

# A Spiritual Formation Primer



Richella Parham

 Renovaré

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# Introduction

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## Who Am I to Be Talking About Spiritual Formation?

That's a good question. There are a number of people with impressive credentials for discussing spiritual formation. To be honest, I'm not one of them.

I'm an ordinary woman. I'm a wife, a mother, a blogger, a local church leader. I have no advanced degrees, no imposing list of publications, no enviable resumé. So how did I get here?

I grew up in a Christian home, went to Christian college, married a Christian man, attended Christian churches, hung out with Christian friends, sent my kids to Christian school. But my heart was hungry for more than I was getting. One day in 1998 a kind pastor gave me a copy of Richard J. Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. Two years later, another pastor gave me a copy of Dallas Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy*. I'm one of hundreds of thousands of people for whom these two books proved to be life-giving.

Then in 2003 I had the opportunity to attend a Renovaré Regional Conference at which both Richard Foster and Dallas Willard spoke. At that conference, Richard and Dallas taught about the grace of God and God's work in our lives. They presented a

balanced vision and a practical strategy for spiritual growth. Not only that, they demonstrated a love for one another and for the other members of the Renovaré team that spoke volumes to my heart.

Beginning that day, the work of God through the ministry of Renovaré has changed my life. I got involved in the work of Renovaré in various roles, and I became a member of Renovare's Ministry Team and Board of Trustees in 2011. At the Renovaré Ministry Team Retreat in June 2012, I was chatting with Dallas Willard and remarked to him, "I really don't have much of a résumé." He smiled and nodded and said, simply, "Yes, and that's just fine."

So I'm here today, writing this spiritual formation primer, not because I'm an impressive expert, but because I've been listening and learning, and I'm grateful for what I've learned.

Actually, I'm very grateful I started learning when I did, for I was to face some difficult times. I remember one of those times so clearly that I'll share the story with you. It was the day my 45-year-old husband had open-heart surgery. Jack's heart had gone into atrial fibrillation and extensive testing revealed that his mitral valve needed to be repaired. But just ten months before Jack's surgery, our 14-year-old son had open-heart surgery. So we knew what this meant. We knew what was coming.

You see, if a surgeon needs to repair the heart, he first must stop the heart from pumping. Heart surgery requires that the surgical team stop the patient's heart, repair it, and then re-start it. And that heart-stopping part is—well—heart stopping. It's hard to prepare for. Jack made sure that all his affairs were in order and that his will was up-to-date. Aside from those practical things, there's not much you can do but pray. You know that the surgery is life-threatening, and it's hard to deal with that fact.

The surgery date was one of the longest days of my life. The operating room at Duke got backed up, so things started late. The hours dragged. Finally, the surgeon came out to see me just as

the clock struck midnight. He explained that the surgery had not gone as planned. Jack's mitral valve was much worse than they'd expected; they'd had to replace it. Part of Jack's heart was now made of stainless steel.

The next day was difficult but exciting. Jack was moved from Surgical ICU to a regular room. He was very groggy from the anesthesia, he had five IVs, and he had four drainage tubes in his chest, but he was alive. Our surgeon came by in the afternoon. I had told Jack about the operation, but the surgeon explained it all again. This time he added some commentary. "Your valve was really in bad shape," he told Jack. "It's a good thing we operated. Otherwise, you would have died of heart failure."

Just like that, we learned that we'd been wrong. Our anguish had been misplaced. We'd thought of the surgery as life-threatening. Turns out that it was *life-saving*.

Several years have passed since that day, but it's become something of a metaphor for me. I've realized that Jack's surgery is not the only thing that I was wrong about. For years I'd clung to grievances, sure that my clinging to them prevented their being repeated. Bitterness I'd nurtured, certain that I was just protecting myself. And anger I'd held on to, knowing that doing so was absolutely necessary.

But I was wrong. Letting those things go is not life-threatening. It's life-saving.

"Come to me," says the Savior, "all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light*" (Matthew 11:28-30).

For me, the process of spiritual formation has been a slow, sometimes painful learning about the way of Jesus. Jesus's way is the way of letting go of those grievances, setting aside that bitterness, ridding my heart of the anger. While his way may

seem hard, it's actually the easier way. It's the way out of burdensome weariness. It's the way of rest.

So now it's my privilege to share with you a little of what I've learned. I'm still learning, to be sure. But I pray that this little volume will help you in some way.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richella".

Richella Parham

# Chapter 1

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## Defining Spiritual Formation

In talking about any subject, a good place to begin is by defining terms. "Spiritual formation" has become a hot topic in the past few years. Books and articles on spiritual formation abound; universities offer degree programs in spiritual formation; many churches now have a minister of spiritual formation. And yet for all the buzz, lots of people don't have any understanding what spiritual formation actually is.

The idea of *formation* is easy enough to understand—every day we think about the formation or development of those things that are important to us. But *spiritual formation*? What does that mean? How can we begin to understand that?

The answer starts with understanding that humans are spiritual beings. One of the best and most trustworthy teachers in the field of Christian spiritual formation is Dallas Willard, author of *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, *The Divine Conspiracy*, and *Renovation of the Heart*. Dallas likes to say that every human is "an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God's great universe." We have a physical aspect, for sure—we all have bodies, and our bodies are important. In fact, our bodies are very important to our spiritual formation. But it's our spirits that will live forever.

We all undergo spiritual formation. Everyone's spirit gets formed, for good or for ill. Even if we aren't aware of it, our spirits are being formed. We develop into people of some kind of character—again, good or ill.

Christian spiritual formation is concerned with our spirits being formed in the right way—that is, the way of Jesus. In fact, it's probably better to think of Christian spiritual formation as *transformation*—the transformation of a person's spirit, which is that part of a person out of which actions flow.

**In short, Christian spiritual formation is the process in which believers cooperate with God and one another so that their souls are nourished and their characters are transformed into Christlikeness.**

I like the way 2 Corinthians 3:18 speaks of this process:

"And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

Jim Smith, author of a number of excellent books on spiritual formation, has written one of the best definitions of spiritual formation I've heard so far:

"Christian spiritual formation is the process of being *transformed* (emphasis mine) into the image of Christ, through a relationship of intimacy with God, by the power of the Spirit, in order to live a good and beautiful life of faith, hope, love, joy, and peace—a life that will be a blessing to oneself and to others and will glorify God now and for all eternity."<sup>1</sup>

A “life that will be a blessing to oneself and to others and will glorify God”? Oh, yes! This is a subject worth considering.

# Chapter 2

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## The Center of It All: Christ

So all of us are undergoing the formation of our spirits, in one way or another. What we want is the *transformation* of our spirits into something beautiful and good.

As we begin to learn about Christian spiritual formation, is there a particular place to start? Is there something on which we should focus? I think there is. It's the root of the word *Christian*. It's Christ.

Richard J. Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline*, makes an important point when he notes that Christians often rush to talk about Jesus's death and neglect careful consideration of Jesus's life. This is a considerable loss for Christians, for in looking at the life of Jesus we can gain great insights for our own lives.

Christian spiritual formation is anchored in the goodness of Jesus. "The person and gospel of Jesus Christ—building on the simple 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so'—is the only complete answer to the false and destructive images and ideas that control the lives of those away from God. The process of spiritual formation in Christ is one of progressively replacing those destructive images with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself."<sup>2</sup>

You may have acknowledged Jesus as your Lord and Savior, perhaps many times. This is right and good. Jesus is our Lord, and he is indeed our only Savior. But there's even more to the role of Jesus and our relationship to him. I invite you to start thinking of Jesus as your Teacher.

The followers of Jesus often called him “Master.” The word “master” has changed in connotation down through the years. In contemporary vernacular we most of often think of a master as being one who is in charge or in control, such as the master of an animal or the master of a slave. When we read of the early disciples addressing Jesus as “Master,” it’s easy for us to forget that they’re looking to him as Teacher.

