of bearing the burdens of others and rejoicing with others. People need people when they're sad and glad – to share what they're experiencing. So, we do that. As Paul said it, we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

And #9 – the service of sharing the word of Life. In my view, there is no greater service to people than sharing life changing principles or truths with them. Jill asked me a question last week. If you could meet any one living person and spend time with him or her, who would it be? My answer was immediate and confident. It's Dallas Willard. I told her that I often think about it. What my character and condition of being would be if he hadn't share the word of Life with me in his books. He doing so was one of the greatest acts of service that anyone has ever done for me.

There are many other acts of service but those are enough to make the point. We have countless opportunities to serve the people that we know and meet everyday. Let's discern and pursue those opportunities. It will not only make their lives better but will also enable the Holy Spirit to make us better.

Prayer

Our next discipline is one that few of us view as a discipline but it is. I'm talking about prayer.

I start with what prayer is. It is conversing or communicating with God. We talk to Him either audibly or in our thoughts and tell Him what is on our mind and heart. Richard Foster has written the best book on prayer that I've ever read. It's titled *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. Read it and you'll discover that there are many different "kinds" of prayer. That only goes to show us that we can talk with God about many different things and when we do, we're praying.

Obviously, prayer isn't only or even primarily a spiritual discipline. As many friends of Jesus through the centuries have testified, it's the main business of our lives. It's at the heart both of our relationship with God and our work in the world. Without it, we cannot successfully relate to God or work in the world. Our life with God would be pathetic if prayer was only a spiritual discipline in it.

And yet, prayer is a spiritual discipline even if it isn't primarily so. That was the gist of what Jesus said to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane. According to Mark 14:38, He declared to him: ***"Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."***

It is often said that prayer changes things – and us. The first means that our prayers actually alter things outside of us. The second means that they actually alter things inside of us, that is, the very condition of our being, our very character and personality. It does that so effectively in fact that transformation is often mistakenly treated as the only purpose of prayer.

It also does that so effectively that even when we aren't using it as a discipline, it still changes us. The truth is that unless we're utterly insincere, it's impossible to pray and not be changed. Immersion in prayer drastically alters the inner dimensions that make up our being.

Remember that spiritual disciplines are the indirect submission of our bodies to righteousness. We do what we can do now in order not to do the evil we can't help but do now – or to do the good that we can't do now. Thus, praying is technically a discipline when we do it for the express purpose of eventually becoming what we aren't now or doing what we can't do now.

Prayer as a discipline can be occasion specific, that is, directed to a specific good or evil. If someone wrongs me, for instance, and I feel even the slightest stirrings of resentment or anger, I stop and discuss that with God and also intercede for the person who has wronged me. Or if I feel even the slightest stirrings of desiring people's approval or praise, I stop and discuss it with God. On both occasions, I'm praying for the express purpose of being what He wants me to be. That makes it a discipline.

But prayer as a discipline can and needs to be directed to good or evil more broadly. We aren't addressing a good or evil in particular but good or evil in general.

Our specific methodology for achieving that is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. That methodology is "unceasing" prayer.

Brother Lawrence and Frank Laubach were practitioners and masters of unceasing prayer and thus are our models for it. Examine their lives and read their writings and you'll know how to pray unceasingly. Generally, we train ourselves to converse with God habitually as we move through our day. We converse with Him constantly, keeping our minds and hearts turned to Him as much as we possibly can. This takes much conscious effort at first but doing it consistently enough eventually forms the habit of unceasing prayer in us. We find ourselves doing it as easily and naturally as breathing.

I mentioned one of the ways that we can pray unceasingly in the sermon I preached last week. I talked about turning our down time into praying time. Remember the five years that we spend over a lifetime waiting in lines for instance. We can commit ourselves to turning those five years of waiting into five years of praying.

You can see from what I've said that frequency and intensity are two of the most vital aspects of transforming prayer. I need to say that again to impress upon you the significance of it. Frequency and intensity are the most vital aspects of transforming prayer. Nothing affects inner change any more than praying frequently and intensely does. It drastically alters what a person is and how he or she reacts and responds to the world and all of the people and events in it.

In his book *The Ideals of Asceticism*, O. Hardman explains that in some detail. His words deserve not only to be heard but remembered as well: Writing about the person who is devoted to prayer, he articulates its effect on him or her this way: ***“Continuing in instant 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 realize 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 realization 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. There is no other way.”***

Notice what Hardman claims. Immersing ourselves in prayer empowers us to take risks, to routinely do what is right irrespective of the consequences, to love those who are opposed to us, and to be at peace with all people, no matter what the barriers are the separate them from us. Those are dramatic claims and the fact is that they're true.

I don't know about you but I've experienced that. I've learned and practiced in recent years the art of praying without ceasing. And I've observed what practicing that does to me. It creates a certain tone in my mental and emotional life that inclines me away from evil and to good.

The other day, I heard my dog in the beginning stages of throwing up. So I quickly got him off the couch and tried to get him outside but he threw up on the floor on the way out. He then rushed into the bedroom, jumped on to the bed, and finished throwing up there. In the past, I would have gotten angry with him and mumbled something under my breath like, "*Stupid dog. Why did you do that?*" But I didn't that day. It didn't bother me at all. I just gently picked him up and put him outside and went about the business of cleaning it all up.

