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SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

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Almost two decades ago I wrote an essay titled “When Is Spirituality Spiritual? Reflections on Some Problems of Definition”.¹ I would like to follow up on one aspect of that topic here.

New Testament Meaning of “Spiritual”

The broader framework of the discussion needs to be remembered. “Spiritual” and “spirituality” have become notoriously fuzzy words. In common usage they almost always have positive overtones, but rarely does their meaning range within the sphere of biblical usage. People think of themselves as “spiritual” because they have certain aesthetic sensibilities, or because they feel some kind of mystical connection with nature, or because they espouse some highly privatized version of one of any number of religions (but “religion” tends to be a word with negative connotations while “spirituality” has positive overtones). Under the terms of the new covenant, however, the only “spiritual” person is the person who has the Holy Spirit, poured out on individuals in regeneration. The alternative, in Paul’s terminology, is to be “natural” – merely human – and not “spiritual” (1 Cor 2:14). For the Christian whose vocabulary and concepts on this topic are shaped by Scripture, only the Christian is spiritual. Then, by an obvious extension, those Christians who display Christian virtues are spiritual, since these virtues are the fruit of the Spirit. Those who are “mere infants in Christ” (1 Cor 3:1), if they truly are in Christ, are spiritual inasmuch as they are indwelt by the Spirit, but their lives may leave much to be desired.² Nevertheless the New Testament does not label immature Christians as *unspiritual* as if the category “spiritual” should be reserved only for the most



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mature, the elite of the elect: that is an error common to much of the Roman Catholic tradition of spirituality, in which the spiritual life and the spiritual traditions are often tied up with believers who want to transcend the ordinary. Such “spiritual” life is often bound up with asceticism and sometimes mysticism, with orders of nuns and monks, and with a variety of techniques that go beyond ordinary Joe or Mary Christian.

Popular Usage of “Spiritual Disciplines”

Owing to the wide usage of the “spiritual” words, way beyond New Testament usage, the language of “spiritual disciplines” has likewise extended itself into arenas that are bound to make those who love the gospel more than a little nervous. Nowadays spiritual disciplines may include Bible reading, meditation, worship, giving away money, fasting, solitude, fellowship, deeds of service, evangelism, almsgiving, creation care, journaling, missionary work, and more. It may include vows of celibacy, self-flagellation, and chanting mantras. In popular usage, some of these so-called spiritual disciplines are entirely divorced from any specific doctrine whatsoever, Christian or otherwise: they are merely a matter of technique. That is why people sometimes say, “For your doctrine, by all means commit yourselves to evangelical confessionalism. But when it comes to the spiritual disciplines, turn to Catholicism or perhaps Buddhism.” What is universally presupposed by the expression “spiritual discipline” is that such disciplines are intended to increase our spirituality. From a Christian perspective, however, it is simply not possible to increase one’s spirituality without possessing the Holy Spirit and submitting to His transforming instruction and power. Techniques are never neutral. They are invariably loaded with theological presuppositions, often unrecognized.



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Christians and Spiritual Disciplines

How shall we evaluate this popular approach to the spiritual disciplines? How *should* we think of spiritual disciplines and their connection with spirituality as defined by Scripture? Some introductory reflections:

(1) The pursuit of unmediated, mystical knowledge of God is unsanctioned by Scripture, and is dangerous in more than one way. It does not matter whether this pursuit is undertaken within the confines of, say, Buddhism (though informed Buddhists are unlikely to speak of “unmediated mystical knowledge of *God*” – the last two words are likely to be dropped)³ or, in the Catholic tradition, by Julian of Norwich. Neither instance recognizes that our access to the knowledge of the living God is mediated exclusively through Christ, whose death and resurrection reconcile us to the living God. To pursue unmediated, mystical knowledge of God is to announce that the person of Christ and His sacrificial work on our behalf are not necessary for the knowledge of God. Sadly, it is easy to delight in mystical experiences, enjoyable and challenging in themselves, without knowing anything of the regenerating power of God, grounded in Christ’s cross work.

(2) We ought to ask what warrants including any particular item on a list of spiritual disciplines. For Christians with any sense of the regulative function of Scripture, nothing, surely, can be deemed a spiritual discipline if it is not so much as mentioned in the New Testament. That rather eliminates not only self-flagellation but creation care. Doubtless the latter, at least, is a good thing to do: it is part of our responsibility as stewards of God’s creation. But it is difficult to think of scriptural warrant to view such activity as a spiritual discipline – that is, as a discipline that increases our spirituality. The Bible says quite a lot about prayer and hiding God’s Word in our hearts, but precious little about creation care and chanting mantras.

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(3) Some of the entries on the list are slightly ambiguous. At one level, the Bible says nothing at all about journaling. On the other hand, if journaling is merely a convenient label for careful self-examination, contrition, thoughtful Bible reading, and honest praying, using the habit of writing a journal to foster all four, it cannot be ruled outside the camp the way self-flagellation must be. The apostle declares celibacy to be an excellent thing, provided one has the gift (both marriage and celibacy are labeled *charismata*, “grace gifts”), and provided it is for the sake of increased ministry (1 Cor 7). On the other hand, there is nothing that suggests celibacy is an intrinsically holier state, and absolutely nothing under the terms of the new covenant warrants withdrawing into cloisters of celibate monks or nuns who have physically retreated from the world to become more spiritual. Meditation is not an intrinsic good. A huge amount depends on the focus of one’s meditation. Is it one imagined dark spot on a sheet of white? Or is it the law of the Lord (Ps 1:2)?