Now, Jesus is not a mean teacher. He’s not one of those professors whose classes you avoid at all costs. He’s a loving, giving teacher, eager to speak to us, happy to share his life with us. Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

As we consider Jesus to be not only our Savior and our Lord but also our Teacher, we need to realize that *Jesus knew what he was talking about.*

Let that sink in for a moment. We can learn how to live from the person who knows best. He came to earth and lived down here as one of us.

As Dallas Willard explains fully in his landmark work *The Divine Conspiracy*, we must realize that a commitment to Jesus requires complete confidence that Jesus knows the truth about everything—about all of creation, about the world in which we live, about our lives and the lives of others. We simply will not trust someone whom we do not believe to be capable and competent.

Jesus is completely capable and competent—the smartest, wisest, most well-informed person who ever lived. When his followers realize that Jesus is the one who holds “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3), they are able to commit themselves fully to learning from him. They have full trust then in the Master Teacher—the one to whom they will gladly apprentice themselves, for he is the one who has full knowledge and abilities.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is our ever-living Savior, Lord, Friend, and Teacher—a position that he and he alone is qualified to fill.

# Chapter 3

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## The Possibility of Change

One of the most important facts about spiritual formation is part of the definition we discussed in Chapter 1: Everyone gets one. Even if you don't know it's happening, your spirit is being formed. Before we go any further, I want to challenge you to believe that formation in Christlikeness is possible.

I was sitting in a Sunday school class one day—a good class with an excellent teacher—when I heard a comment that struck me as very sad. We were talking about being disciples of Jesus Christ, and an older man in the class spoke up. He said, "We would be wrong if we think we can make any progress while we're here on this earth. We'll never be anything more than horribly sinful creatures, and not until we get to heaven will we see any real change."

Really? We'll never make any progress in becoming Christlike? Is that true?

His comment was ironic, because he is actually an extremely godly man. He has walked with the Lord for a long time, and even a casual onlooker can see evidence of that. I believe he was thinking about the truth that all people are sinful and are completely reliant on God's grace. That is certainly a fact.

But it is possible to make progress. By the grace of God, it is possible to become more like Christ. Our transformation into Christlikeness is the work of God in us. But it IS possible, and that's an important fact. God invites us to live in His grace and to

allow the transformation of our characters to take place. By looking to Jesus as our teacher and making ourselves apprentices to him, we can learn to live as He lived. We can become more like him.

Will we reach perfection? Absolutely not. If we tried very hard, could we save ourselves? Most definitely not. But can we become more like Jesus? Yes, we can.

That simple fact is important. *In order to change, people first must have a vision that change is possible.*

I challenge you to let this idea percolate in your brain for awhile. Jesus stands ready to teach us and to show us His way if we will listen and follow.

"Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen"  
(II Peter 3:18).

# Chapter 4

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## Grace

As I wrote these chapters, I found myself wrestling with the order in which they should go. Defining terms seemed to beg to go first. Establishing Jesus's position at the center of the entire matter couldn't wait. And it seemed necessary to state early on the fact that change is possible. But I can't go any further without establishing the principle which is the very heart of the matter when it comes to spiritual formation: grace.

As I said in chapter 1, Christian spiritual formation is probably best thought of as spiritual *transformation*. Our desire is to become like Christ. Read 2 Corinthians 3:18 again:

"And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; *for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*"

Do you see it? This business of transformation is God's work in us. We participate in the process, to be sure, and that's a great deal of what we'll be exploring together in this volume. But the transforming work is done by God. It is a gift from his hand—his grace imparted to us.

So what difference does that make? We know that we're saved by grace. Right. Got it.

Or do we?

I think perhaps that while we understand that God's grace is extended to us in salvation, we tend to forget that the flow of his grace doesn't stop once we become Christians. Grace is for sinners, to be sure. "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!" Now how about this? "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that sustained a Christian like me"? Now, we're all still sinners, so it's appropriate to keep singing about the fact that God's grace saved us. But it's also by his grace that we're provided with "everything needed for life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3)—everything needed.

It is by God's grace that we are changeable, and it is by God's grace that we are changed.

Why is this important? Two big reasons, I believe. First is the very nature of the word *grace*. It's interesting that we have no trouble recognizing the goodness and generosity inherent in the idea of grace when we're speaking of, say, gracious hosts, graceful dancers, or maybe grace periods for bill-paying. But when it comes to our thinking about God's attitude toward us, we can sometimes think that he's impatient with us—that he's tired of our messing things up, or weary that's He's provided for us for too long. This voice of God in our imaginations might say, "Time to move out and earn your own keep! I'm tired of your being dependent on me!" Although we may not admit it, this is often the way we think of God's attitude toward us.

Remembering, instead, that God's approach to us is grace, grace, and more grace—never-ending, never-failing, never even rationed—is delightful.

Second, recognizing that the transformation of our hearts is accomplished by God's grace relieves us of any notions that we might be changing ourselves. An acknowledgment of God's saving, redeeming work throughout prevents us from becoming proud of ourselves and monstrously self-righteous.

The fact that this life-saving, life-giving work emanates from a power beyond mine was driven home to me recently. I was

driving through my neighborhood when I noticed a fire truck parked by the side of the road. No sign of fire, no smell of smoke—just the truck. I wondered why the truck was parked there, then I saw two firefighters walking around holding brushes and cans of red paint.

*They were painting the hydrants.*

It's been a long time since there was a fire in this neighborhood. But the firefighters diligently painted each hydrant, making sure the giant spigots would be easy to spot if ever they're needed.

It occurred to me this is what we do when we stop to acknowledge and celebrate God's grace. If there haven't been any fires in our lives lately, we can forget where our strength comes from—strength for everything we need for life and godliness. Gushing forth, never-ending, always available, never running dry. Perhaps “amazing” is the best word we have to describe it.

Together, then, we sing:

“Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come;  
‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”<sup>4</sup>

# Chapter 5

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## The Kingdom of God

"I want to be like Jesus."

Such is the heart-cry of so many people. They learn about Jesus, they admire him, and they try really hard to be like him. When they fail, they become disheartened and assume that it's impossible to be like him.

It's easy, I believe, for us to look at Jesus, the man who lived on earth, in a rather one-sided way. Maybe this is because we believe so strongly in the divinity of Christ—we certainly do believe that, and it's one of the most important tenets of our faith. But it may be that we sometimes look at Jesus and assume that he lived such a good life only because of his divinity. We read that he lived without sin, and it's easy for us to assume that this is only true because he was God and that he couldn't sin. From there, it's easy for us to surmise that the way Jesus lived was nice for him but not really applicable to us.

I believe there's an additional way of considering Jesus as our example—a very real example for all of humanity. I think Jesus lived a life of goodness and rightness because he wanted to do so. He understood the value of it, and he trained his body (his human body!) to live that way. Jesus intended to live his life on earth in complete accord with the will of his Father in heaven, and he took steps to bring this about. Remember the description of Jesus in Hebrews 4:15: he was "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (ESV)." So Jesus was tempted just like we are, yet did not sin.

I'll bet you've heard sermons and lessons given on the temptation of Jesus. Taking Matthew 4 as their text, preachers and teachers talk about how Satan appeared to Jesus and tried to get him to sin. Jesus successfully resisted the temptations. We hear the sermons, and we think something like, "Way to go, Jesus! Way to beat that devil!" And sometimes the teachers add a little more "oomph" to the story by emphasizing the fact that the devil came to Jesus right at the end of Jesus's 40 days of fasting. I've heard preachers and teachers say, "Just imagine! Satan is smart and wily, and he tempted Jesus just when Jesus was at his weakest point." And then we *really* cheer, "Way to go, Jesus!"

Perhaps there's another, very important way to look at that story. It's true that Satan approached Jesus when Jesus had been fasting for 40 days. No doubt Jesus was really hungry and that his body was very weak at that point. It would appear Satan thought he was going to catch Jesus in a moment of weakness.

