

# *Spiritual Disciplines*

*“A discipline is an activity within our power  
that enables us to accomplish  
what we cannot do  
by direct effort.”*

- Dallas Willard

There are many different spiritual disciplines that can help us to grow and mature in Christ. The following pages describe many, but not all of the spiritual disciplines that are referred to in Scripture and that have been practiced throughout church history. Dr. Michael Bischof, from Souleleader Resources, explains the following twenty disciplines. These explanations are used by permission. Explore the use of these disciplines to help you grow in the grace of God. Spiritual discovery awaits you!

## *Disciplines of Engagement*

*Worship  
Celebration  
Confession  
Guidance  
Fellowship  
Journaling  
Meditation  
Mourning  
Prayer  
Service  
Study*

## *Disciplines of Abstinence*

*Solitude  
Silence  
Fasting  
Secrecy  
Simplicity  
Frugality  
Chastity  
Sacrifice  
Submission*

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## Worship

*“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.” – John 4:23*

If the focus of silence is *listening to* God, the focus of worship is *experiencing* God. Worship starts with who God is, not music, not our emotions, not our feelings. Worship is about giving God the worth that he is due. God is so approachable, and worship prompts us to approach him with regularity. Worship puts God in his rightful place as the worshipper reflects on who God is and all he has done. It might be somewhat difficult to think of worship as a discipline, since the first thing that usually comes to mind when people think of worship is the singing that takes place during a church service. This perception can cause problems, though, for several reasons. First, worship is much more than just singing. Worship can include prayer, silence, reading, dancing, clapping, and many other expressions of praise and adoration. Worship is also a cleansing experience. So it is important to move beyond any stereotypes you might have about worship. Worship has also become one of the most hotly debated topics in many churches because of the tensions between worship styles. So it is also important to move beyond a perception of worship as a reflection of generational styles or cultural preferences.

Richard Foster says,

*To worship is to experience reality, to touch Life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community . . . Worship is human response to divine initiative. . . Worship is our responding to the overtures of love from the heart of the Father . . . It is kindled within us only when the Spirit of God touches our human spirit.<sup>1</sup>*

In reality, people are used to worshipping many kinds of things such as sunsets, art, music, celebrities, athletes, etc. So as you spend time in the discipline of worship, seek to move beyond worship as you have ever known it before, and make sure that God is the object of your worship.

- One of the most important prerequisites to effective worship is getting rid of distractions. So whatever it is that might be a distraction to you, make sure you identify it and do whatever it takes to eliminate it.
- If you like to sing, plan a time to sit in the presence of God singing to him your favorite songs of praise and worship.
- If singing is not something you prefer, you might try listening to recorded praise and worship music. As you begin to learn the words of the songs, you find them very easy to adapt as prayers to God as part of your personal worship.
- It is good to learn to worship without music and singing. There are countless ways you can do this. You might enjoy reciting the names of God, reading Scripture out loud, creating a dance, or even worshipping in silence. The important thing is to have a heart focused on God.
- Many people enjoy worshipping God in nature. If you can take a walk in the forest or mountains, carefully observe all that God has created and spend time worshipping him for each one.
- It is often helpful to include as many of the senses as possible in worship. Think of ways you can worship using sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste.
- As you experiment with worship, feel free to use your imagination in new and creative ways. Allow your imagination to draw you into the presence of God.
- If you are not familiar with liturgical worship, you might find it refreshing and enlightening to explore the liturgy, recite various creeds, explore the Book of Common Prayer, etc.
- Visit a church that is outside of your worship style preference and enjoy the different flavor.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 138.

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## Celebration

“A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God.” – Ecclesiastes 2:24

According to Dallas Willard, celebration is one of the most important disciplines of engagement, yet it is one of the most overlooked and misunderstood. He says, “We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, *in conjunction with* our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on *our* life and world as God’s work and as God’s gift to us.”<sup>i</sup>

Celebration is often thought of in terms of worship, yet celebration differs from worship. In worship, we ascribe greatness and glory to God. In celebration, we are thankful to God and calling to mind the things he has done for us, our people, our family, etc. In a sense celebration is the completion of worship. It is remembering what God has done, because it is so easy for us to forget.