(4) Even those spiritual disciplines that virtually all would acknowledge to be such must not be misunderstood or abused. The very expression is potentially misleading: spiritual *discipline*, as if there is something intrinsic to self-control, to the imposition of self-discipline, that qualifies one to be more spiritual. Such assumptions and mental associations can lead only to arrogance; worse, they often lead to condescending judgmentalism: others may not be as spiritual as I am since I am *disciplined* enough to have an excellent prayer time or a superb Bible-reading scheme. But the truly transformative element is not the discipline itself, but the worthiness of the task undertaken: the value of prayer, the value of reading God’s Word.

(5) It is not helpful to list assorted Christian responsibilities and label them spiritual disciplines. That seems to be the reasoning behind the theology that smuggles in, say, creation care and



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almsgiving. But by the same logic, if out of Christian kindness you give a back rub to an old lady with a stiff neck and a sore shoulder, then back rubbing becomes a spiritual discipline. By such logic, any Christian obedience is a spiritual discipline, that is, it makes us more spiritual. Using the category of spiritual disciplines in that way has two unfortunate entailments. *First*, if every instance of obedience is a spiritual discipline, then there is nothing special about the emphatically emphasized, biblically mandated means of grace: prayer, for instance, and serious reading of and meditation on the Word of God. *Second*, such a way of thinking about spiritual disciplines subtly cajoles us into thinking that growth in spirituality is a function of nothing more than conformity to the demands of a lot of rules, of a lot of obedience. Certainly Christian maturity is not manifest where there is *not* obedience. Yet there is also a great deal of emphasis on growth in love, in trust, in understanding the ways of the living God, in the work of the Spirit in filling and empowering us.

(6) For these reasons it seems the part of wisdom to restrict the label “spiritual disciplines” to those Bible-prescribed activities that are explicitly said to increase our sanctification, our conformity to Christ Jesus, our spiritual maturation. When Jesus in John 17 prays that His Father will sanctify His followers through the truth, He adds, “Your word is truth.” Small wonder that believers have long labeled things like the study of the truth of the gospel “means of grace” – a lovely expression less susceptible to misinterpretation than spiritual disciplines. ■

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NOTES

¹ JETS 37 (1994): 381-94.

² Editor's note: Cf. D. A. Carson, "The Cross and the Holy Spirit: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16," in *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 43-66.

³ Cf. Keith Yandell and Harold Netland, *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009).



[In answer to the question: What is your view of the daily discipline of the Christian life—the need for taking time to be alone with God?] — We have our New Testament regimental orders upon the subject. I would take it for granted that everyone who becomes a Christian would undertake this practice. It is enjoined upon us by our Lord; and since they are his commands, I believe in following them. It is always just possible that Jesus Christ meant what he said when he told us to seek the secret place and to close the door.

— *C.S. Lewis*



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1

In talking about “the emphatically emphasized, biblically mandated means of grace,” Carson specifically cites prayer and serious reading of and meditation on the Word of God. Do you practice these spiritual disciplines on a daily basis? If not, are there any specific steps you would like to take to make them a part of your daily life? Can you think of ways in which you might enrich your prayer life and/or time in reading and meditating on Scripture?



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2

While emphasizing the necessity of obedience for Christian maturity, the author observes “there is also a great deal of emphasis on growth in love, in trust, in understanding the ways of the living God, in the work of the Spirit in filling and empowering us.” Would you like to ask God to show you ways in which you could grow in these areas?



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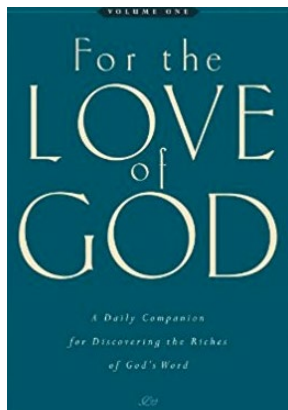


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RECOMMENDED READING



D.A. Carson, *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word, Volume 1* (Crossway, 2006)

In a world that views absolute truth, right and wrong, and salvation as being subject to individual interpretation, the Bible's unwavering proclamations and miraculous stories seem obsolete in modern times. But it is not God's Word that has changed. Indeed, its relevancy and its power to transform lives are intact. What has changed is the number of people who consult it. Now more than ever the need to read the Bible, to understand the big picture of its storyline, and to grasp the relevance this has for your life is critical.

As with its companion volume, *For the Love of God—Volume 2*, this devotional contains a systematic 365-day plan, based on the M'Cheyne Bible-reading schedule, that will in the course of a year guide you through the New Testament and Psalms twice and the rest of the Old Testament once.

In an effort to help preserve biblical thinking and living, D. A. Carson has also written thought-provoking comments and reflections regarding each day's scriptural passages. And, most uniquely, he offers you perspective that places each reading into the larger framework of history and God's eternal plan to deepen your understanding of his sovereignty — and the unity and power of his Word.