That response was rooted in several things, one of which was unceasing prayer. Habitually being in conversation with God that day created a certain tone in my mental and emotional life. That tone then dictated the way I responded to the dog. Directing irrational anger against a dog is actually a difficult thing to do in the context of unceasing prayer. Because of the mental and emotional tone it creates, one almost has to purposely will to get angry in that scenario in order to do so.

That illustrates, I trust, the larger point I'm trying to make. Nothing affects inner change any more than praying frequently and intensely does. It drastically alters what a person is and how he or she reacts and responds to the world and all of the people and events in it.

Prayer then, as a discipline, can be occasion specific, directed to a specific good or evil. But it can also be directed to good or evil more broadly. We aren't addressing a good or evil in particular but good or evil in general.

I'd be remiss if I closed out our discussion of prayer as a discipline without discussing one of the most vital truths that you'll ever hear in that regard. That truth is this. Prayer must be practiced in conjunction with other disciplines in order to transform us in a significant way.

Very few Christians, including pastors and leaders, realize that. Almost all Protestant churches, including the one I grew up in, hold up Bible study and prayer as *the* activities that will make us spiritually advanced. Those are the activities, we're told, that enable us to achieve the abundance and fullness of joy that Jesus has for us.

But it isn't so. Bible study and prayer are not producing the spiritual richness they seek. They themselves then become burdens to them as a result. That explains what Willard calls "the open secret" of many Bible-believing churches. Only a small percentage of the people who talk about studying the Bible and praying actually do so in a vital way.

To be an easy yoke that transforms us spiritually, Bible study and, for our purposes now, prayer must take place in the context of other appropriate disciplines like solitude, silence, fasting, worship, and celebration. Those other disciplines enliven our prayer life and make it the dynamic life giving activity it can be.

I've mentioned great men and women of God in sermons who were devoted to prayer and changed by it. I'm talking about people like John Wesley, George Mueller, Hudson Taylor, David Brainerd, and more. But we will misunderstand the lesson they teach unless we look at the total context in which their prayer life took place. Those great friends of Jesus practiced a host of spiritual disciplines that enabled them to pray as effectively as they did. To see their prayer lives outside that larger context deceives and injures us. In the end, it's an overall disciplined life that makes prayer the dynamic and effective force for good that it can be.

Fellowship

Fellowship means that we engage ourselves in activities like worship, study, prayer, celebration, and service in conjunction with other followers of Jesus. Those other followers of Jesus can be many or few.

Fellowship was at the very heart of the first century church experience. There were no church buildings of course. Believers worshipped and dined together in homes, which allowed for an intimate and advanced sense of community. The Greek word that describes that community is "koinonia."

The Bible does call us to fellowship in verses like Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; and Hebrews 10:24-25. Note the command in that last passage. We should not forsake assembling together with other followers of Jesus.

Matthew 18:20 reveals the reason for that. The New Testament teaches that salvation involves power from above and that this power is located literally in the body of the disciple of Jesus. Matthew 18:20 reveals a significant insight about that. The power from above is present to an even higher degree when that person is with others in fellowship or community. God's presence and power is somehow manifested differently in the community than in the individual. Thus, a group of disciples has a greater capacity for experiencing and sustaining God's presence and power than an individual disciple does.

The bottom line is that disciples in community are able to attain a deeper level of spiritual power and Christlikeness than disciples in isolation are. Disciples are usually unable to attain "fullness of joy" by themselves.

That's why we are changing our Wednesday night format beginning in April from teaching to a freely sharing discipleship group. Most of you have learned the past year how to practice God's presence and the spiritual disciplines. You now need to gather together in a group and with a singleness of mind and purpose, pursue doing those activities. I am counting on God's power being manifested to you as you do and enabling you to attain the spiritual richness you desire.

Fellowship really is a transforming discipline that everyone needs to practice. The spiritual growth of those who don't will be stunted.

Confession

The discipline of confession is easy to explain but difficult to do – especially for Protestants. So let me explain it and encourage you to do it.

To confess means that we communicate to some person or group of persons our weaknesses, failures, or sins. I practice this discipline a lot, and purposely so, in my sermons and teachings. I confessed in this past Sunday's sermon for instance what my greatest besetting sin has been. It's been not truly believing that God is good and getting angry with Him because of the injustice and pain in the world. I've also confessed caring too much what people think about me. Patti Preston commented to me last week that she thinks I'm too hard on myself by I really am not. I'm just telling it like it is.

But I've not only confessed, I've also been confessed to – by countless people over the years. If I listed on piece of paper the weaknesses, failures, and sins that church attenders have revealed to me over the years, you'd probably be stunned.

That helps us understand what confession is. We communicate to some person or group of persons our deepest weaknesses, failures, or sins. We tell it like it is to others, the "it" being what we are and do. We let them know who we really are without holding anything important back. We become completely transparent before them. As Willard says it, "*We lay down the burden of hiding and pretending, which normally takes up such a dreadful amount of human energy.*" Doing this engages others and allows us to be engaged by others in the most profound depths of our souls.