- Spend some time reading the following passages, and in your own words describe how you see celebration:

Exodus 15:20  
Judges 5  
2 Samuel 6:12-16  
John 2  
Deuteronomy 14:22-29  
Ecclesiastes 3:12-23; 5:18-20

- One way to exercise the discipline of celebration is with your family. Determine a place that your family really enjoys and spend some time there. Reflect on what God is doing in each of your lives as well as in your family. You might need to schedule a celebration event such as this. Consider having a time of celebration as part of a family tradition or holiday gathering.
- Since we are at the half way point of *Journeying in Community*, it would be fun to plan a party for those in your community as well as their families. As you plan this event, plan it in such a way that you will be able to exercise the discipline of celebration.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 179.

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## Confession

*“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”* – James 5:16

Confession is the practice of letting other safe and trusted people know our deepest weaknesses and failures. One of the best ways to receive nurture and grace from others is through the practice of confession. There is also no more effective way to deal with sin in our lives. Over the centuries, confession somehow became a practice between an individual and God. But in the Bible, confession is both a practice between an individual and God (1 John 1:9) and an individual and other supportive believers (James 5:16 is one example).

A huge part of confession is forgiveness. Richard Foster has said, “It is God who does the forgiving, but often He chooses human beings as the channel of His forgiving grace.”<sup>i</sup> It is important to understand confession as a process. Since forgiveness is a process and almost always takes a significant amount of time, the practice of confession becomes an integral part of this process. There is nothing more healing for sin than bringing it into the light. The best way to bring sin into the light is through confession.

It is also very important to be sure that confession is practiced in an atmosphere of safety and grace. If confession is done with people who are judgmental, critical, or attempt to “fix” you as a person, it will only exacerbate the problem. So prior to spending time in confession, be sure the other people involved are as committed to giving grace, love, and forgiveness as you are.

- Read and meditate on 1 John 1:9. Choose an area of sin that you need to tell God about. As you share it with him, picture God’s face full of compassion and love. Allow yourself to feel and experience God’s grace and forgiveness of this area.
- Choose a friend who knows you better than anyone else. If you have never discussed confession together, spend some time exploring how the two of you might benefit from sharing the deepest parts of yourself. If you have mutual agreement about sharing issues of struggle and sin, share an area of your life that has been in the darkness and needs to be brought into the light. Allow yourself to feel your friend’s acceptance and grace. Spend some time praying for each other with what you have shared.
- If you are part of a small group that is very safe, consider how you might practice confession in the context of community. If you are not part of a small group, consider sharing with your Journey Community an area of your life that would benefit from the practice of confession.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Richard J. Foster’s Study Guide For Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983), 59.

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## Guidance

*“One reason why we fail to hear God speak is that we are not attentive. We suffer from what might be called ‘spiritual mindlessness.’” – John Ortberg*

In our process of *Journeying in Community* we have strongly emphasized the importance of how to listen to God and live our lives in response to God’s leading. The discipline of guidance helps us to learn that guidance and direction for our lives comes both in individual and in corporate ways.

The discipline of guidance teaches us that prayer and interaction with God is as much about listening to God as it is about speaking to God. The disciplines of solitude, silence, prayer, and meditation all prepare us for listening to God. The discipline of guidance helps us to develop the spiritual ears and eyes that are necessary for hearing and seeing God’s direction for our lives.

An important aspect of the discipline of guidance is learning to listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit through what others in the body of Christ are saying and doing. Richard Foster says, “God does guide the individual richly and profoundly, but He also guides groups of people and can instruct the individual through the group experience. Perhaps our preoccupation with private guidance is the product of our Western individualism. The people of God have not always been so.”<sup>i</sup>

It is easy to stray in this discipline so that it becomes a “fleece” for determining the will of God. But it is important to understand that it has more to do with character than tasks. John Ortberg says, “God’s purpose in guidance is not to get us to perform the right actions. His purpose is to help us become the right kind of people.”<sup>ii</sup>

- Make the conscious effort as you interact with people this week to listen for promptings from the Holy Spirit. Don’t just listen to what the people are saying, but also try to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying. This will help you to be with people in the same way that Jesus was with people.
- An excellent way to practice the discipline of guidance is through the influence of a spiritual director. If you do not already have someone who functions as a spiritual director in your life, consider finding one as soon as possible.
- Spend some time intentionally reviewing your times of prayer. Reflect on what you find yourself saying, what you sense God communicating, what you feel, what is easy, what is difficult, etc. Learning to be more reflective in the area of prayer will assist you in the area of guidance.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 151.

<sup>ii</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 143.

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## Fellowship

*“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” – Acts 2:42*

While fellowship is a very common word among Christians, the intentional practice of fellowship as a discipline is not so common. The discipline of fellowship involves purposefully engaging in community building activities with other believers. Many of these activities are also other disciplines, such as worship, study, prayer, celebration, and service.

