

# Introducing Spiritual Disciplines to Your Children

## Article

What are spiritual disciplines? It's not a phrase we commonly hear today, even at church.

*Spiritual disciplines are very straightforward, practical steps toward developing a Christian character and a deeper relationship with God.*

Most of us have heard of several of them—prayer, worship, service, fasting, celebration—although we may not have seen how they are all connected.

Why do we need these spiritual disciplines? Once we have been saved through Christ, why do we need to do things to discipline our spiritual nature? Well, even though we are redeemed, we are also fallen. Our corrupted human natures constantly fight against our renewed spiritual nature, so we must make it strong, putting on “the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:13). Furthermore, as C.S. Lewis frequently pointed out, humans are material as well as spiritual beings. What we believe must be expressed in action, or we will soon lose those beliefs. Maria von Trapp, whose family became famous through the musical *The Sound of Music*, put it this way in her autobiography: “as long as we live here on earth, we simply are not pure spirits, but we also have . . . a very human heart, and that heart needs outward signs of its inward affections.”<sup>1</sup>

And it is actually more effective to teach kids about Jesus through spiritual disciplines than it is to try to get them to “feel” converted. We learn truths as children through traditions and habitual practices that we come to identify with what is important in life. Learning and practicing spiritual disciplines will help children to ground their faith more firmly and live it out intelligently and with purpose.

It is essential to teach children spiritual disciplines before they go out into the world and find themselves in situations where their faith will be tested. They cannot be expected to exercise righteous judgment in the world unless they have previously learned and assimilated the virtues that will enable them to make the right decisions when faced with an attack on their faith.

Below is a brief description of twelve spiritual disciplines and brief guidance for incorporating their practice into your children's lives.



**Meditation** on the Word of God is an essential foundation for forming godly character in your children. When you read the Bible with your children, spend time discussing what you have read. The article on “Teaching the Bible to Children” in the *Aslan Academy* Guide adds more detail on this cornerstone of our faith.

**Prayer** is probably the first spiritual discipline most Christian parents teach their kids. Even so, it is important to make prayer a meaningful part of life for our children. One of the best ways to help your children understand the importance of prayer is to ask them to pray for you, about issues that concern your family or the world. This will help children to understand that prayer is one of the most wonderful ways through which God enables us to take part in caring for His Creation; that when we pray, we are actually participating in addressing the concerns we are bringing to God to solve.

**Fasting** is a spiritual discipline less often undertaken today. However, fasting is an important way to prepare ourselves to depend on God rather than material objects for security, which will then enable us to resist more seductive temptations. Fasting from meat, in the early church, would have been a direct stand against the wasteful extravagance of Roman banqueting. Today, perhaps it is better to fast from the junk or “comfort foods” we turn to instead of God, or from the information devices that take up our time—time that might otherwise be dedicated to Him.

**Study** is different from meditation in that it is more active. Meditating on the Word begins to instill a godly character and a natural bent toward and desire for making godly decisions. But it is also necessary to learn how to apply these Christian principles in the situations of daily life. The more we study the Bible, and how the church has applied its teachings throughout the centuries, the better we and our children are equipped to carry them out today.

**Simplicity** is all about giving and humility. C.S. Lewis pointed out that the desire for more “luxuries [than] any man can really enjoy”<sup>2</sup> is rooted in pride and enmity, exhibiting the desire to be better than others. Demanding more than we need is a sin deeply rooted in our fallen nature. We are called to set our children the example of generosity, teaching them “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35 NIV).

Solitude is time alone with God—an addition to prayer. Encourage your children to take the time each day to silently notice and appreciate God’s goodness—outside, looking at His creation, is often the best way. Learning to “be still and know” (Ps. 46:10), in awe of God’s greatness, is the beginning of reverence and obedience to His will.

**Submission** is this obedience to God’s will. But God has created the parent-child relationship to teach obedience to Him through learning obedience to parents. Our modern society pushes the idea of self-realization. But this rebellious attempt to “make our own decisions,” ironically leads to slavery to social fads and sinful impulses. Only God knows what is truly best for us, and obedience to Him and His chosen ministers for our care is the only way to be truly free. Don’t feel guilty about imposing Christian rules of behavior on your children; if you don’t teach them God’s ways, the world will force its ways on them.

**Service** is putting into practice the two greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbor. Give your children opportunities to serve others. Operation Christmas Child is a wonderful way to start. Teach them that doing God’s work and helping others comes first, before taking care of their own personal goals—and that even their talents are God’s gifts to be used for serving others, not our own glory. When you ask your children to help out, remind them that this is an opportunity to be a “good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21), the highest commendation that can be given us by God.

**Confession** of our sins is not a one-time conversion event. It is connected with our remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice for us; the more often we confess our sins, the more closely we are drawn into the renewal of our lives through His death and resurrection. It is best to have our children ask for forgiveness from God, as well as the people they have hurt, every time they misbehave, and talk to them afterward about the joy of being forgiven.

**Worship** is honoring God for His greatness. It is easiest to start with gratitude, perhaps by making a list of all you and your children have to be thankful for. Praise and reverence, reminders of His sovereignty, are connected to our joyful confidence of intimate communion with Him. God is King as well as Father, and our worship should contain awe as well as trust. The Chronicles of Narnia, with their depiction of Aslan, teach this very well.

**Guidance** is dependence on God, rather than ourselves, to make the right decisions. It is active faith; when we—and our children—follow God’s guidance in His Word, we demonstrate our trust in Him.

**Celebration!** This last spiritual discipline underscores all the others. Being a follower of Jesus is fun; it is a life of joy. Even times of hardship can become times of celebration, if we seek to understand how God works through those difficult in order to shape us. And every celebratory achievement in our lives, even those not directly connected with worship, can and should be to us opportunities for thanking God for His blessing.

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As your children learn that these spiritual disciplines were intended by God for us to rejoice in and grow closer to Him, they will begin to astonish you with their joy and zeal.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Maria Augusta Trapp, *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers* (1949; repr. New York: Image/Doubleday, 1990), 73.

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. London: HarperCollins, 2002), 123.

