

Spiritual Disciplines

A TPC Guide

Introducing the Disciplines

We can never reiterate enough that spiritual disciplines are not the point. They are not the path of righteousness, nor can they earn God's favor in any way. The free grace of Christ on account of his death and resurrection is the only thing that makes us righteous before God.

The disciplines do, however, place us before the Lord so that his Spirit can continually fill us with his sanctifying grace. These are biblical, God-given habits and rhythms to help those of us who have been redeemed by Jesus to put lingering sins in our lives to death and to become more and more like our Savior until we glorify God in all areas of our lives simply by default. "They are activities in which we voluntarily act to meet the reality of God's Kingdom at points where we are especially needy" ([Dallas Willard](#)). We neglect these gifts only to the detriment of our whole selves.

The following list represents the most common biblical disciplines — those that assist the believer in resisting sin and distraction and those that encourage us to engage our Lord and our neighbors in love. Disciplines of resistance open up avenues for disciplines of engagement. Practiced together, they lay out for us a "plan of Christlikeness" (Willard). In addition, almost every discipline can be, and ought to be, practiced individually and communally, for although God calls each of us personally, he saves into a community of faith.

Disciplines of Resistance

Fasting

Especially to counter an overly consumerist culture, we voluntarily abstain from food, a good gift from God, in order to sympathize with the hungry and forgotten, to better understand the things that control us, and "to intensify our expression of need for something greater — namely, God and his work in our lives" ([John Piper](#)).

Silence and Solitude

We temporarily remove ourselves from our regular activities and interactions in order to resist the busyness, noises, and distractions in our lives and to hone in on the voice of the Lord. This could consist of small moments throughout the day, an extended period of "quiet time," or days-long retreats.

Submission

By practicing self-denial and "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21), we break the bonds of self-pity and self-absorption by "count[ing] others more significant than [ourselves]" (Phil 2:3). Instead, we receive our identity and joy from the Spirit. (This should be done with the guidance of the Spirit within the confines of love, discerning when others take our practice as license to take advantage of or abuse.)

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Secrecy

In a culture that encourages us to display our virtues and achievements for all to see (and even to display our vices and failures in order to be lauded for our honesty and vulnerability), the practice of keeping our good deeds and qualities to ourselves trains our inordinate desire for the praise of man.

Sabbath

One day a week, we practice God's creational pattern of work and rest by stopping from our normal activities, reminding ourselves that we do not and cannot sustain the world. By taking a Sabbath, we embrace our limitations and build our trust in God's powerful provision.

Simplicity

Scripture encourages us to pursue a simple inner life: Seek the Kingdom of God and glorify him in all things. That inward simplicity that entrusts all things to the Lord is expressed and reinforced by outward simplicity. We purposefully simplify our schedules, spending habits, and tendencies to hoard and so "[declare] war on materialism" ([Renovaré](#)), as well as anxiety, addiction, and more.

Simplicity includes sub-disciplines like frugality, generosity, stewardship, etc.

Lament

It is not biblical to stoically repress our griefs and burdens. That is a product of a culture that believes that we have the ultimate power to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and that we must always present ourselves as if we are okay. Lamenting combats those lies by allowing us to mourn at the feet of our gracious Comforter and Healer and so "receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16).

This practice is closely associated with practices of releasing one's [emotions](#) and [burdens and anxieties](#) to God, which themselves are types of prayer (see below).

Chastity

Chastity is a virtue that concerns all people. According to God's wisdom, sex is best expressed in the context of a covenantal marriage; all other sexual endeavors, in action or in thought, go off from his good plan. Chastity in this sense is not a spiritual discipline any more than truthfulness or kindness are disciplines. These are simply ways of living that align with God's law, and we are called to obey that law. In an overly sexualized world that draws men and women increasingly into oppressive perversions of sex, however, it is necessary to turn chastity into a practice of resistance. This is more than simply abstaining from sex outside of marriage. We practice chastity (as singles and marrieds) by applying the principles of fasting and simplicity to matters of sex and temporarily refrain from expressions of sex and sexuality. For the single person, this might include refraining from watching or listening to certain kinds of media in which sex is prominent, avoiding certain events or parties, or abstaining from dating for a period of time. For the married person, much of the same applies in

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addition to abstaining from sexual intercourse with one's spouse (see 1 Cor 7:5). As with fasting, the principle is to abstain from one good thing in order to intently focus on the better thing.