While fellowship can be experienced as part of a large group, the inner dynamics of fellowship are best experienced when the group is small enough for you to be known by everyone else in the group. Therefore, involvement in a small group, cell group, bible study, or something like this is very instrumental to the practice of fellowship.

The practice of your spiritual gift(s) is also important to the realization of true fellowship. Dallas Willard says:

*The diverse gifts or graces of the Spirit – all of which are needed in some measure by each person from time to time – are distributed among the separate members of the body of Christ, the church. The unity of the body rightly functioning is thus guaranteed by the people reciprocating in needs and ministries. There are no “oughts” or “shoulds” or “won’t-you-pleases” about this. It is just a matter of how things actually work in the new life.<sup>i</sup>*

- If you are not already part of a small group of believers who meet consistently for the purpose of fellowship, find a group that you can join. Share with this group your desire to be intentional about fellowship.
- Spend some time meditating on the list of “one another” verses from this module. Choose one or two that you would like to practice more regularly, and spend some time doing it in the context of fellowship.
- Read and meditate on 1 Corinthians 12:7-11. Consider a new way in which you might use your spiritual gift that will enhance your experience of fellowship.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 187.

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## Journaling

Spiritual journaling grows out of reflection, contemplation, and prayer. It is an open expression through writing or some art form of one's insights and observations about God, oneself, and what is transpiring in one's relationship with Jesus Christ.

There are many kinds of journaling:<sup>i</sup>

- recording reflections on scripture (which is best integrated with other forms of journaling), nature, oneself and others;
- writing one's thoughts, feelings, motivations and dreams honestly to God knowing that grace accepts all;
- writing words of adoration, thanks, confession, or petition;
- recording what God seems to be saying to the journaler which must be tested by biblical revelation, time, and the counsel of mature, discerning believers;
- writing narrative;
- recording evidences of God's activity in personal or corporate experience;
- recording one's wrestling with God or spiritual issues.

How does one journal? It is often helpful to read the journals of others. One place you can start is to read the sample journal reflections written after extended times with God (EPCs) found at the end of Appendix A. It might also be helpful to interact with others who journal. Feel free to experiment and find your own style. Even if you do not like writing, try some form of journaling realizing that it may never be a significant part of your spiritual life.

- Some people never journal because they don't have a place to write their thoughts. You might benefit from going to the store and buying a small spiral bound pad of paper that you can use as your journal.
- It is helpful to start small. At the conclusion of a time with God, spend a few minutes jotting down thoughts and feelings that come to mind.
- Whenever you come across a quote, verse, phrase, or idea that had an impact on your life, write it down in your journal. In this way it can become a treasure chest of your spiritual growth.

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<sup>i</sup> Information on Journaling adapted from Paul Jensen, "Spiritual Journaling," unpublished paper in Course Syllabus *Spirituality and Discipleship in College and Young Adult Settings*, Fuller Theological Seminary, Fall 1997.

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## Meditation

*“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”* – Joshua 1:8

Meditation is a wonderful place to start for a person who desires to receive nurture from God. It is intentional vertical connection that is both spiritually nurturing and emotionally healing. Richard Foster says, “That is why meditation is so threatening to us. It boldly calls us to enter into the living presence of God for ourselves. It tells us that God is speaking in the continuous present and wants to address us.”<sup>i</sup>

While meditation can always be done in a place of solitude, it is important to find places to integrate it into our normal daily routine as well. Here it is important to find a place that is quiet and free from interruption. It might also be helpful to have a consistent place versus to trying to find a new place each time.

It is important to understand the difference between meditation and study. Thomas Merton has defined this well: “By study we seek the truth in books or in some other source outside our own minds. In meditation we strive to absorb what we have already taken in.”<sup>ii</sup>

