

Personal Environments

We are transformed by intentional spiritual practices. (1Timothy 4:7-8)



Intentional spiritual discipline such as scripture reading, prayer, solitude, or fasting are environments where we make space in our over-scheduled, harried lives to focus our hearts and remain open and surrendered to the fresh, on-going work of the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus invites us into: to radically reorder our lives in such a way that creates an on-going connectedness/abiding with God.

So the disciplines serve a purpose only to the extent that they train our hearts to stay focused on our true Treasure and live in a state of surrender, openness, willingness, submission (our role!) to the transforming Presence of Christ in us. The spiritual practices allow us to keep our hearts in a place of receptivity...instead of control. The spiritual disciplines are not what create intimacy with Jesus. They create the space to nurture intimacy with Jesus. When we spend time in silence, solitude, prayer, lectio divina, etc., we open ourselves up to what God may want to do within us. The very act of being still in God's presence is an act of surrender...surrender to our agenda, surrender to our dependency on words, surrender to Him. And the more we practice surrender, the more we open the way to true transformation.

The fact is we can't force ourselves on the course of transformation by sheer determination or willpower. Rather it is often through the disciplines we open ourselves up to the wind of the Holy Spirit and allow him to carry and propel us. We can see it as a time to position ourselves to best open our "sails" to receive the wind. Perhaps the spiritual life is not so much about "finding God's will" as it is hearing and following his voice; It's not about trying to get God's attention, but about training ourselves to pay attention to Him. Any activity that is used to help us pay attention to God and to our relationship with God may be used by us. The problem comes when we lean heavily on the disciplines as means of growth rather than means of grace.

1 Corinthians 9:25-27 (New Living Translation)

²⁵ All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. ²⁶ So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. ²⁷ I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified

The Message: ²⁶⁻²⁷ I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

1 Tim. 4:7, 8 TM– “Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever. You can count on this. Take it to heart. This is why we’ve thrown ourselves into this venture so totally. We’re banking on the living God, Savior of all men and women, especially believers.”



The Spiritual disciplines in and of themselves have no merit whatsoever. They possess no righteousness.....their only purpose is to place us before God. After that they have come to the end of their tether. Then the grace of God steps in, takes this simple offering of ourselves, and creates out of it the kind of person who embodies the goodness of God.

In his book, *Extravagant Mercy*, Craig Barnes explains it so well: “The Bible often portrays the grace of God as a thin stream of refreshing water that perseveres in a desert land. The only way our parched souls can survive in a spiritually desolate society is to stay close to the stream. That is why we come to worship, read our Bibles, serve others, and pray without ceasing throughout the day. It’s all a way of drinking in the grace that keeps us spiritually alive. The more time we spend by that stream, the more deeply our lives become rooted in God.”

There’s a lot of misunderstanding about spiritual disciplines.

- They are not “spiritual principles” or “moral guidelines” we perform as a way to go about improving our condition. They are not a formula we follow so we can harness divine favor or look godly. To live freely and authentically, we will have to struggle hard against living with formulas. We have to fight hard against having merely a form of godliness.
 - We do not earn our salvation through working hard at the disciplines. They don’t make us grow...they are not a means of growth....they are a means of grace...of making space in our lives for God to do what only He can do. They help create the environments that grow us spiritually.
 - Another misunderstanding: They are not only suited for just certain personalities. “I’m not wired to” That’s where the discipline part comes in.

What Jesus invites us to do....is to radically reorder our lives in such a way that creates an on-going connectedness/abiding with God that forms our hearts that are fully alive.

In our growing desire to live authentically with God, with others and with ourselves, Spiritual disciplines can help engage our hearts beyond the superficiality of our routine days.

Spiritual practices are exactly what their name suggests; they're ways to be deliberate about matters of the soul. A spiritual practice is a tool for becoming aware of God within the normalcy of life—it injects the sacred into elements that could otherwise seem just every day. In this way they nourish the spiritual life not because of what they *require* of us but by what they *reveal* to us. So in applying spiritual practices, we find that the lines can be blurred between those things spiritual and what is secular: Gratitude can happen when we're mowing the lawn; worship and grocery shopping are compatible; God can be pursued on the evening commute.

What do some of these spiritual practices look like?

- **Prayer**

While many of us would acknowledge that prayer is conversation with God, in practice it may be less a dialogue than a monologue that borders on talking AT God.

Truth be told, many of our prayers resemble a spiritual shopping list. While there is nothing wrong with telling God your needs but if that is your only experience of prayer it can begin to feel pretty one-sided.

Prayer is the most essential thing we do as Christians. However, if you think in terms of trying to get God's attention to serve your purposes you'll only turn to God in prayer when you need something. But if you understand it is God's nature to seek us out and to draw us into participation with what he is doing then it becomes a way of communing with God and paying attention to Him. Then prayer becomes a way to hear God's voice in order to cooperate with his Holy Spirit in what he's doing; to listen and live a life of obedience and respond in ways that allows God to bring about his purposes.