But what if those 40 days of fasting actually made Jesus stronger? Jesus was not fasting to make himself weak so that his resistance to the devil would be impressive. He spent that time fasting so that he could devote himself completely to being with his father. After 40 days of unbroken communion with God, Jesus's spirit was in a state of great strength, not weakness. I think that resisting the temptations of the devil was actually pretty easy for him at that point. In other words, Jesus the man was able to resist the temptations of the devil not because he *was* God, but because he had just spent so much time *with* God—his spirit was full and strong, and what the devil offered was unappealing.

Again, I don't mean to suggest that Jesus never acted as God when he lived on the earth. Clearly, there were things that he was only able to do—things that we will never be able to do—because he was God. He knew what people were thinking. He could read people's hearts. He had the power to forgive sin. He was certainly God, and that's an important fact.

But he also lived as a man, and he lived the kind of life that we, by his grace and with his help, can live. Jesus doesn't ask us to be

divine. He knows our human weaknesses. But he does invite us to live a life of more strength and less weakness by doing the kinds of things that he did while he lived here on earth—things that keep us in close communion with God so that we draw our strength from him.

So often what we hear proclaimed as the gospel is that Jesus died for us so that we can go to heaven when we die. That is a true statement, but it's only part of the truth. Jesus didn't die just so that we can go to heaven someday. He died to give us eternal life—*and that life begins right now.*

If you take a good look at Matthew 4 and read past the part about the temptation of Christ, you'll see that Jesus began preaching. His message? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). I'm afraid that we might not understand that language very well. Here's another way to put it. Jesus says: "Change the way you think about things. The kingdom of the heavens—the place where God, who is always near us, reigns—is right here. I have come to make it available to you. I'll show you how to live." Jesus the man understood that he could live his life in assurance and trust in God's goodness and provision, and he opens to all of us the invitation to live in that same assurance.

*That's good news!*

Jesus does more than to save us from eternal death. He also makes available to us eternal life—life in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the place where God reigns, where what God wants done is done. It is a place where we are not only forgiven of our sins, but also loved beyond our wildest imaginings and equipped to be a vital part of God's work. Jesus himself is the way into the Kingdom. By trusting him with our lives—trusting him enough that we'll bring our own "kingdoms" into his great Kingdom—we can live the abundant life of which Jesus speaks in John 10:10. There we, like Jesus, can live in assurance and trust in God's goodness and provision.

Life in the Kingdom of God is life with God—life that acknowledges God as King and trusts the goodness and greatness of his reign. This life extends for all eternity, but it begins now. By trusting Jesus, the “way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), we enter into this life with God.

Certainly this life involves life in heaven. Life with God is everlasting, eternal. But life with God does not commence upon our walking through the pearly gates; it begins here. It begins the moment we place our trust in Jesus. The work of the spirit of God within us is to transform us into the kind of people who will want to be in heaven—the kind of people who really do want God’s will to be done. “The instant we turn and step into the kingdom of God we are born from above, as Jesus said, and we enter into a vast array of experiences in the Holy Spirit. These experiences are glorious glimpses into heavenly realities. . . . In our turning into the Kingdom of God we are also enrolling as disciples, or apprentices, to Jesus Christ. We will be in this apprenticeship all our lives.”<sup>5</sup>

The Kingdom of God, made available by Jesus—this is the place where we can live in true “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

# Chapter 6

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## The Bible

Ever since the beginning of the church, Christians have been in the business of wanting to become Christlike. Spiritual formation is something of a trend right now, but it is nothing new. For two millennia devoted people have wanted to become more Christlike. Many books have been written on the subject, and I'll talk about some of those. But first I want to commend to you the two great books that Christians have been using for two millennia.

The first great book is the Bible. Of all generations we are particularly blessed in that we have the Bible in such a wonderful form. We can have a translation into nearly any language; we can have a Bible in many different versions; we can have a large study Bible for our desktops and one that fits into our bags or backpacks or briefcases. We can even have the entire Bible at our fingertips on our smartphones.

What an amazing gift of God's grace is the Bible! Just think of it. "God, in sovereign grace and outrageous love, has given us a written revelation of who he is and what his purposes are for humanity. And God has chosen to accomplish this great work through his people on earth. This written revelation now resides as a massive fact at the heart of human history. There is simply no book that is remotely close to achieving the significance and influence of the Bible."<sup>6</sup>

Sadly, this gracious gift from God is sometimes used in ways that God never intended. It can be used as a "proof text" to accommodate one particular belief or another. It can be used as a weapon to attack persons or groups of people who are disliked by

other persons. It can be treated only as a piece of literature, analyzed and parsed and studied but unregarded as the Word of God.

Neither do those who *do* regard the Bible as the Word of God go without their share of controversy. Some groups refuse to trust or even to associate with folks who do not use a particular version of the Bible. Great fights have arisen over issues as small as whether a particular use of pronouns is good or not. For instance, the English version of the Bible completed in 1611 during the reign of James I of England is considered by many to be the only acceptable translation. Others accord that same place of prominence to the New International Version, the English Standard Version, or another favorite. The truth is that no translation of the Bible is perfect or acceptable to all readers.

Still, for all the controversy that has centered around the Bible in our times and in centuries past, God has seen fit to preserve these Scriptures. I am convinced that if God had wished for his book to be passed down to us in a radically different form from what we have, he certainly could have brought that to pass. Imagine the controversy, though, if we actually did have the original scrolls or parchments or tablets on which the Bible writers had penned their inspired words. Where would we keep them? In Jerusalem? In Rome? In Greece? In London? How about New York? Or Nashville? What do you think? And if we could decide *where* to keep them, *how* would we keep them? Would they be on heavily guarded display, like the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre or the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum or the U.S. Declaration of Independence in the National Archives?

The Bible is God's book, and he has seen fit to preserve it for us in a way that doesn't necessarily satisfy all our curiosities—but it does contain the message. That message is one of love. Amazingly, God so loves the world that He extends to us the opportunity to live with Him—not just in heaven someday, but right here on this earth. Think about it—the Bible begins with a record of human life with God in face-to-face, individual relationship. As the Earth is populated, most people turn away

from God, so God chooses an individual family and chooses to bless the world through them. That family grows to be a nation which passes through ups and downs, times of tragedy and triumph, times of reverent obedience to God and times of great disobedience. Still, they are God's people to bring to the world the greatest of all gifts—Jesus. Jesus is Immanuel—literally, God with us. For a few years people on earth get to live with God right in their midst. Since Jesus's death, resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, we have had the privilege of living with God in our hearts.

God with us! Imagine the greatness of that fact! And that grand story is revealed to us in God's Word, the Bible—not so that we can fight about it, or use its words to prove one point or another, but so that we can learn to become more and more like the one who is at the center of the story.

For the spiritual formation of a human being, there is no greater aid than the Bible. We should read it, study it, meditate upon it, memorize passages from it. Those exercises are all highly profitable. Most of all, though, we should let its message of love seep into our hearts, our minds, our total beings.

# Chapter 7

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## The “Book” of Nature

As I write this chapter, it's a beautiful day in my home state of North Carolina. It's the kind of day that reminds me of Psalm 19:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
The firmament proclaims his handiwork (Psalm 19:1).

Along with the written Word of God, the Bible, another great “book” is provided to us: the “book” of Nature. As Psalm 19 says, “the heavens are telling the glory of God.” This is true! Taking a real look at the creation of God can do much to fill your soul with glory and drive you to your knees in praise, adoration, and gratitude. This is good for your soul.

Now, simply reading the book of Nature without ever looking at the Bible would be a mistake. It is quite possible to elevate the goodness of God's creation to the level of worship-worthiness; doing this is certainly not good for your soul.

But just reading the Bible without ever pausing to drink deeply of the beauty of creation and to adore the God of creation would also be a mistake. “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Romans 1:20). In the words of one of my favorite poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
and ev'ry common bush afire with God,

But only he who sees takes off his shoes—  
The rest sit 'round it and pluck blackberries.<sup>7</sup>

Do you see? Do you see goodness and grace of God in the everyday beauty that surrounds you? All Creation sings the praises of the Creator!