This discipline functions hand in hand with fellowship. I say that because the people to whom we need to confess should be Christians whom we can trust and whom we know love us. Confession to the wrong person or group can be a damaging thing.

I do need to make a quick point before we go any further. The kind of confession that I'm discussing now doesn't replace private confession. Before the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church bound people by making them think their confessions had to be to a person, specifically a priest in the confessional. One of the significant contributions of the Protestant Reformation was to make people realize that we don't ultimately need a human mediator. That we can confess directly to God and have our sins forgiven. That was a dramatic breakthrough that liberated people from the bondage the church had put them under. Thus, whenever we sin, and there are no exceptions to this, we must confess first and foremost to God Himself.

But confession to another person or persons does have its proper and helpful place. Even the Father of the Protestant Reformation itself, Martin Luther, believed in mutual brotherly confession. He wrote about that, *"Therefore when I admonish you to confession I am admonishing you to be a Christian."* Besides that, brotherly confession has historically sparked genuine revivals of personal piety and holiness. The Asbury Revival in the early 70's, for instance, began when a student publicly confessed his sins in a chapel service. Confession, to others, is a highly charged discipline that makes it a mainstay in our spiritual lives.

The Biblical basis for confession is found in James 5:13-16, focusing on verse 16. Reading between the lines in this passage, it seems that unconfessed sin can be an agent of destruction in people's physical, psychological, and spiritual lives. But the discipline of confession is able to neutralize or eliminate it as a such a reality.

I used to fill pulpits as a guest speaker when I was practicing law. After preaching one Sunday morning in a Friends Church, the organist came up to me and asked to speak with me. She then confessed that she had committed adultery with one of the elders of the church and that no one except he and she knew about it. I asked her if she had confessed her sin to God and she replied that she had. She was still greatly distressed though, she said. She went on to also say that she *"just needed to tell someone else what I did."* I counseled her that telling me was a start but that she needed to think seriously about whether or not there was anyone else she should tell.

The moral of that story is that sometimes, just confessing to God isn't enough. There are two kinds of guilt when we sin. The first is objective guilt. We actually are guilty because of what we've done. We have offended God and His holiness demands that He punish us for what we have done. The second kind of guilt is subjective guilt. We actually feel guilty for what we have done.

Certainly, we can't always rely on our feelings when it comes to guilt. On the one hand, we may sometimes not feel guilty about something but may actually be guilty, objectively before God. On the other hand, we may sometimes not be objectively guilty about something but actually feel guilty. We've confessed our sin to God and He's forgiven us. But for one reason or another, we don't feel forgiven. We're still burdened down not by objective guilt, which is gone, but by subjective guilt, which is still present and oppressing us. That subjective guilt can obstruct the spiritual, psychological, and even physical realities of our lives.

The discipline of confession can effectively address that problem. John 20:19-23 reveals the dynamics behind it doing so. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples. He breathed on them so that could receive the Holy Spirit and then declared in verse 23, ***"If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."*** That statement raises several issues.

One is whether or not it is applicable to followers of Jesus beyond those to whom He explicitly spoke it. That appears to have been His 12 disciples, absent Judas. Based on the James passage we discussed, it is likely that Jesus was speaking here to all disciples of all generations, including ours. Most commentators take that to be the case.

Assuming the statement is directed to us, the next issue is what it means. It clearly doesn't mean that we have the power to forgive someone's sin. Only God can do that. It does mean that we have the power to proclaim that God has forgiven it. We have the right to stand in Jesus' stead, receive the confession, and pronounce that God has forgiven it.

That's a valuable service that can quite effectively alleviate the subjective guilt that a repentant person feel. The Christian receiving the confession is able to make God's presence and forgiveness real to the confessing person. In his classic book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer devotes the last chapter to confession and communion. He writes about confession: ***"A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person."*** It is said that confession is good for the soul and so it is.

Proverbs 28:12 reveals another aspect of confession. Notice that the wide man links confessing transgressions with forsaking them. In a close and transparent community of people, nothing is more supportive of right behavior than open truth. Persisting in sin is unsupportable in such a community unless it's hidden. Apart from that, the expectation of confession in a close community is a profoundly motivating. It is able to force evildoing out of our lives and compel us to righteousness.

There are several other benefits of confession that deserve mentioning and understanding.

One is that it builds humility. We recognize our place among our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our confessing to them and their confessing to us makes us realize that we're no better than they are. It gets us off of our spiritual "high horse" and goes along way toward seeing ourselves as we really are, which is humbling.

Another benefit is that confession builds in us a sense of being loved. Let me share with you what is called *the law of acceptance*. To be fully convinced that I am accepted and loved, I must be fully convinced that I am accepted and loved at my worst. When we are in a close and caring community, share our sins, and are still loved, that love becomes a transforming reality in and to us.

A final benefit of confession is that it creates deep fellowship among God's people. Confession alone in fact is able to do that. Every local church desires to build koinonia or the supernatural fellowship of the Holy Spirit but that can't happen without confession.