Prayer is not about pestering God into doing what we want Him to do. Prayer is not so much about finding the right words to say to God, as it is an orientation of the soul toward God and his kingdom. It is a stance, a way of being present. Prayer is so much less about technique or a formula that we secretly follow hoping to get God to notice and intervene and make life better. Rather than it being about a set time and place...or even words, it's more about living into a deeper awareness of God's activity in our lives and the habit of turning our heart toward God throughout our day. It's simply about all the ways and moments we commune with God.

Check out these other resources on the Intentional Journey:

- ACTS Prayer
- No More "Zap Me, God" Prayers
- Prayer: A Place to Begin
- What is Prayer?
- Praying When You Don't Feel Like It
- A Daily Prayer of Surrender

- **Scripture Reading:** Someone as has said, “Living words need to be read in an alive manner.”

The part that is missing so often in our usual reading of the Bible is the pondering; the reflection; the leisurely thinking. As we approach God’s Word through this listening, attentive posture, this is where these words begin to shape our lives.

As we continue in this posture of openness and response, it naturally leads to a posture of yieldedness to God and we abandon ourselves to God and his work in us.

Remember the “Magic Eye?” Scripture reading is like the Magic Eye photos. There is more than what you see on the surface of things. If you look closely enough, and change up your gaze you will see a picture in a picture. More than ink on paper, Scripture is to be gazed upon looked into intently so as it becomes an encounter with Jesus.



- **Silence and Solitude**

The part that is missing so often in our usual reading of the Bible is the pondering; the reflection; the leisurely thinking. As we approach God’s Word through this listening, attentive posture, this is where these words begin to shape our lives.

Throughout the NT, we find example after example of Jesus seeking out solitude for prayer.

Mark 1:35 - Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (NIV)

Luke 5:16 - But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer.(NLT)

Matt. 14:23 - After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone (NIV)



The idea of being alone, quietly alone, is unnerving for most Americans, even Christians. We thrive on perpetual noise, packed schedules, and frenzied activity. And we like it that way.

In our society there is a certain pride or badge we wear that says, “I am so busy.” The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. A sobering truth, however, is that we can be very busy and look very important, yet be out of touch with that place in the center of our being where we know who we are in God and what he has called us to do—that place where we are responsive to the voice of God above all others.

However, if we don’t create space for God in our lives we can skim over our lives and never experience anything significant in our spiritual life. We hope something will “stick” and it rarely does.

What are the chief obstacles to solitude? More than anything I think it’s simply lack of practice. It will take time to be able to sit with silence.

It will take time to train ourselves to not require that “something happen” and give up our need to control the situation.

It will take time to give up our efforts to fix and solve and make progress in our spiritual life. It will take time to push beyond the distractions and noises of our minds. One thing we will need to learn is to resist the urge to judge our experience as right or wrong. “I’m awful at this sort of thing!” or “I didn’t get anything out of it.”



We need to remind ourselves it’s just to be with God and give up our expectations how that might look. Yet even when we our times of silence and solitude are fraught with distractions, inner restlessness, preoccupations, boredom, or personal anxieties, I think just our showing up pleases God.

There is a freedom that comes from being who we are in God and resting into God. This eventually enables us to bring something truer to the world than all of our striving.

We sometimes see these words more in terms of our experience than in terms of their implicit God focus.

- Solitude isn’t just being alone, but being alone *with God*.
- Silence isn’t just being quiet, but quiet *with God*.
- Sabbath is resting *with God*.
- Retreat is withdrawing to focus my attention more *on God*.

“The great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.”

John Ortberg



These practices are a means of opening up space in my schedule, in my thinking, and in my attentions to see Him more clearly in my life.

- **Fasting** (typically we think of food...but can be anything that we find controlling us). For example, it could be fasting from a critical spirit or gossip or exaggeration. It can be fasting from technology. Fasting helps us realign our lives, overcome sinful habits, hear from God, and intensify our focus in prayer.

Other practices: Retreat, hospitality, journaling, service, simplicity...and more. These are all ways to create space in our lives for God to work.

One thing for sure: The Christian life is meant to be lived. It is not meant just to be studied and debated. So instead of talking and learning about prayer...we need to pray. Practicing the spiritual disciplines does not make us Christians. Instead, the practicing teaches us what it means to live as Christians.

John Ortberg concludes, “The great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.”

Other Resources:

1. “Invitation to Silence and Solitude” by Ruth Haley Barton
2. “The Life you’ve Always Wanted” by John Ortberg
3. “Sabbath” by Wayne Muller
4. “Sacred Rhythms” by Ruth Haley Barton
5. “Spiritual Disciplines Handbook” by Adele Calhoun