

PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

I Timothy 4:7&8 – “*train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*”

WHAT IS GODLINESS?

Godliness is an attitude of devotion to God. It does not come naturally, even in our lives a Christians, but must be developed through training. The Christian life should be one led by the Spirit, and filled with His fruit (see Galatians 5:22), but we also have our part to do in developing Christ-like character, or, perhaps more accurately, in preparing the way for the Lord who is the Spirit to do His work of producing Christ-like character in us. Godliness is that pure devotion to God that allows this to happen. This is “practical spirituality”!

HOW CAN WE TRAIN OURSELVES FOR GODLINESS?

There are two main aspects of this process – freeing ourselves of distractions and filling our hearts and minds with the fullness of God. Much has been written in recent years by evangelicals on the topic of the spiritual disciplines. In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald S. Whitney lists ten – Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, and learning. Others have included confession, accountability, simplicity, submission, spiritual direction, celebration, affirmation, sacrifice, and “watching”. In this article I will focus on five of them which I see as being the key disciplines for deepening and maintaining our relationship with God.

STOP: Think how much effort you put into your career, your marriage / relationship / even keeping your house clean and neat! Why do we put so little effort into our spiritual development?

DO THESE DISCIPLINES EARN THE GRACE OF GOD?

God’s favour cannot be earned – His grace towards us is His unmerited favour, and it is a free gift received through faith in Christ alone. We do not perform these disciplines to earn favour with God, but to build our relationship with Him. As CH Spurgeon wrote:

“I must take care above all that I cultivate communion with Christ, for though that can never be the basis of my peace – mark that – yet it will be the channel of it”

It is important that we understand this distinction. The basis of our peace and blessing is the death of Christ in our place, but we still must experience these blessings, and it is through disciplining ourselves that we do so.

THE DISCIPLINES

1. Encountering God’s Word

THE single most important discipline – the entrance of God’s word brings light (Ps 119:130)!

1989 poll of “born-again Christians” in USA – only 18% read Bible daily
– 23% never read Bible

(i) Find time

(ii) Follow a plan [3 Ch / day & 5 on Sun = whole Bible in year
OR 3 OT & 3 NT = 1x OT & 4x NT in 1 yr
OR 1 Ch from each of 3 sections – Genesis, Job, Matt]

(iii) Memorise:

- helps with guidance, witnessing, counselling, meditation
- 1 verse per day = 1000 verses in 3 years [93 years to memorise whole Bible]

(iv) Meditate on it

- a. Repeat in different ways [emphasis] to help with understanding
- b. Rewrite in own words
- c. Look for applications by asking questions:
 - (i) Is there some **truth** here that I need to learn?
 - (ii) Is there a **promise** here that God wants me to hold onto?
 - (iii) Is there a **sin** mentioned here that I need to repent of?
 - (iv) Is there a **warning** here that I need to listen to?
 - (v) Is there a **command** here that I need to obey?
 - (vi) Is there an **example** here that I should follow?
 - (vii) Is there something here that I need **to share** with someone else?
- d. Pray through it (think who you can pray it for) – link into prayer

(v) Application – put it into action (James 1:22-25)

(vi) Study – using commentaries & concordance OR at least comparison of versions
- context & comparison

(vii) Reintegrate it – fit it back into big picture – the goal = to understand **all** of Scripture

2. Prayer

- (i) Use your own words and posture
- (ii) Balance your prayers with adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication
– in your adoration use songs of worship
- (iii) Keep a prayer list
- (iv) Make a special time for prayer in a quiet place
- (v) Start with manageable time and then build it up
- (vi) Make your whole life a prayer to God
John Owen: *"Pray as you think. Consciously embrace with your heart every gleam of light and truth that comes to your mind. Thank God for and pray about everything that strikes you powerfully"*
Take every thought captive to Christ!
- (vii) Send up "arrow" prayers when you have a special need
- (viii) Pray with other Christians (prayer meeting)
- (ix) Use Bible in your prayer (e.g. Psalms)
George Muller of Bristol (second half of 19th Century cared for over 2000 orphans at one time) – gave himself to meditation and this soon led him to prayer!
- (x) Use prayer letters / information to guide your prayers

3. Fasting

Richard Foster: *"the voluntary denial of a normal function for the sake of intense spiritual activity"*
Donald Whitney (*Spiritual Disciplines*) lists 9 types of fast in life of God's people in Bible, but for us fasting will most often be a personal discipline, either regularly or in times of special need or both.

Why?

- (i) Expected – Matt 6:16 – *"when you fast"* – same Ch as giving (vv2&3) & prayer (vv5-15)
- (ii) Purposeful – to focus on God (not just a negative thing!)
 - a. Strengthens prayer & is an act of worship (Luke 2:37 – Anna)
 - b. Expresses grief for sin and repentance (Joel 2:12 – Lord calls His people to return)
 - c. Seeks guidance and deliverance (Acts 14:23 – Paul & Barnabas appointing elders)
 - d. Expresses dependence upon God rather than own desires (e.g. Jesus – Matt 4)
- (iii) Rewarded – Matt 6:18

How?

- Set the purpose of your fast
- Remember others – Matt 6:17 – remain aware of needs of others (Is 58:6-7 – true fasting)!
- Choose what to fast from and for how long [must be with exercise of wisdom]

4. Silence and Solitude

Jim Elliot: *"I think the devil has made it his business to monopolise on 3 elements: noise, hurry, crowds ... Satan is quite aware of the power of silence"*

Why?

- (i) Jesus did it – His life is the perfect example (see Luke 4:42; Mk 1:35)
- (ii) Helps us to focus on God (Zeph 1:7/Hab 2:20) and hear His voice better (Elijah I Kings 19:11-13)
- (iii) Brings physical and spiritual restoration (Is 30:15 / Mark 6:31 – Jesus' command to His disciples)
- (iv) Helps to bring self-control, fresh perspective on self and control of tongue (James 1:26)
- (v) Seek God's will – Hudson Taylor June 25th 1865 had time of silence when the Lord confirmed to him that he should go into the interior of China (leading to formation of CIM – later OMF)

How?

- "Minute retreats" (Whitney) – short breaks aside
- Retreat – afternoon / evening / day / weekend – take a day's leave etc. ("make time")
- Find special places – in your home (conservatory for me) and within walking distance
- Trade off daily responsibilities with spouse or friends (offer this in return)

THE CHALLENGE

When was the last time you really interacted with God's word / prayed from the heart / worshipped on a weekday / fasted / practiced silence and solitude? All of these are part of a healthy spiritual life. Never routine – should be our desire, but if discipline ourselves then:

- a) As we grow closer to the Lord (develop godliness) the desire will grow – as we taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8)
- b) When times are rough doing what we know to do will carry us through!

Athletes train for years for the Olympics – for a prize that lasts only in this lifetime.

The reward of discipline is godliness, and godliness has value in this life and the next (I Tim 4:8)!