Genesis 1 and 2 reveals that God created us to be part of a close-knit community in which we know and are known. Imagine being so at ease with others that we know and are known without being ashamed. The creation account makes clear that is one of the greatest joys and deepest needs of the human race, of you and me.

It also make clear that such a community requires openness and truth. Obviously, knowing others requires that they reveal themselves to us, not conceal themselves from us. And others knowing us requires that we reveal ourselves to them, not conceal ourselves from them. That means that confession cultivates koinonia and concealment destroys it.

What I've said shows how imperative it is that we belong to a close and caring community of people, a community in which the discipline of confession operates freely and effectively. My hope and prayer is that our Disciples of Jesus groups that are formed in April will be just that.

Those of you are who here tonight and hearing what I've said will be key players in the development of those groups. It's take time for trust to develop in groups of course and we must be careful to whom we confess. As the saying goes, confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation. But it will be up to those of you who are familiar with confession to move the group in the direction of confession. Only then can it be the loving, caring, and transforming community that God wants it to be. I close out this discipline by quoting Bonhoeffer again. He wrote: *"In the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a sinner."*

Submission

What the Bible teaches about submission is probably its most radical social teaching. It takes all human concepts of relationship and turns them upside down. The Bible's instruction concerning submission is almost as foreign and alienating to Christians as it is to secularists. Very few professing Christians have a vision for submitting in their everyday relationships and even fewer actually do it.

Submission, like almost all of the disciplines, is not first and foremost a discipline. It is first and foremost an essential part of the way of life to which Jesus calls his followers. He calls us to habitually submit ourselves to others. This habitual submission is a dominant theme in the New Testament. A sampling of verses that teach and command it is as follows: (1) Ephesians 5:21 – to Christians; (2) Ephesians 5:22,25 – to spouses; (3) Hebrews 3:17 – to church leaders; (4) 1 Peter 2:13-14 – to government; and finally (5) 1 Peter 5:5 – to elders in the church.

Submission as a practiced behavior is meaningless unless we define it. So let's define it. It has two component parts.

The first part of submission is an attitude. Paul characterizes that attitude this way in Philippians 2:3, *"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves."*

That is a definitive statement isn't it? Submission involves a point of view that sees others as more important than us. We regard their hopes and dreams, their preferences and plans, their desires and rights, as more important than our own. Thomas a Kempis articulated the essence of this attitude. He wrote, *"To have no opinion of ourselves, and to think always well and highly of others, is great wisdom and affection."*

The second component part of submission flows naturally from the first. This part is a specific action that Paul describes in Philippians 2:4, *"Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."*

Submission is a lifestyle that actively looks out for the interests of others. We protect and promote the hopes and dreams, preferences and plans, and desires and rights of other even if it means giving up our own. We give them their way instead of insisting on our own way. In submission, we give way to others. We defer to them.

There is a word that captures the essence of the attitude and action that make up submission, "subordination." Both in attitude and action, we subordinate what we want and need to what others want and need.

I have a family member who actually got into a fight with a man in the parking lot of a mall. They both arrived at a desired parking space first – in their minds at least. My family member pulled in and got out of his car. The other man rolled down his window when he did and cursed him out. My family member replied that if he was any kind of man he'd come over to his face and say it, which he did. At which point, my family member beat him up.

Suppose that my family member had lived out the Biblical ethic of submission. How would that scenario have gone differently if he had? He would have subordinated his desire for the space to the other man's desire for the space and given it to him. He would have done that even if he had actually been there first. He would have yielded his right to the space to the other man's wishes.

That's the way the life of those who practice submission goes. They are agents of grace who continually bring about well-being and joy for the people around them.

True community in our homes, churches, offices, schools, factories, and so on requires that submission prevail. True community only occurs when the individuals who make it up are mutual servants in mutual submission. I'm going to say that again because it's so vital. True community only occurs when the individuals who make it up are mutual servants in mutual submission.

What a community transforming principle that is and how so few people grasp it. Carefully examine all the conflict and strife in homes, churches, workplaces, and so on. You'll find if you do what the basic problem is. The people in those places aren't mutual servants in mutual submission. They're dominators instead who are always demanding and seeking what they want. Any relationship can thrive only if the people who make it up are servants who submit to each other.

But while submission is a way of life, it's also a spiritual discipline. While it's an activity of direct righteousness, it's also an activity of indirect righteousness. It's a bodily activity that we do in order to achieve righteousness that we aren't capable of now.

We've talked before about different states and acts of righteousness that almost all of us we can't achieve directly just by trying to. I've mentioned things like receiving criticism with gratitude and joy, caring about those who sue us, loving our enemies, being glad for our competitors when they win, and so on.

But there's another state of righteousness that the Bible calls us to but which almost none of us can directly achieve. That state is our happiness not being dependent on getting what we want.

Suppose that someone wants something but doesn't get it because someone else gets what he or she wants instead. What are the usual psychological tones that accompany that? Are they usually love, peace, and joy? No, they are not. They are usually bitterness, resentment, or disappointment to one degree or another. We saw those tones played out in the parking space story I told you about earlier. The man who cussed out my family member did so because he didn't get what he wanted and was very unhappy that he didn't.