Perhaps today you would benefit from stepping outside and considering the glorious testimony to God's goodness provided by His creation.

This is my Father's world,  
And to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and 'round me rings  
The music of the spheres.  
This is my Father's world!  
I rest me in the thought  
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;  
His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world,  
The birds their carols raise;  
The morning light, the lily white  
Declare their Maker's praise.  
This is my Father's world!  
He shines in all that's fair;  
In the rustling grass, I hear him pass;  
He speaks to me everywhere.

If you aren't seeing that all of creation proclaims the praises of the Creator, I urge you to make space in your life to look again. Spend time considering the wonders of creation. Allow the order and beauty of the natural world to stun you. Let it sink deeply into your soul. For the same God who created all this beauty still reigns.

This is my Father's world,  
O let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,

God is the ruler yet.  
This is my Father's world!  
The battle is not done:  
Jesus, who died, shall be satisfied  
And earth and heav'n be one.<sup>8</sup>

# Chapter 8

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## Entering into the Process of Change

In considering spiritual formation, we've established several things:

1. Our spirits are being formed, one way or another.
2. What we're really after is the *transformation* of our spirits into Christlikeness.
3. That transformation is God's work in us—it's all by grace.
4. It IS possible to make real progress, even here on earth.

So if these things are true, are there steps for us to take? Is there anything we can do to help this process along?

The answer is yes. Remember, the transformation of our spirits into Christlikeness is God's work in us. It's God's grace that changes our hearts. We don't do anything to try to earn God's approval. The notion of trying to make ourselves righteous because of our good works is wrong-headed. God loves us because of his goodness, not because of ours. We're not trying to earn our way into heaven—we're saved because of God's grace, not because of our good works.

But while the doctrine of salvation by grace is opposed to the idea of salvation by works, it is not opposed to our making effort to learn and grow. Sometimes Christians are paralyzed into non-action, assuming that any effort in pursuing godliness implies that they're trying to earn their salvation. And that's wrong—

headed, too. There are things we can do that will greatly help us in our journey.

Some people refer to these things we can do as "spiritual disciplines," "soul-training exercises," or "holy habits." No matter what you call these practices, the goal of practicing them is the same: becoming more like Jesus.

Here's an analogy for you. Someone who wants to be a great piano player gets a teacher to show her the way. She starts by doing simple, small things such as learning scales and practicing them every day. She interacts with her teacher over and over, and she practices each new skill as she goes along. Over the course of years, she is transformed into someone who is like her teacher—that is, someone who can play the piano, which was her goal all along. But she didn't get there by simply saying "I want to play the piano. God, turn me into a piano player." Nor did she get there by simply trying very hard to be a piano player. Rather than just *trying* to be a piano player, she *trained* to become one. She understood that there is a way to become a piano player, and she followed a path to become what she wanted to be.

So it is in the Christian life. If we want to be more like Christ, there are things we can do that will aid us as we work toward that goal. There are things that we can do right now, wherever we live and in whatever situation we find ourselves, to put ourselves in a position of humbly interacting with our Teacher so that we can learn from him. And in that process of learning from Jesus, our hearts can change. Again, the change must occur in our hearts—deep inside us where only God can reach. But by doing the things our Teacher demonstrated for us to do, we can grow to be more like him.

# Chapter 9

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## Introducing Spiritual Disciplines

Now we move into talking about soul-training exercises, or spiritual disciplines. The best definition of spiritual disciplines I've ever heard comes from Dallas Willard: "A discipline is an activity within our power—something we *can* do—which brings us to a point where we can do what we at present *cannot* do by direct effort."

Did you get that? A discipline is something we can do right now, using our bodies, minds, and hearts in their present state, so that we will eventually be able to do something that we cannot currently do. A discipline is part of the process of change.

As we think about this, I want be sure that we understand a couple of things.

First, the soul-training exercises, or spiritual disciplines, are not the point in and of themselves. They are the things that we can do so that eventually we will be able to do what we cannot currently do by direct effort. Here's an example: A coach might have basketball players run laps. Every day, they may run a lot of laps. *But the point is not for the players to become good lap-runners.* No, the coach wants the athletes to become good players, and he understands that part of being a good player is having the cardiovascular fitness and stamina to last through a game. He can't wave a magic wand and give his players stamina instantaneously, but he knows that they will develop stamina if they'll do what he says. So he prescribes the lap-running. The players might not like the lap-running, but they trust that the

coach knows what he's doing, and they know that if they'll obey his instructions they can become good players. If all the athletes ever did was to become good lap-runners, they would have missed the point. Similarly, if we practice spiritual disciplines as if practicing the disciplines were the point, we might become good practitioners—but we want more than that. The point is for us to become Christlike. The disciplines are a means to that end.

Second, while the disciplines are not themselves the point, they are indeed things that we can do in order to become more like Christ. We cannot change our own hearts. That is the work of God. But we can do some things to put ourselves in the right position for being changed. These things we do as an act of submission, trusting that God will work. Perhaps it will help us to consider a familiar example from nature: the caterpillar. A caterpillar doesn't become a butterfly because it wishes it were a butterfly. And it doesn't change itself into a butterfly. It does, however, do what it *can* do—form a chrysalis—so that it's in the position for the metamorphosis to take place. If the caterpillar had conscious thought, it might really, really want to be a butterfly, and it might wish that it could become a butterfly instantaneously. But that's not how the process works. The metamorphosis is God's work, and it doesn't happen until the caterpillar submits to the process of change. Now, we're more complicated than caterpillars, but the same principle is true for us. We don't just wish we were Christlike and expect God to change us instantaneously. There are tried and true things that we can do so that we're living a life open to God's work in us.

Again: spiritual disciplines or soul-training exercises are a means to an end. **Our goal is to become like Jesus, not to be good at exercises.**

But it's important to realize that there is a real need for people who are disciplined. Simply put, the disciplined person is one who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. We recognize this fact easily and readily among athletes (that athletic metaphor is just too useful to ignore!). We expect the members of our favorite teams to have practiced long and well at playing

their sports. If they haven't practiced, it shows on the playing field: they are not able to perform in the game what they have not practiced. For example: although he may have great natural talent, there is no magic that makes a kicker able to make a field goal during the heat of the game. But if he has submitted to training and practiced well, he'll be able to kick the field goal even during the stress of a difficult game. He may even do it so well that he makes it look easy.

Surely the spiritual life is not less important than the athletic life! Yet many of us merely hope that we will be able to act like Jesus in the heat of the moment simply by force of will or by trying hard. Rather than submit to the training regimen of practicing ways to become more like Jesus, we simply wish that we were. And then we're often disappointed when it turns out that we're not the kind of person we wish to be.

Simply put, the spiritual disciplines are the training exercises for the spiritual life. It bears repeating that they are not the goal of spiritual life, any more than training exercises are the goal for an athlete. They are an important means to the end of becoming like Jesus.

It would be very difficult to talk about the spiritual disciplines without referring to one of the best teachers on the subject, Richard J. Foster. Richard's landmark book *Celebration of Discipline* was first published in 1978, and it remains a most trustworthy guide to understanding and practicing the disciplines. In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard writes extensively about a number of spiritual disciplines, but first he establishes the fact that the practice of disciplines is a pathway to freedom rather than a means of enslavement. Understanding the disciplines requires an acknowledgement that the work of transformation of our characters into Christlikeness is the work of God.

Richard writes, “Training in righteousness most surely involves spiritual disciplines appropriate to our situation and our need: solitude and silence, prayer and fasting, study and service, and so much more. These disciplines are the main way we offer our bodies up to God as a living sacrifice. We are doing what we can with our bodies, our minds, our hearts. God then takes this simple offering of ourselves and does with it what we cannot do, producing within us deeply ingrained habits of love and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

*Celebration of Discipline* describes twelve classical disciplines that have been practiced by followers of Jesus for centuries. That may seem a long list of practices, but it is not an exhaustive list, nor was it meant to be. The point of all the soul-training exercises, however many there may be, is to place ourselves in a posture of learning from God and growing in his grace. Whether we routinely practice two or two dozen disciplines, we do so in humble and grateful dependence upon God to work in our hearts.