Disciplines of Engagement

Word

The Bible is the Spirit-inspired Word of God to us, our necessary and sufficient authority on life and faith (2 Tim 3:16-17), in which God reveals himself, his world, and ourselves to us more fully and truly than any purely human source could. Without it, we would have no certain knowledge of God and reality. Because it relates the story of our redemption, centered in Jesus Christ (Lk 24:44-49), we cannot be reconciled to God nor can we abide in Jesus unless we receive it (Rom 10:14-17). As one of the bedrock disciplines that we practice with other disciplines, we can attend to the Word in several ways.

- **Spiritual Posture:** We prayerfully submit ourselves to the authority of the Word, asking that the Lord would open our minds and hearts to understand it, to be convicted by it, to be nourished from it, and to delight in it.
- **Study:** We read the text diligently and closely to grasp what God has meant to say in that passage so that we do not place our own meaning onto it. This means taking the time to understand the historical context, pay attention to the genre and literary features, and consider how it fits into the larger narrative of redemption in the Bible.
- **Meditation:** We give ourselves time and space to “sit in the text,” marinate on its meaning, and allow it to fill and expand our imagination. It is essentially an activity of listening and being filled by God that can be undertaken in [numerous ways](#). (Christian meditation can also include pondering/considering God and his works, but these are revealed mostly clearly in Scripture although “the heavens declare the glory of God” [Ps 19:1] as well.)
- **Memorization:** We “store up [God’s] word in [our] heart” (Ps 119:11) by committing specific verses or passages to memory.
- **Communal:** Because the perspectives of others help us to see more fully the beauty and truth of God’s revealed Word, we read and receive the Scriptures together in communities of faith — primarily as we receive the preached word in corporate worship but also as we study in small groups and learn from believers from different times and places.

Prayer

Because any healthy relationship requires communication by both parties, prayer is another bedrock discipline that often occurs while practicing another discipline. In short, “prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him” ([Tim Keller](#)). It is our primary means of talking with our Father, which we are able to do on the basis of Christ’s work (Heb 10:19) and in the power of the Spirit (Rom 8:15, 26). Prayer is a gift from him, through him, and to him (Rom 11:36) so that “the promises of God should have their way with us” ([Calvin](#)), transforming more

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into the image of Jesus. Like attending to the Word, the Bible commends many types and means of prayer to us.

- **Adoration:** We complete our joy in the Lord and turn away from our self-centeredness by acknowledging his great worth, expressing what is true about him.
- **Thanksgiving and Remembrance:** The people of God are prone to forget the goodness of God, so we regularly thank God for his works of grace, recalling what he has done in the past and what he is doing in the present, in hope for what he will do in the future.
- **Confession:** There are two kinds of prayers of confession. First, we confess our sins — what we have wrongfully done and left undone; the errors of thought, word, and deed; how we have failed to love God and neighbor. Second, we confess that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord, who has saved us from our sins by the cross and rules at the right hand of the Father.
- **Petition and Intercession:** Because God is the sustainer of all things (Heb 1:3), we take our needs and the needs of others to him, trusting that he will respond according to his steadfast love.
- **Listening:** We often need to stop our talking and wait on the Lord. We practice this typically after asking the Lord for some need or guidance or understanding, especially after reading and meditating on the Word.
- **Individual and Communal:** We can pray by ourselves, with a few friends or a small group, or in a congregational setting. It is important to lift up our hearts to God in all of these ways to remember that he is our God personally while uniting us as one Body.
- **Extemporaneous or Instinctive:** We regularly take our needs, experiences, and emotions to the Lord in prayer “in the moment.” This allows us to be honest with him, whether we are pouring out praise or venting our anger, for we have no need to hide our true self from him but can approach him as our Father.
- **Written:** Writing out our prayers allows us to more definitely work out our thoughts and feelings with the Lord because we are forced to choose definite words to define these things. We also are more likely to name our specific sins and idols and hand over to his forgiving grace. Besides writing our prayers, we also enlarge our vocabulary of prayer by praying the written prayers in the Bible (especially the Psalms!) or from past believers or by [praying through Scripture](#).
- **Physical posture:** Because we are both body and spirit, our physical posture can influence our spiritual posture. Therefore, we might pray from various postures: sitting in expectation, kneeling in submission, raising our hands in surrender or to receive, etc.