Our happiness being dependent on getting what we want is one of the most crushing burdens in the lives of normal people. Preoccupation with things always going the way we want them to is a real bondage.

Leadership expert John Maxwell describes this bondage in vivid terms: *"The fight to secure our rights and get everything that is coming to us is one of the major causes of emotional fatigue. Both the Bible and experience teach us that this battle frequently brings bitterness, resentment, anger, hatred, and fear which are the five destruction emotions that deplete our energy. These emotions will ultimately destroy us if we continue to give vent to them."*

Submission is a spiritual discipline that addresses this area of need in our lives. Practicing it enables the Holy Spirit to change us inside and free us from the burden of always having to have what we want and deserve. Not getting what we want and deserve doesn't affect the love, peace, and joy we have. We are able to move happily along, thankful for what we have and glad for those who got what they wanted and deserved. What a wonderful state of being to possess.

There are other conditions of righteousness that submission as a discipline enables the Holy Spirit to produce within us. It frees us to give up our rights for the good of others without resentment or fear. It empowers us to love people without being loved in return. And finally, it enables us not to have to be treated in certain ways. Those are great benefits that contribute significantly to the abundant life that Jesus says we can have.

Now that we know what submission as a discipline does, let's examine how we practice it. We purposely yield our opinions, preferences, tastes, desires, and rights to others. There are countless opportunities to do that in our everyday lives. We see those opportunities and pursue them.

Here is a practical example of what I mean. My wife Jill and I occasionally plan to go to a store after dinner. In that context, I want to clean up the kitchen completely before we go. It bothers me to go somewhere after dinner and leave it in disarray. But Jill wants to clean up the kitchen after we go and get back. She'd rather go, come home, change clothes, and then leisurely clean the kitchen. You can see then that what she and I want conflicts.

But that gives me an opportunity to practice submission doesn't it. When that particular scenario arises, I purposely give up what I want so that she can have what she wants. I do that for the express purpose of enabling the Holy Spirit to free me from the burden of always having to get what I want. That makes it a spiritual discipline.

Opportunities like that one to submit to others arise frequently in the course of our everyday lives. To practice submission as a discipline, be on the lookout for those opportunities and when you see them, pursue them. You'll grow immeasurably in Christlikeness if you do.

I close out our discussion of submission with a caveat. There are times when we shouldn't submit to people. We see that in several passages of Scripture. In Galatians 2:4-5, Paul refused to yield in subjection to Judaizers in the Jerusalem church. In Acts 15:36-41, Paul refused to yield to Barnabas and Barnabas refused to yield to him regarding whether or not to take Mark on their missionary journey.

We can discern from these passages that there is a guiding principle that we should follow in our submission to others. That principle is this. We submit until it becomes destructive to God, others, or even us. If our submitting is destructive to God, others, or us, then we should not submit. By destructive of course, I don't mean that it's inconvenient or contrary to our wishes. I mean that it causes harm that outweighs the good that is done.

The trick of course is determining when it is destructive. Determining that requires informed reflection and thought and a firm reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide us.

I refer you to the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-41. Barnabas was an apostle and one of the truly great leaders in the first century church. Paul and he became best friends and partners in Christ, making the first missionary journey in Acts 13-14 together. Barnabas' cousin, John Mark, better known as just Mark, accompanied and assisted them on that journey but abandoned them before it was completed. When they decided to make a second missionary journey in Acts 15, Barnabas wanted Mark to accompany them again but Paul wanted him not to. Barnabas apparently believed that Mark had grown and could be trusted and Paul believed that he couldn't be. According to verse 39, ***"there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another."*** Notice that Paul refused to submit to Barnabas in this matter and Barnabas refused to submit to Paul.

Whether or not Mark went with them wasn't a moral matter or a matter of conviction. It was a matter of preference or opinion. Did they sin then in not giving way to each other, in not subordinating themselves to each other? The answer of course depends on why they didn't.

What we need to do is to read between the lines of the text. Paul apparently believed that Mark had deserted them on the first journey and might do it again – that he was still unreliable and might prejudice or hinder their work in the churches. Barnabas on the other hand believed that Mark had grown and wouldn't. He probably also believed that not taking him would injure his walk with God.

That helps us understand their refusal to submit. Each believed that the harm that submitting achieved would outweigh the good. They believed that submitting would be destructive in other words and so didn't. I think that neither of them was ego involved in their refusal to submit. They were simply seeking the greater good in the situation instead.

But the fact that one of these spiritual giants was clearly wrong in his assessment of the situation is humbling. It impresses upon us the urgency of making sure that true goodness and not ego involvement is the reason we aren't submitting.

Memorization of Scripture

We come now to the final spiritual discipline that we're going to discuss. That discipline is the memorization of Scripture. Memorization is a subdivision of study but is so critical to our life with God that I wanted to address it separately and finally.

Remember that in study, we engage ourselves with some reality, set our minds on it, for the purpose of understanding it. We try to understand two things: the reality itself and what it means to our life and us.

As we learned earlier, study is a transforming activity. That's because our mind takes on the order of the subject studied. That order in our mind then forms the other inner dimensions that make up the self that we are. It's critical that we understand these dynamics.