In the following chapters, we’ll look more closely at a few of those disciplines.

# Chapter 10

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## The Discipline of Solitude

So often we wish we could be more like Jesus and we even try to be more like Jesus, but we neglect to do the kinds of things that Jesus did.

Once again, let's remember: Jesus was the smartest man who ever lived. Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

So what did Jesus do? Is there anything Jesus did that we can do as well?

Yes. Yes, there is.

We don't know everything there is to know about Jesus's life on earth. But we do know some things. If we give Jesus his due, we'll consider that he lived his life on earth just as he meant to do. He lived his life as a man on purpose—both to *give* his life as a ransom for us and to *live* his life as an example for us. He is our Savior and our Teacher.

So let's consider some things that Jesus did as he lived his life here on earth. We'll also talk about some habits that Jesus-followers down through the centuries have found helpful.

To begin with, let's look at a practice that Jesus practiced often:

**Solitude.**

Doesn't sound very exciting, does it? But even a quick look at the gospels will show that Jesus often "withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). I think perhaps it is easy for us to focus so much on what Jesus was doing *after* he retreated from the crowds that we overlook the important fact that he retreated. He sought solitude.

Of course, Jesus was not completely alone during these times of solitude, and that is precisely the point: he withdrew from the company of other people so that he could be solely in the company of his Father. The discipline of solitude is not valuable just because it gives us a break from being around other people (although that's sometimes very helpful!). It's valuable because it gives us freedom to be only with God—and what riches await when we clear our minds to focus only on him!

You may be at a stage of life when solitude sounds like an unimaginable luxury. I can remember times when my children were small that I felt like I had no time to myself at all. If I'm honest, though, I'll admit that there were times when the kids were asleep or safely occupied in an activity that didn't require my presence every minute. Perhaps the same is true for you.

Of course, it's tempting to fill every such moment with activity, and these days it's easy to for that activity to be something that will connect you to other people—make a phone call, send a text, reply to an email, or read a blog, for instance. Those activities are all good, of course. But your soul needs some space to breathe, and that's best found in solitude. I invite you to see what you might gain from taking some time to be alone with God.

# Chapter 11

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## The Discipline of Silence

Closely related to the discipline of solitude is a practice that is so closely linked to solitude that it's not always listed as a separate discipline. Yet it's one of utmost importance, so I'm dedicating a separate chapter to it.

### Silence.

Oh, mercy. I was on a retreat once and our group's director decided that we would all observe three hours of silence one morning. Now, some folks had signed up for a "silent track" at this retreat; they *wanted* to be silent. Kind of like monks, you know. Guess who had not signed up for a silent retreat? Guess who struggled the most with those three hours?

Yes, that was me.

I love to talk. That's one of the reasons I enjoy being a blogger—it's like talking to people all over the world. And I love to listen to people talk. People are so interesting! I love to hear their stories and learn all about them. It's fascinating!

But with all the talking and all the listening and all the general noise in my life, guess whose voice I have trouble hearing sometimes?

You guessed it. God's.

Richard Foster writes, "Jesus Christ is alive and here to teach his people himself. His voice is not hard to hear; his vocabulary is not difficult to understand. But learning to listen well and to hear correctly is no small task."<sup>10</sup>

Why do we not hear God's voice more clearly? I think it's mostly because we're not often listening. We're usually talking. We're filling all available space with our own needs and desires and interests. We're busy, for crying out loud. And the result is that we don't give God a chance to get a word in edgewise.

In addition to our frequent talking, I think perhaps we keep up a steady stream of noise because we have some ideas about God that are not true. We're afraid to listen for his voice, because we don't trust that what he has to say will be good—and good for us.

One of the great benefits of practicing silence and listening for God's voice is that, when we hear it, we'll be amazed at the goodness in it. Richard Foster also writes, "The quality of God's voice is one of drawing and encouraging. The spirit in God's voice is all grace and mercy. And the content of what is being said is always consistent with what God has said before—we have a huge biblical witness upon which to test our leadings."<sup>11</sup>

For me, more than anything else, practicing silence has demonstrated to that God is completely trustworthy. His voice, whether speaking through the written word of the Bible, the spoken word of a good teacher, or directly to my heart, is always one of goodness. Furthermore, keeping silence has sometimes deprived me of being able to speak up for myself. I tend to jump at the chance to defend and justify myself. When I practice silence, I have to trust God to protect me—and I learn that he is trustworthy in this way, too.

I know you have a long list of things to do and places to go. I know you may feel as if you can't possibly afford to spend time being still. But I urge you to try it, even if it's for just a few minutes. Remember the words of the psalmist: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Leave your to-do list and quiet

your heart. Be still and know—for he IS God. What he has to say will be well worth hearing.

# Chapter 12

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## The Discipline of Meditation

Next we'll consider the discipline of **meditation**.

Many Christians speak of having "quiet time." Often, they think of their "quiet time" as the time during which they do their Bible study or practice intercessory prayer. Both of those are very good things to do, but "furiously busy time" might be a better description of those sessions than "quiet time."

In this exceedingly busy world, meditation is often just what our hearts need.

What is meditation? Simply put, meditation is contemplation or reflection. It is continued thought on one matter. The adherents of some Eastern religions are famous for their meditative practices, and rightly so. These folks have learned the value of quieting their minds and calming themselves. But unlike these forms of meditation, Christian meditation does not stop with the idea of detachment from the world. Instead, Christian meditation is a tool for detaching from the confusion and noise of the world in order to attach fully and richly to God.

Christian meditation is the practice of stepping away from the noisiness of our sometimes frantic world, calming our minds, and developing an ability to hear the voice of God.

So how can we do that? Again, putting things very simply, we first choose to practice. Meditation may come quite naturally to some people. Those who have introverted personalities, for

instance, or those with an artistic bent may find meditation a very easy discipline to practice. Those of us who are more extroverted or more action-oriented may find that we must force ourselves into a position of quiet calm. There's no magic way to meditate—you don't have to sit in a certain position, hold your hands any particular way, or have your eyes closed. You might meditate best sitting under a tree, gazing out at the beauty of creation. Or you might meditate best sitting in a chair with your hands in your lap.

Perhaps the most helpful thing I've found is to choose something upon which to meditate. Each of us is unique, so each of us may benefit from meditating upon different things. Perhaps a work of art may speak deeply to you—a painting or a poem, for instance. Maybe a part of God's creation will inspire you most—say a leaf, a pine cone, or a sea shell. Anything on which we can fix our minds and in so doing shut out other sounds long enough to focus upon God's speaking to us is a good object for meditation.

For me, the very best thing is to meditate upon a passage of Scripture. Now, I don't mean to study a passage of Scripture, although that's an excellent thing to do. I mean to allow a passage to speak to you deeply. Remember, Scripture is the Word of God, described as "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). It's important to remember that God loves you passionately and completely, and allow his Word to communicate that love to you.

Here's a personal example of how meditation has helped me. As I mentioned in the Introduction, my family has faced real struggles with health over the past several years. My 14-year-old son had open-heart surgery in April 2008. Then in February 2009 my husband had open-heart surgery. And then in April 2011 my husband required a second open-heart surgery. Of course these surgeries took place right in the middle of our everyday, busy lives. At one point I was so stressed that I wished I could take a class in time management. There was so much to do, so many lists to be made and tasks to be carried out. How on earth was I ever going to get everything done?

Precisely at this time of intense activity, I was advised to spend time meditating on the psalms. At first I balked: how on earth was meditating on the psalms supposed to help me get through my to-do list? To be honest, I was frustrated at the very thought of it, a little miffed that anyone should suggest that something that would take so much time would be helpful to me right when I was busiest. I felt as though I could only afford to do the urgent tasks on my to-do list. But a trusted friend of mine knew better. I knew him well enough to know that he'd been through some extreme difficulties of his own, so I submitted to his wisdom and followed his advice. I meditated on the third psalm. He was right. I needed calmness of heart and trust in the Lord more than I needed to get through my to-do list. And let me tell you, friends: in the surgical waiting room, these words—words that had become dear friends through the time we spent together—meant much more to me than any completed to-do list ever could have: "Thou, O Lord, are a shield about me; my glory, and the lifter of my head" (Psalm 3:3, KJV).