Worship

Worship is our life-long response to God’s grace by honoring and glorifying him in all that we do (Rom 12:1) and, in that sense, is more of a lifestyle than a discipline, the goal of the whole Christian life. However, because our hearts are prone to wander, we must make a specific practice of worshipping in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24), honoring and praising God, lifting our hearts up to him, and welcoming his presence among us. We do this individually in prayers of adoration, continuous prayers, thanking God for his Word and works, singing songs

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of worship, and more. We also worship in our corporate gatherings by receiving and responding to the preached Word, singing songs of worship, participating in the sacraments (baptism and communion), and giving and listening to testimonies of God's goodness (Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14:26). In all of these ways of worshipping, we are directing our mind, affections, and will to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Evangelism

God is forgiving sin and healing the world of sin's corrupting influence through his Son, Jesus Christ. We partner in this work by intentionally sharing the gospel, this good news. Loving our neighbor includes caring for their physical needs but extends beyond this to care for their eternal spiritual need for God.

Serving

If Jesus "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), then we likewise practice that other-focused mentality (Phil 2:5-7) by serving the needs of others, at the same time cultivating humility within us.

Serving — "the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves" ([Renovaré](#)) — takes many forms, including assisting someone with a particular need, large or small, guarding one's reputation, showing common courtesy, displaying hospitality, listening, bearing another's burden, or speaking an encouraging word (Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 134-140).

Journaling or Reflection

Journaling is, in a sense, a subdiscipline of several other disciplines like attending to the Word, prayer, and study. Writing down our thoughts, feelings, experiences, prayers, and insights allows us to reflect over and process these things in light of the revealed Word to the glory of God. We capture the past and remember God's providence. We cultivate a better future by organizing our goals and priorities. And we enrich the present as we examine our story in light of God's story, meditate upon the ways in which the gospel encounters our lives, and "disentangle our thoughts, draw out our emotions, and dream about new endeavors" ([David Mathis](#)).

Learning

The renewal of the mind is an important element in the transformation of the whole person (Rom 12:2). We renew our minds by thinking on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, or excellent (Phil 4:8). This begins with learning the Bible and theology but extends into all spheres of life — economics and engineering, cooking and caretaking, music and medicine. Because the Creator impresses himself upon all of creation, we read the "book of creation" to enlarge our knowledge and love of his majesty.

Fellowship

God calls his people into a single body (Eph 2:16; 4:4), one living organism in which we receive and share love and wisdom, joys and sorrows, correction and encouragement in order to live

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to the glory of God more faithfully. We must not fail to meet together habitually (Heb 10:25) in corporate worship (Col 3:16; Acts 2:42-47), small groups, and intentional friendships but purposefully cultivate all of these.

Guidance

The temptation to choose for ourselves what is good and evil and to chart our own course sits deeply in our hearts as it did in our first parents. We squash that temptation and build our trust in the Lord as we take time intentionally to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer and Bible intake, as well as through the godly counselors he has placed in our lives.

Celebration and Feasting

In regularly celebrating and feasting, we acknowledge that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17) and is not to be rejected. These are times in which we gather with others to enjoy God and all that he has graciously given, giving thanks since we have no good apart from him (Ps 16:2).

Common Questions

Do I have to practice the spiritual disciplines to be a good Christian?

How you answer this depends in part on how you define “good Christian.” Does it mean someone who knows the Bible or theology well? Someone who lives a moral life? Someone who attends church and is generally well liked? The spiritual disciplines may or may not be helpful to meet these ends. Let us say, rather, that a good Christian is someone who has been saved by Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12) and is being conformed more and more into his image (Rom 8:29; 1 Pet 1:14-15; Col 3:1-17). We are not saved by any work of our own but only by grace through faith in Jesus (Eph 2:1-10), a gift received from the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5; 1 Cor 2:6-16). But how are we conformed into the image of Christ? How is sin removed from our life? How do we grow in humility and holiness? What we see in Scripture, by teaching and example, is that the Holy Spirit transforms us through the disciplines, especially attending to the Word and prayer. He uses these as the training grounds to breathe the life of Christ into us.