The first thing we should study as disciples of Jesus of course is the Bible. The Bible should be the first subject of our study above everything else because it is literally the written word of God.

The study of the Bible has a specific primary purpose. That purpose isn't doctrinal purity, as significant as that is, but transformation.

That's because God's word, both written and spoken, is a spiritual power in its own right. According to Hebrews 4:12, it's a living and powerful entity that is capable of distinguishing spirit and soul in us and dealing with them in redemptive ways.

Besides that, when we place our mind on God's word with concentration, it takes on the order of that word. That order in turn forms our other inner dimensions.

Psalm 19:7 reveals the result of that. Our soul is restored. The order of God's written word, which is now in our inner dimensions, including our soul, restores them. It makes them highly functional and strong.

Memorization of the Bible is a specific kind of study that dramatically enhances its impact on us. Take everything I've said thus far about what the Bible can do in us. Memorization is an activity that optimizes its power to do that.

The Bible itself calls us to memorize it. Examine passages like Deuteronomy 6:6-9, Joshua 1:8; Psalms 1:1-3; and Proverbs 7:1-3 and you'll see what I mean.

Take Deuteronomy 6:6-9 for instance. With regard to His word through Moses, God commanded the Israelites to bind them as a sign on their hands and as frontals on their foreheads and to write them on the doorposts of their houses and on their gates. The Israelites took these commands literally. They took this passage along with Exodus 11:13-21 and Exodus 13:1-16 and wrote them on small scrolls. They then placed them in small leather containers called phylacteries and bound them on their forehead and left arm on special occasions. They also enclosed the passages I mentioned in a small container and attached them to the doorposts of their houses.

But God never intended them to do that. He meant these commands in verses 8 and 9 to be taken metaphorically. He wanted the Israelites to keep His word in their minds and recall them as often as they could during the course of their everyday lives. That was the practice that He calls for in these verses.

What God wanted the Israelites to do with their written word, the Law of Moses, so He wants us to do with the entirety of His written word, the Bible. This requires of course that we memorize the Bible. We memorize it and then recall it, bring it to mind, as often as we can as we move through the routines and responsibilities of our daily lives.

We do need to memorize verses. Some verses state salient principles and truths concisely and can be easily memorized. Remember that in 2007, we as a congregation memorized two verses a month for a total of 24 verses. I instituted doing that as a foundation for you and I memorizing even more verses on our own. I don't know how many of our people actually memorized the verses but those who did can recall them as they need to.

But we also need to memorize passages. There are some passages that are so rich and deep that they need to be memorized as a whole. That is what we're doing as a congregation in 2008 – memorizing passages. Our passage for January was the great ethical section in Ephesians 4:17-6:9. Our passage for February was the great highly priestly prayer of Jesus for us in John 17. Our passage for this month, March, is the Bible's classic statement on resurrection – 1 Corinthians 15. Passages, even more than verses, bring the order of God's word into our mind and other inner dimensions.

We may not be able to recite passages verbatim like we can the verses we memorize but we can become so familiar with them that we know in detail what they teach and can bring it to mind. I, for example, have mastered the contents of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. I can't recite all the verses verbatim but I can recite for you the subject matter of each of the divisions that make it up. I know, for instance, that 5:33-37 are about not manipulating people, that 6:1-18 are about seeking God's praise and not man's, and that 7:1-11 is about influencing people for good and how we do that. You get the idea. We don't have to memorize the passages verbatim. We just memorize what they teach.

The more verses and passages we memorize, the better able we will be to routinely place our minds on the Bible all the time. And that really is our goal isn't it? I mean can you think of anything better to keep our mind on than God's word? I know I can't.

Those who memorize verses and passages find that they speak constantly and consistently to scores of incidents, circumstances, situations, and experiences that arise in our everyday lives. Bringing them to our mind when they do alters the way we think and act. We find ourselves doing a whole lot more positive things and a whole lot less negative things.

I've pretty mastered the content of 1 Corinthians 13 for instance. Verses 4-7 list 15 different acts of love, many of which I bring to mind in various situations. If someone cuts me off in traffic, for instance, I might recall verse 5, which says that love is "not provoked". That means it isn't touchy and easily irritated. Or if someone insults or injures me, I might recall verse 7, which says that love "bears all things." That means that it's able to absorb insults and injuries without getting angry or depressed. Or if someone's behavior is ambiguous and can be interpreted in a positive light or a negative light, I think of verse 7, which says that love "believes all things." That means that it believes the best about people not the worst until it knows otherwise.

That illustrates what we're to do with the verses and passages that we memorize. We bring them to mind as much as we can and relate them to the details of our everyday lives.

The value of mastering and memorizing Scripture and placing our minds on it cannot be stressed enough. I've tried to drive that point home on Sunday mornings when we've gone over our verses and passages for the month. I don't know if most of our people understand and believe that but I trust that you do. Memorizing Scripture and bringing it constantly to mind is one of the most dynamic disciplines in our life with God.