“What happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus is the Master Builder. We don't have to design or construct the sanctuary; he does that work for us. We only have to give him the space to work.

# Chapter 13

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## The Discipline of Prayer

One of the most important of all the spiritual disciplines is prayer.

We often think of prayer as an act of worship—something we offer to God to affirm his greatness and our dependence upon him. And while this is a good thought about prayer, I'm not sure it goes far enough. Prayer is more than worship.

I once heard prayer described very simply as conversation with God about what we and he are doing together. I like that. After all, there is nothing in this life that we do without God; “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). We talk to God and we listen to God principally not because we fear him or respect him, but because we love him. We want to spend time with him. We want to talk with him about things that are important in our lives and the lives of others. And we want to know what is important to him. We listen for his voice.

Now, it's an amazing thing to be able to talk to the Creator and Sustainer of everything, the King of glory, the Ruler of the universe. If we wished to have an audience with the king or queen of a nation, we probably would not be able to gain it. If it were possible to gain the opportunity to speak with an earthly ruler, it might be a once-in-a-lifetime chance. But God, the Ruler of all, makes himself available to us all the time. Any time. Day or night, in good times and bad, we can meet with God and talk with him about everything. "Let us therefore come boldly to the

throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

How do we pray? There are a number of answers to that question, many of them very good. For instance, many Christians like to pray according to the acronym ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Each of those facets of prayer is important, and the ACTS acronym is very helpful to some believers. Some Christians particularly benefit from using a prayer book (e.g. *The Book of Common Prayer*). Some folks use the ancient prayer book of God's people, Psalms. I myself have found it beneficial to "pray the psalms"—that is, read the words of a psalm as a prayer—especially in times of stress. Some churches have special prayer ministries wherein folks who are particularly gifted in intercessory prayer will pray for people. Some groups meet especially for prayer for their churches, their schools, or their communities. Many Christians through the centuries have benefited from using "breath prayers" (prayers that can be uttered in a single breath), such as "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

As I see it, the form of prayer is not nearly so important as the attitude of prayer. The humble heart, eager to spend time with the Lord, is free to approach God. "God is welcoming us home—home to peace and serenity and joy," writes Richard J. Foster. "We need not be afraid. God's arms are stretched out to take us in. God's heart is large enough to receive us."<sup>13</sup>

Jesus's friends and followers asked him to teach them to pray. His instruction to them was to pray not for show or for other people to see. He gave his disciples a model prayer, and for 2000 years followers of Jesus have prayed these words of Jesus found in Matthew 6:

Our Father, which art in heaven  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come,  
Thy will be done  
On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our trespasses  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.  
Amen.

The teaching of Jesus on prayer is a reflection of the life that Jesus offers to us. The familiar words "Our Father which art in heaven" do not mean "distant, fearsome deity who is far away in space and time." Instead, they mean "loving Father who is right here with us, always near us." Just let that sink in for a moment! Because of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is available. Just as Jesus talked to God when he lived here on earth, we can talk to God. Although some people see the recitation of this model prayer (called "The Lord's Prayer" or the "Our Father") as a dry, lifeless exercise, this certainly doesn't have to be the case. The simple act of praying this prayer as a beginning to each day can have life-changing results.

And that's the real aim: life change. As with all the spiritual disciplines, prayer brings us into communion with God, who changes our hearts.

# Chapter 14

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## The Discipline of Study

The next discipline I'll discuss is one of my favorites. Yes, I have favorites!

It's the discipline of **study**. I love to study things. If I'm interested in a subject, I find great pleasure in studying it. I love to look things up and run references and amass information. I find it a very satisfying exercise.

And Bible study? Study of the Word of God? Study of spiritual things? Yes, please. If I can look things up and run references and amass information about God, so much the better. Bring it on.

Oh, how easy it is to fall into the trap of attaining knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Or for the sake of feeling good about our knowledge. Or for the sake of trying to prove that we're right, or good, or enlightened, or well-educated.

The spiritual discipline of study does lead to knowledge. As we study the Bible, good books, and the world around us, we do attain new knowledge. We learn more about God. But the purpose of study is not so much to know *about* God as it is to know *God*. This difference is critical. There are some profound scholars who know all about God and the Bible but have no faith in God at all!

Understanding that we are not working just to amass information, we do well to approach study seriously. Many of us are helped by enrolling in an organized study, such as Bible Study

Fellowship or Community Bible Study. Churches may offer weekly classes. Home-based groups may use published materials from trusted authors. Participation in one or more of these kinds of groups may be extremely beneficial.

At their core, though, the spiritual disciplines are things that we must commit to do for ourselves, so simply signing up for a Bible study will not be enough. We need to concentrate our efforts. For instance, when studying a book of the Bible, it's very helpful simply to read through the book one or many times. If we're studying a short book, we may wish to read the book through every day for a week or a month. We may want to read it in several different versions of the Bible. Then we might read a commentary on the book. We might choose a portion of the book to memorize. All of these methods can be effective ways of practicing the discipline of study.

In addition to those forms of study, we might want to focus upon Scripture using the ancient practice of *lectio divina*.

Practiced for centuries by people wishing to commune with God, *lectio divina* involves engaging with a passage of Scripture through four stages: reading (*lectio*), meditating (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*). Soaking myself in a passage of Scripture in this way has been very helpful to me, allowing me to go beyond simply studying a passage and truly engaging with it in a life-changing way. Paul writes “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Using a tool such as *lectio divina* as part of my approach to studying the Bible helps me to keep my focus on the holy. Studying the Scripture is not the same as studying a chemistry textbook. Both require a rigorous, scholarly approach, but the Bible is so much more than a textbook. The study of it deserves a recognition of its sacred nature.

Perhaps even more than the other disciplines, the practice of study requires a humble heart. Students learn from masters when they first admit that the masters know something worth

knowing—and then when they approach the learning of that subject with a teachable spirit.

So our hearts cry out to the teacher:

Teach me your way, O Lord,  
that I may walk in your truth;  
give me an undivided heart to revere your name.  
I give thanks to you, O Lord my God,  
with my whole heart,  
and I will glorify your name forever (Psalm 86:11-12).

# Chapter 15

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## The Discipline of Service

Aside from the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the most-remembered event of His life on earth took place on the night before his crucifixion. You may hear about this night every time you partake of Communion, for this was the time of the Last Supper. Christians spend a good deal of time reflecting upon that meal that Jesus ate with His closest friends; we take seriously his instruction, “Do this in remembrance of Me.”

In the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his gospel, the apostle John tells about another part of that evening. Those gathered in the Upper Room had gotten their feet dirty walking to the meeting place. The custom of the day was for a host to provide for guests' feet to be washed, usually by having a servant wash their feet. There was apparently no one available to perform this menial service for the company present at the Last Supper, so Jesus does it himself.

The apostles are amazed that Jesus would perform this act of servitude, of course, and Jesus converses with them about what it means to offer one's self in love and humility. Jesus knew that the apostles needed to hear this message. Jesus spoke to them about abiding in him, about keeping his commandments, and about the unity he desired for them. In modeling humble service, he provided for them not only a lesson in humility, but a key practice for being able to do those very things about which He spoke: the practice of service.

You know, it's quite easy for me to wish I were more humble. I read “He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the

humble His way” (Psalm 25:9) and I think to myself “Yes. I should be more humble.” But humility isn’t a state into which I can wish myself. It’s an attribute that can be gained, though, by practicing the discipline of service. In performing acts of service, I practice putting my own needs second to those of others. In doing something that needs to be done, however menial the task, I practice being a servant rather than a master.

