

The Purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual transformation, “recovering your life” is a partnership with God. God, first, initiates the process. The fact that God initiates relationship with us mean not that we go after it but rather that we respond to his invitations. We most often sense his invitations in the form of a desire. That desire, sometimes an ache, for change; a desire to experience more than you have already in God; a need to make a difference...these are all ways God invites us to “walk” with him.



Meister Eckhart said, “The reason we are not able to see God is the faintness of our desire.” If we have no desire we are probably not looking.

Without desire, I am not cooperating with God’s Holy Spirit; I feel obligated and my efforts are forced and I don’t cooperate with God’s Holy Spirit. Anything that comes from the discipline will then be by my effort and with limited transformation.

I do think that it is important to stop and listen for that desire but not only to ask ourselves, “How do I want to or need to be with God,” but also, “*How does God wish to be with me in this moment?*”

Surely God will meet us in whatever fashion we offer as God is not a selfish lover...but are we? Brennann Manning tells a story of going on retreat with all these ideas of mountain top visions when his director handed him a bottle of bubbles and a pack of crayons. That weekend God only met him in the foolish musing of a child. Maybe God wishes to climb a tree with you today, or to stomp in a mud puddle or in any variety of silly ways. It is *His* heart we are after.

Look again at Matt. 11:30 in the Message, “Walk with me and work with me-watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or **ill-fitting on you**. “Ill-fitting” is a good description of a discipline that is not connected with what God is doing in your life. They are not unforced rhythms of grace or ill-fitting because they have been entered into as a result of a desire in our lives prompted by the Holy Spirit. The disciplines are always connected to a desire...a desire that has been stirred up in our lives by God and the disciplines are the way in which we place ourselves before God for him to do the work only He can do. Our responsibility is to co-operate with his work he is already doing in our lives by listening to that desire and responding. How do we do that? Jesus tells us. By walking with him. By working with him. By watching what he does. All these require we pay attention.

The problem iswe live in an age of distraction. We tend to become impatient with any process that requires of us more than a limited involvement of our time and energies. If we do not receive the desired results almost instantly, we become impatient and frustrated. Is it no wonder we feel disconnected from God? We rarely give him our full attention. The spiritual disciplines allow us to stay awake...pay attention. What are some synonyms for paying attention? *Pausing, noticing, opening, yielding and stretching, and responding.*

Clearly, we are participating in a love that's being given to us. We are not creating this. We are not generating this. It is being generated through us and in us. We are *participating* in something larger than ourselves, and we are just allowing it and trusting it for the pure gift that it is.

Authentically pursued, spiritual practices have the capacity to bring us to a place of spiritual health because they open us up to God. They help create the environments that grow us spiritually.

Henri Nouwen once offered a simple description of spiritual disciplines as “the human effort to create open space to listen to the voice of the One who calls us the beloved.”

Spiritual practices are the means of reaching out. The means of opening the soul to meet with God. They invite us to be intentional about the care of our souls. They invite us to an authentic encounter with God.

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Richard Foster wrote, “Spiritual Disciplines are the main way we offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. We are doing what we can do 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 peace, love and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

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Dallas Willard wrote, “The condition of our hearts and our churches today...is distraction. And the fruit of distraction: we don't go in any direction that's worth going in.”

Romans 12:2 says, “Fix your *attention* on God. You'll be changed from the inside out” (The Message).

Some people prefer structure. Others prefer spontaneity. But our preferences aren't the whole of us. For example, a willing embrace of spontaneity (if you prefer structure) has been an important pathway to growth and freshness. Embracing what *isn't* our preference is critical for spiritual progress.

As for formulas, this is one of the banes of US American thinking. We tend to take what

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is organic and vitally alive, then process and package it for mass consumption. Like with food, a lot of the nutrients get lost. We might sell a lot more of it, but is it all that it could be anymore? And formulas tend to forget the mysterious reality of God's grace, God's initiative, and God's empowering presence. You can't package those!

And as for the practice of "devotional time," there is the regularity of time with God, but that sometimes it can be two minutes and sometimes two hours. The focus isn't on a formula, but on God Himself. We are not seeking to be faithful to some system of practices, but to a

personal, interactive, conversational relationship with our heavenly Father. Spiritual disciplines are a way of making more unhurried time and uncluttered space to listen for God, watch for God and notice Him. They are not good things I do to gain favor with Him.

There is the subtle tendency to experience deep spiritual union with Christ for OUR SAKE. So WE will be transformed as if that was our goal...the reason and they why of our spiritual pursuits. The reality is, our goal should be adoration...the fruit of such orientation will be transformation...a by-product of such union.

Calhoun wrote, "The goal of the Christian life is not so much a set of behaviors as it is an orientation of the soul toward God and his kingdom" (p. 256).