Dallas Willard makes some dramatic statements in that regard. Listen to what he writes in his book *The Great Omission: "Bible memorization is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation. If I had to – and of course I don't have to – choose between all the disciplines of the spiritual life and take only one, I would choose Bible memorization. I often point out to people how much trouble they would have stayed out of if they had been muttering Scripture."* He goes on to say that memorizing Scripture is actually more important than a daily quiet time. He argues that when we fill our minds with its verses and passages, quiet time actually takes over the entirety of our lives. Our entire day is a quiet time in other words.

Those are radical things to say but an argument can be made for them. Whether you agree with Willard or not, his essential point is true. Thriving in our spiritual lives requires memorizing Scripture and placing our minds as constantly on it as we can. Doing so turns us away from evil and to goodness and brings us the calmness and joy that all of us so desperately want.

Bible memorization does take time and effort but it's time and effort well spent. Start small with baby steps if you have to. Make as your goal memorizing just one verse. Take as long as you have to in order to do that. Then move on to another verse and another and so on. Once you're comfortable with that, add a passage to memorize here and there as I defined it above.

Don't try to be heroic and do more than you can. Do as much as you can and build on that. Your ability to memorize Scripture, enhanced by the Holy Spirit, will grow.

The key of course is repetition. Recite the verse over and over again or if it's a passage, read and study it over and over again. Repeat it as many times as you have to in order to master it. Don't worry about quantity but quality. Once again, do what you can and build on that.

You can see from what I've said that Bible memorization is truly a spiritual discipline. It's an activity that all of us can do now that transforms us. The ultimate objective of memorizing and recalling Scripture isn't to memorize and recall it. It's to change us into a different kind of people. It's to make us people who think, feel, and act like Jesus.

Conclusion

Our study of the spiritual disciplines is now finished. We've discussed sixteen disciplines but as I explained earlier, those sixteen aren't exhaustive. There are others, some of which we ourselves will invent to address the particular and pressing issues in our own lives with God.

The purpose of study isn't to know but to do. It's to take what we've learned and actually put it into practice.

Learning of course requires remembering, which for most of us will require going over the materials presented again. That's why I'll make a copy of this study available to any of you who want one. Take the copy and read through all 110 pages of it again, trying to retain as much of it as you can.

Once we've learned about the spiritual disciplines, each of us then has a life determining decision to make. That decision is this. Will I now put into practice what I've learned? Will I actually identify the bodily habits of evil in my life that need to be replaced with bodily habits of righteousness? And will I actually practice the spiritual disciplines that allow the Holy Spirit to accomplish that in me? Each of us will answer "yes" or "no" to that question.

If you are like the vast majority of professing Christians in America, you will answer "no." And the primary reason that you will answer "no" is that you have better things to do – or so you think. There are television shows to watch, shopping to do, friends to meet, teams to follow, children to haul around, computer games to play, possessions to maintain, and on and on it goes. Ours is a culture of diversion and we're so caught up in the diversions that we will simply not take the time we need to learn and practice the spiritual disciplines.

But there's something we need to grasp in that regard. Almost every professing Christian would claim to follow Jesus. But following Jesus isn't a vague and abstract thing. On the contrary, it's an observable and measurable thing. It always translates into how we spend our time. If a spiritually literate person were to shadow us for an entire week and observe how we live our lives, he or she could judge quite accurately whether or not we follow Jesus. He or she would know that by what we spend our time doing.

My point is that each of us who claim to follow Jesus should back up that claim by taking the time to learn and practice the spiritual disciplines.

Doing so expresses and demonstrates our love for Him. In the epilogue of *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard reveals one of the most profound insights into our relationship with Jesus that I've ever learned.

Loving Jesus means to longing steadfastly and willing resolutely to be like Him. And one of the primary means that we become like Him is through the spiritual disciplines. Practicing the spiritual disciplines, therefore, is the practical expression of our love for Him.

In John 14:15, Jesus says to us, *"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."* He reiterates that same point in verse 21, *"He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me."*

Those verses raise a critical question. What is the relationship between loving Jesus and obeying Him? The answer, according to Willard, is this: *"And Jesus is not – in that all too human manner – trying to 'corner' us into doing what He says by saying, 'If you loved me you would do as I please!' Instead, he is teaching that obedience and love go together because love alone stays to find a way to obey."*

Please grasp the value of that insight. Love alone stays to find a way to obey. If we truly love Jesus, we will naturally want to do what He says. And if we truly love Him, we will find a way to do just that.

That way, as we've learned, is by practicing the spiritual disciplines. Those who do so therefore are finding a way to obey Him. And because they're finding a way to obey Him, they are thereby loving Him. That is ultimately what practicing the spiritual disciplines is. It's the practical expression of our love for Jesus.

I close out our study by identifying the consequences of practicing the spiritual disciplines.

One of those consequences is that we will experience spiritual problems that we never faced before. That doesn't mean that those problems weren't there before because they were. It's just that we weren't aware of them because we weren't thinking and acting in opposition to them. But in practicing the spiritual disciplines, we begin to and thus they become apparent to us.

I never realized, for instance, how self-centered I was until I started practicing the spiritual disciplines of solitude and silence. Before practicing them, I wasn't disturbed by my egocentrism at all. But after practicing them, I was and very much so and still am. I'm far less self-centered than I've ever been in my life but am far more taken back by it than I ever was by my much greater self-centeredness before.