Since God is the ruler and I am a part of his Kingdom, I don’t have to be the master. In the process of serving, I learn that my interests and well-being survive just fine even when I’m not making them my top priority.

This is extremely good news for those of us who might find ourselves in life situations which require a great deal of service to others. Parents of small children, for instance, may sometimes feel as though they simply don’t have enough time to employ as many spiritual practices as they would like. But we can learn to practice the presence of God as we’re performing our tasks. We submit ourselves to obedience in service, and we find that service can be a tool for forming our souls.

Perhaps the most excellent example of one who learned to practice the presence of God even in the midst of mundane tasks was Brother Lawrence, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite monk. Lacking the education to be a cleric, Brother Lawrence spent most of his time working in the kitchen of the priory. Lawrence resolved to seek God at every turn, determined to live his life in awareness of God’s presence. Brother Lawrence advised: “Never tire of doing even the smallest things for him, because he isn’t impressed so much with the dimensions of our work as with the love in which it is done.”<sup>14</sup>

In offering himself in humble service, Lawrence learned to be like Christ, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled

himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8, NIV).

I remember vividly one time when I was pressed into urgent service. I had three small children to tend, and we were expecting company. I was grumpy and feeling put upon, but I offered a quick prayer entreating God to help me finish the tasks.

Suddenly, my mind was filled with a song we'd sung in church that week: “In my life, Lord, be glorified.” As I vacuumed, I began to sing, adding new verses as they whispered themselves to my heart: “In my home, Lord, be glorified. In my work, Lord, be glorified.” The peace that settled over me was amazing. When I surrendered myself to performing an act of service in love and faithfulness, God met me there.

“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because He cares for you” (I Peter 5:6-7). Practicing the discipline of service teaches me that I can trust God and His care.

# Chapter 16

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## The Discipline of Fasting

Oh, boy. You knew it was coming, didn't you?

Any time the subject of spiritual disciplines comes up, people ask with great trepidation, "Do I have to fast?"

The answer to that question is No. You do not have to fast, any more than you have to have to practice any of the other disciplines. But if you're as needy as the likes of Moses, David, Hannah, Esther, Daniel, Paul, or a host of other Bible characters, you may *need* to fast.

**Fasting** is, in simple terms, the voluntary denial of some normal function to allow for intense spiritual activity. Normal functions are fine things; they are things that are good for you and that take up a good deal of time and effort during your normal days.

Fasting is not the cessation of activity that is bad for you: it's stopping an activity that's good for you in order to focus on something even better.

Throughout the ages, God's people have fasted from eating from time to time. Fasting sometimes accompanied cries of anguish to God; other times it accompanied specific requests or petitions. Always, though, it freed the person fasting from the pursuit of being filled in body by consuming food and made way for being filled in spirit by spending time with God.

The truth about human beings is that we sometimes allow our lives to get out of balance. Things that are intended to bless our

lives end up becoming things that rule our lives. We find ourselves believing that we simply *can't do without* this or that.

When prompted by the Holy Spirit, we may find it exceedingly useful to take a break from those very things that seem so essential to our lives. Through the ages, fasting from food has been most common. In these days of plenty, fasting from food is still a useful tool, but we may want to consider fasting from other good things as well.

Of course, as with the practice of any spiritual discipline, fasting should be undertaken at the prompting of God, with the purpose of glorifying Him alone. As John Wesley firmly teaches, "First let it 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 which is in heaven."<sup>15</sup>

Once we have that purpose firmly fixed in our minds, we may benefit greatly from fasting. We simply and quietly but very purposefully cease an activity that we normally practice in order to devote ourselves more wholly to communion with God. The more essential the activity seems to our everyday existence, the harder it may be to forgo—and the more useful the break from it might be. Perhaps we will want to fast from using our cell phones. Or fast from using the internet. Of all the disciplines, fasting may be the most useful in revealing those things that distract us from God, things that entice us to misplace our faith, or even things that control us.

Fasting helps us to remember that God is on the throne and that we are safe and well as we trust him to provide for us. We are not safe and well because of anything we own or anything we do. We are safe and well because God reigns.

# Chapter 17

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## The Corporate Disciplines

The spiritual disciplines or soul-training exercises we've been discussing all have one thing in common. They're all things that a person can do all alone.

That's a good thing, really. All of us spend a good bit of time on our own, one way or another. Even if we're usually in a crowd of people or a houseful of children, we're often on our own when it comes to exercising our bodies, minds, and spirits.

But being alone isn't enough. God designed us to interact with one another in many different ways. Even a deeply introverted person cannot do everything for himself. And some aspects of our spiritual development must come about in community.

Spiritual disciplines which require the involvement of more than one person at a time are sometimes called "corporate disciplines"—that is, those things we do as a body of people rather than as individuals.

Some of the corporate disciplines may involve large groups of people. For instance, one of the most important things we do is to **worship** God.

Jesus teaches, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). In worship, human beings respond to God. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century hymn proclaims, "Oh Savior, my Redeemer, what can I but adore and magnify and praise thee and love thee evermore?"<sup>16</sup>

Over the course of 2000 years, Christ-followers have worshipped God in many different ways. Some of those forms of worship are acceptable to certain believers and objectionable to others. But the *form* of worship has never been the most important issue.

Most important is the *object* of our worship: we worship God alone. "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Matthew 4:10). Also important is the *attitude* of our hearts in worship. We must realize that worship is the act of our spirits responding to the Holy Spirit. We come into the presence of God humbly and adoringly, giving glory and praise and honor to God. The Bible does not prescribe one particular form or formula for worship, but it does require that we worship God alone and that we worship him in spirit and in truth.

Worship is good for our souls. The action of joining with brothers and sisters and together affirming the goodness and greatness of God is a powerful thing. It is good for us all to be reminded that God alone is worthy of worship. Among many other benefits, worship reminds us that we are not the center of the universe. Sometimes our issues and problems feel so significant that they blot out all other thoughts. The act of worship pulls us back into understanding that nothing supersedes God. No power is greater than his; no love is greater than his; no goodness is greater than his. What a relief to be reminded that our great and good God is on the throne!

Other corporate disciplines involve small groups of people or just two individuals in deep spiritual friendship with one another. For example, **confession** usually takes place with one person confessing sin to one other person. Some churches ordain individuals to serve as priests; those priests serve in such capacities as hearing the confession of church members. Protestant churches treasure the idea of the "priesthood of all believers" as described in I Peter 2, so any believer may hear the confession of another. Regardless of the particular form that confession might take, it involves more than one person. And what a powerful thing it is for one Christian to be able to confess his sins not only to God but also to another human being! In

confessing to one another, we help one another bring every aspect of our lives—the bad as well as the good—into the precious, healing light of Christ.

One of the most powerful tools we have as we seek to become more like Christ is spending time with others who are also on this journey. We practice these corporate disciplines together. We may worship in a large group of people, but we need a small group of intimate confidantes with whom we practice a deeper level of being together.

With this small group of friends, we share a deep bond. Together we practice honesty in examining our lives, identifying areas in which we most fully celebrate God's goodness as well as areas in which we most deeply need his help. We may practice confession—both confessing our own sins and hearing confession of theirs. We can sympathize, encourage, and exhort one another at a far deeper level with an intimate group. We practice withholding judgment, enabling a level of honesty and authenticity that is irreplaceable. And we practice the essential act of keeping things confidential. In a very special way, these small groups give us a place to practice the giving and receiving of grace, reminding one another of the source of grace in our lives.

Our spirits are shaped as we journey through life. If we desire that our spirits be formed into the likeness of Christ, we practice the way of living that Jesus modeled and taught. That way of living involves a loving cooperation with others, experiencing together these means of God's grace that we could never experience alone.