To use an analogy, does an athlete have to train in order to win a championship? Of course, they do. But, while their training may be trying and difficult, the sacrifice is worth the prize in their eyes. In the same way, our training in godliness (1 Tim 4:7) may be taxing at times — all discipline is (Heb 12:11) — but with our eyes set on the prize of knowing and encountering God, these turn from laborious duties into occasions for joy and growth.

Is it enough simply to make a habit of attending to the Word and praying?

This is not an unreasonable thought. If we desire to commune with God, then we will absolutely need to hear his voice, which comes to us objectively in the Bible, and cultivate that relationship with prayer. Two things, however, encourage us to utilize the other disciplines as well. First, the Bible itself commends the disciplines to us as the way of holiness by teachings and examples (from Jesus himself no less!). Second, because we are limited,

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finite beings embedded in patterns of sin, we must actively fight distractions and sin which wage war against our flesh. The disciplines were designed to counter the weaknesses of our flesh *and* position us before the Lord so that he transforms our whole being from the inside out.

(You can read more about this by considering the [General Habits Approach](#) and the [Subversive Habits Approach](#) to aligning our story with God's Story.)

How do you practice spiritual disciplines without turning them into dead, legalistic practices?

This is a real threat to the Christian life, but one that can be countered fairly easily. First, we must remember where on the timeline of our spiritual journey with God the spiritual disciplines occur. They do not come before our salvation in Christ but *after*. If we place them before, we will view them as ways of trying to *earn* God's favor, much like the Pharisees of Jesus' time. Failure to practice or half-hearted practicing will result in feelings of guilt because we will think that God will not be able to love us. In actuality, God loved us even while we were sinners and his enemies (Rom 5:6-11). The disciplines will be free of legalism and guilt if, on the other hand, we practice them fueled by grace and the power of the Spirit. Then our failures and setbacks will simply be points along our journey.

Second, we must remember that these are *means* not *ends*. If they were ends, they would be good in themselves, like listening to music or enjoying someone's company. But they are good only insofar as they position us before the Lord. They have a specific use, directing us to something beyond themselves: They are the avenue to encounter and enjoy God. He is the end, the destination, the goal. If we seek fasting or study or silence more than God himself, then we will have transformed his good gifts into idols, which will bind us in chains.

Are we allowed to practice certain disciplines that we might find to be spiritually edifying but are not in the Bible?

This depends. Some "spiritual" practices, so named by various religions or philosophies, are opposed to God and his purpose for our lives. For example, many practices of Eastern religions ask practitioners to empty themselves. The Christian does not desire to empty him- or herself but to be filled with the presence of God. Other techniques call for the practitioner to center their mind or spirit on themselves. Again, we center ourselves on God, not our own person. These types of practices must be avoided.

Some practices, on the other hand, while not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, fit under one of the main disciplines or serve the same purposes, like journaling mentioned above. For example, Scripture says nothing about smartphones or streaming services. But making a rule for yourself that limits your use of these — say, you turn your phone off for an hour each day or limit your media intake to four hours a week — fits with biblical disciplines like fasting, silence, or Sabbath. Moreover, these two "[rules of life](#)" would allow you to target specific things that tend to distract you from God, embed you in patterns of sin, or stir up misguided desires. These should not, however, be forced upon others, nor should they take precedence over the primary biblical disciplines. Still, if a self-imposed rule helps you to resist sin or

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engage God and your neighbors, and if a rule could be categorized within another discipline, we have freedom to apply these kinds of rules to our life.

General Resources

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

- [Donald Whitney's basic definition](#)
- [Donald Whitney examining the disciplines of Jonathan Edwards](#)
- [Renovaré's list and definitions of specific disciplines](#)
 - The Renovaré website is perhaps the most comprehensive online resource for the spiritual disciplines.

The Heart Behind Practicing the Disciplines

- ["The Heart of Spiritual Disciplines"](#) by Steve Childers
- ["Your Quiet Time is Not About You"](#) by Brandon Smith

Recommended Books

- [The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives](#) by Dallas Willard
- [Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life](#) by Donald Whitney
- [Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth](#) by Richard Foster
- [Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ](#) by Dallas Willard
- [The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction](#) by Justin Whitmel Earley
- [Recapturing the Wonder: Transcendent Faith in a Disenchanted World](#) by Mike Cosper