That's a good thing though. Remember that the first step in repentance is the admitting our sins to ourselves. And the first step in admitting our sins to ourselves is identifying. And practicing the spiritual disciplines often enables us to do just that.

A second consequence of practicing spiritual disciplines is empowerment. Practicing them is one of the principal means for accessing the kingdom of heaven that is at hand. Consequently, it opens us up to the presence and power of God through the Holy Spirit. That in turn empowers us to live the life of abundance and fullness of joy that Jesus promised.

You recognize of course what that implies. Those who don't practice the spiritual disciplines cannot access the kingdom of heaven at hand as they need to. That in turn causes them to forfeit the abundant life, the fullness of joy that Jesus promises.

I end our study with the third consequence of the spiritual disciplines. This consequence is a fitting conclusion because it uncovers the ultimate objective or aim of literally everything that we've learned. That objective or aim is to glorify God.

Remember what it means to glorify God. It means to please Him and to cause others to esteem Him. That raises an issue. What is it that glorifies God the most? Saint Irenaeus told us almost 1900 years ago. He said, "*The glory of God is man fully alive.*"

He's absolutely right about that. Nothing pleases God and esteems Him as much as a person who is fully alive, that is, who is like Jesus. Since the spiritual disciplines are an indispensable means to becoming like Jesus, then their ultimate consequence and aim is to glorify God.

Will you or will you not glorify God by practicing the spiritual disciplines? Make the right decision. Choose "you will."

Silence I

Our next spiritual discipline is silence. Actually the word silence is used to identify two different disciplines.

The first discipline is the partner of solitude. In that context, silence means closing ourselves off from sounds. I'm talking here about sound of any kind – words, music, traffic, and even the sounds of nature if we can.

There's something that we need to grasp about our modern world – how noisy it is. It is radically different in that regard than earlier times. What has happened is human invention. Human invention has made ours the noisiest society in all of human history. Total silence is a rare experience for most of us. What we call silence is actually nothing more than just less noise than we're used to.

Many people have never actually experienced silence and don't even realize it. We think that's normal but it isn't.

But it isn't just abnormal. It's affecting as well. As Dallas Willard says it, *"Sound always strikes deeply and disturbingly into our souls."* Sound is as altering to our inner dimensions as sight is. It contributes significantly to much of the tension that grips the lives of Americans.

The simple fact is that we weren't made physically, psychologically, and spiritually to live in the noisy environment that we do. We're out of our natural element, so to speak, in that regard. That natural element is silence at least and the gentle sounds of nature at most. That silence and those gentle sounds help produce a tranquility of the soul in us that in turn is conducive to deep relationship with Jesus.

So, we need to be silent. We need to purposely close ourselves off from the sounds of our everyday world.

That is a difficult thing for many of us to do. The fact is that many of us actually find comfort in noise. So, we have the television on even when we aren't watching it or always have music playing in the background even when we aren't really listening to it. But we don't just comfort in the noise, we find discomfort in the silence. It shocks many of us because it makes us think that we're doing nothing or that nothing is happening, which is the worst of evils in a fast paced world like ours.

But we need to overcome these biases and practice silence. I said in discussing solitude that silence is a vital part of it. It is in fact the partner of solitude. If we withdraw from people but are immersed in noise, music for example, then we are not truly practicing solitude. Silence makes solitude real. Solitude, defined as withdrawing from human interaction, is emptied of meaning without silence.

Silence II

There is another discipline that is called silence. The difference between the first and the second is simply this. Silence I is about noise. Silence II is about talking. In the first, we close ourselves off from noise. In the second, we restrain ourselves from talking.

The Bible addresses this second discipline of silence in both the Old and New Testaments. The following are samplings of verses that treat the issue: Proverbs 10:19; 17:27-28; James 1:19-20; 3:1-4.

Those verses show us what we need to do. We need to restrain our tongue. So, we choose not to talk at all or to limit what we say. We choose to speak either minimally or not at all.

We practice this discipline in those various circumstances in which we feel compelled to talk. Examples of such circumstances are when we're accused, when we're uneasy with people, and when we want to control people, to get them to believe what we want them to believe or do what we want them to do.

But what good does that achieve? Remember that spiritual disciplines are the indirect submission of our body parts to righteousness. We practice them in order to be transformed, so that we can be what we aren't now or so that we can do what we can't do now – all for God's glory. In that regard, we can use silence to achieve a number of different aims or ends.

First, it can help us get control of our tongues. Controlling our tongues in the less intense situations allows the Holy Spirit to transform them. We eventually find ourselves being able to control them in the more intense situations.

Second, it helps us value people. That's because listening is an inherent part of silence and listening always cultivates valuing.

And third, it helps us play to an audience of One (God) not many. Not verbally promoting ourselves or adjusting how we appear to others allows the Holy Spirit to diminish our desire for the praise of others and enhance our desire for God's praise.

One of the celebrated songs of the 60's said that "Silence is golden" and, when it's used as a spiritual discipline, truly is.