# Chapter 18

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## The Communion of Saints

Although each generation must discern how best to live the with-God life in its own context and culture, one of the greatest blessings of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that we are walking well-worn paths. Two thousand years have passed since Jesus Christ lived on earth. Throughout that time, people have walked with Jesus—people from all over the world, from all walks of life, from all kinds of backgrounds. These people found such goodness and joy in life with God that quite a number of them chose to write out some of their thoughts. Some of them kept journals of their adventures with God; some wrote scholarly treatises on truths they had come to understand; some wrote letters to loved ones; some scribbled notes of encouragement for others.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Getting a glimpse into the hearts of Christ-followers from centuries past holds great value to us. We learn much about ourselves by peeking into their lives, for truly “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). We are encouraged to learn that our kinds of struggles, as well as many other kinds, have been endured by other beloved children of God. We are comforted to learn that our types of failings, as well as many

other types, have been experienced by other devoted children of God. We are humbled to learn that our sorts of triumphs, as well as many other sorts, have been enjoyed by other grateful children of God.

“Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”<sup>17</sup>

And we are blessed to learn our ways of experiencing God, as well as many other ways, have been helpful to Christians for centuries. Some we may not entirely understand or appreciate; some may seem deeply foreign or strange to us. But some will be greatly comforting to our hearts, for we learn that the ways of experiencing God most helpful to us have been helpful to others as well. Most of all, though, we learn that God is completely trustworthy. We read of how he has befriended and loved those who've walked this path ahead of us, and we may be sure that he'll do the same for us. We trust the one who is “the same yesterday, and today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

# Chapter 19

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## Fellowship with Other Believers

We've talked about the corporate disciplines: those soul-training exercises that are done not by individual Christians alone but by Christians in community with other Christians. I can hardly stress enough how much fellowship with believers is necessary for spiritual formation.

Now I want to remind you of another reason fellowship with other believers is so important. This is really quite elementary, but it's easy for us to forget, I think. Here it is:

*Not one of us knows everything.*

No one knows it all. We need each other. Those of us who love God, who listen to God, who spend time learning about God and talking to God—all of us need one another.

Throughout the ages and continuing today, whenever people have centered their lives on Jesus, they've learned things that can be of great benefit to other believers. Trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord has inspired people to worship him in many different ways. Christian traditions all have different strengths, and we can be grateful for all of them. Although each of us must choose one faith community to be our "home base," isn't it wonderful that we can have fellowship across all dividing lines? This is a foretaste of heaven, I think.

We can all learn from one another. We honor God and our souls benefit when we pay attention to one another and share our strengths with one another.

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6, NIV

Richard Foster writes about six traditions of Christian faith and practice, all of which are modeled most beautifully for us by Jesus, in his landmark book *Streams of Living Water*. Richard founded Renovaré to model, resource, and advocate fullness of life with God, and one of the principal means employed by Renovaré in this work is a recognition and celebration of these six great “streams” of Christian tradition.

From our brothers and sisters in the Contemplative tradition, we learn more of the prayer-filled life. From those in the Holiness tradition, we learn more of the virtuous life. From our kindred in the Charismatic tradition, we learn more of the Spirit-empowered life. From our brothers and sisters in the Social Justice tradition, we learn more of the compassionate life. From folks in the Evangelical tradition, we learn more of the Word-centered life. And from those in the Incarnational tradition, we learn more of the sacramental life.

What joy there is in learning from one another as we all learn from Jesus!

# Chapter 20

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## The Reality of Renewal

One morning while it was still dark, I woke up and glanced at my alarm clock. The glowing numbers on the dial seemed to mock me as I jumped out of bed and hurried to the bathroom, for I was running late. I switched on the light and began rather frantically to start my day. As I strapped on my wristwatch, I realized that I wasn't actually running late at all. It was still an hour before time to wake up; I'd simply mis-read the clock. Gratefully, I switched off the light to go back to bed. Of course, having had the light on for a few minutes had destroyed my night vision, but I walked sure-footedly back to my side of the bed and climbed in.

As I lay there snug and warm under the covers, I was struck by how easy it was for me to find my way back to bed even when I couldn't see a thing. It shouldn't have surprised me, really—I'd walked that path hundreds of times before, in darkness and in light. Of course I knew the way!

That's just the way it is with learning to walk in step with the Spirit. Day by day, we simply do the little things that Jesus modeled for us. We adopt those spiritual disciplines that are most helpful in our training, and we develop a rhythm of life that incorporates these. And we are changed into people who are becoming more and more like Jesus. Then even when dark times come, we still know how to walk as if it were light. Indeed, we are walking in the Light. Jesus shows us the way.

The reality of making progress is very reassuring to me. I spend a good deal of time these days around college campuses. I have one son at Duke University and another at the University of North

Carolina-Chapel Hill. Recently it hit me: when I'm on a college campus these days, it's as a *parent*, not as a student. I don't feel old enough to have two kids in college, but a quick look in the mirror confirms that I am. Grey hair and wrinkles don't lie!

All those myths about the fountain of youth are just that: myths. Time marches on, and we all get older. But that's one of the wonderful things about being a new creation in Christ. Read these words from 2 Corinthians 4:

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16, NIV).

Do you hear the triumph in those words? This is why we are particularly interested in the formation of our spirits. Our hair turns grey; our skin wrinkles. Our physical bodies age and decay. But our spirits? They're eternal. The Spirit of the Lord works in us and renews our spirits day by day. There's no fountain of youth for our mortal bodies, but our spirits are renewed every day!

This is good news. Hear it and celebrate it.

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being *transformed into his likeness* with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Together, then, we pray:  
Finish then, Thy new creation;  
Pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see Thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in Thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
'Til in heaven we take our place—  
'Til we cast our crowns before Thee,  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.<sup>18</sup>



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>James Bryan Smith, Keynote address, Aprendis Institute conference, September 2011.

<sup>2</sup>Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002), p. 101.

<sup>3</sup>For greater discussion of this point, see Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>“Amazing Grace,” John Newton, 1779.

<sup>5</sup>Richard J. Foster, *Renovaré Perspective*, April 1999.

<sup>6</sup>*Life With God Study Bible*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), p. xxv.

<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Book 7. Cited in Nicholson, D.H.S. and lee, A.H.E., Eds. *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917; Bartleby.com, 2000 [www.bartleby.com/236](http://www.bartleby.com/236)).

<sup>8</sup>“This is My Father’s World,” Maltie D. Babcock, 1901.

<sup>9</sup>Richard J. Foster, *Renovaré Perspective*, April 1999.

<sup>10</sup>Richard J. Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, ), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul*, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup>Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul*, p. 151.

<sup>14</sup>Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), p. 25.

<sup>15</sup>John Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: Discourse Seven.” In *The Sermons of John Wesley*, Sermon 27. The Wesley Center Online, [www.wesley.nnu.edu](http://www.wesley.nnu.edu).

<sup>16</sup>“Is It for Me?” by Frances R. Havergal, 1871.

<sup>17</sup>Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup>“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” by Charles Wesley, 1747.

## Appendix 1: Recommended Resources

I pray that this little introduction to spiritual formation has whetted your appetite to learn more. In addition to the Bible and the many books written by Christians through the centuries, there are some excellent books by contemporary authors. Here are a few books that have proved particularly helpful to me.

Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978.

Foster, Richard. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

Foster, Richard. *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

Foster, Richard. *Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011.

Foster, Richard and Smith, James Bryan, Editors. *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990.

Foster, Richard and Griffin, Emilie, Editors. *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000.

Hudson, Trevor. *Discovering Our Spiritual Identity: Practices for God's Beloved*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.

Ortberg, John: *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.

Peterson, Eugene. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980.

Peterson, Eugene. *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus Is the Way*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Group, 2007.

Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community: Following the Spirit, Extending Grace, Demonstrating Love*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.

Webb, Christopher. *The Fire of the Word: Meeting God on Holy Ground*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011.

Willard, Dallas. *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984.

Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988.

Willard, Dallas: *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

Willard, Dallas: *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002.

Another excellent resource is a study Bible edited by Richard J. Foster, Gayle Beebe, Lynda Graybeal, Thomas Oden, Dallas Willard, Walter Brueggemann, and Eugene Peterson: *The Life*

*With God Bible* (New Revised Standard Version). New York:  
HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.



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