- Select a portion of Scripture. You might find it helpful to use a translation or paraphrase that you are not as familiar with so that the words are fresh. Try repeating it several times. Each time you repeat it, emphasize a different part of it. You might consider writing it on an index card and placing it somewhere to remind you over the next week.
- A similar exercise to the one above is praying the Scripture. Choose a passage that is simple and practical. Read the passage very slowly, only a portion at a time. Do not focus on how much you read, but the way you are reading. One author has described this as the difference between a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower and one that penetrates into the depths of the flower. As the Scripture begins to sink in to your soul, spend time interacting with God about what the passage is saying to your life.
- Think about some of the new principles you have recently taken in. Choose a phrase or a concept which you desire to become a deeper part of you life. Sitting in quiet, focus on the this phrase or concept. Consider taking this concept with you into your day.
- Go somewhere to be in nature. Spend at least 30 minutes contemplating all that is around you. As you take this in, thank God for his creation. Allow the beautiful surroundings to nurture your soul.
- One very helpful exercise suggested by Richard Foster is called “palms down, palms up.”<sup>iii</sup> You begin by placing your palms down as a symbolic indication of your desire to turn over any concerns you may have to God. Pray about your concerns as you do this. Next, turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord. As you meditate in this posture, pray in a way as if receiving directly from the Lord. There is something very helpful about using our hands to illustrate what is going on in our heart.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 19.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1960), 53.

<sup>iii</sup> Foster, 24.



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## Mourning

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* – Matthew 5:4

*It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting . . .  
Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart.* –  
Ecclesiastes 7:2-3

Mourning is the process of feeling and expressing deep grief or sorrow. Mourning is an ideal practice for the issues in this module since it is a process of healing and letting go. The concept of mourning is found over a hundred times in the Bible.

In a psychological sense, mourning is closely associated with the process of grieving. An understanding of the grief process can be helpful to the one who desires to practice mourning as a discipline during a time of loss or intense pain. The normal stages of the grief process are:

1. shock and denial
2. anger (anger turned outward)
3. depression (anger turned inward)
4. bargaining
5. sadness
6. resolution, acceptance, and forgiveness

Since grief or mourning is a highly individualized process, it is important to understand that people experience it very differently. The stages listed above are only general categories of the way people generally process grief.

- Designate a period of time to spend in mourning. Some people choose a day or two. Some choose a week or more. The goal is to allow yourself to be sad and to grieve over issues of sin and loss in your life. You might want to choose an issue in your life that was addressed in the module. During this time, avoid feeling pressured by others to be happy. Allow yourself to remain in a process of mourning as long as you need to.
- If you have difficulty crying, allow yourself to watch a movie or read a story which you know is sad and will prompt these deep seated emotions in your soul. As you watch or read, allow yourself to feel the sadness. If this brings you to the point of tears, allow yourself to weep as long and as hard as you need to.

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## Prayer

*“pray continually.”* – 1 Thessalonians 5:17

It is not difficult to view prayer as an integral part of our spiritual life. It might be hard to learn prayer as a spiritual discipline. It is slightly different than the other disciplines because it almost always must involve other disciplines and spiritual activities if it is to be effective in our lives. Dallas Willard says:

*But prayer will not be established in our lives as it must be for us to flourish, unless we are practicing other disciplines such as solitude and fasting. In many Protestant churches prayer and Bible study are held up as the activities that will make us spiritually rich. But very few people actually succeed in attaining spiritual richness through them and indeed often find them to be intolerably burdensome.<sup>1</sup>*

Of all the disciplines, prayer is probably the one we feel most comfortable with. We are just not that good at it. Therefore, the goal of practicing prayer as a discipline is to explore it in fresh ways. For example, many have only experienced prayer as talking to God. One of the most joyful revelations is to experience the reality that prayer is just as much *listening to God*.

If this kind of listening prayer is new to you, you might be concerned with how to know what you are hearing. Is it God's voice? My voice? Satan's voice? There are several guidelines as you listen to assist you in this area. First, it is important to ask if what you are hearing is in harmony with Scripture. Second, is it persistent. In other words, does the prompting keep coming back. Third, if you are still having difficulty determining, seek the counsel of other wise and mature Christians.

A problem in prayer is that we have a tendency to view it merely as something that we do, rather than someone we are with. Prayer is relational. It is just as relational as walking and talking with a friend.

- As you begin to practice prayer as a spiritual discipline, try to pray in new and different ways. For example, if you always pray silently, attempt to pray out loud. If you always pray with your eyes closed and head bowed, pray with your eyes open and face raised to God. If you pray with your hands folded, consider praying with your hands open or raised.
- Taking prayer walks can be a wonderfully refreshing exercise. If you walk your neighborhood, pray for the people whose homes you pass. If you walk during your work day, consider praying for your co-workers or family. If you walk in a public place, pray for the salvation of those around you. The ideas are only as endless as your creativity allows them to be.
- Consider praying passages of Scripture. Many are familiar with praying the Lord's prayer. It is especially easy to pray the Psalms. Where possible, make these prayers personal by exchanging your name or personal pronouns.
- Find a place that inspires prayer within your heart. Many neighborhoods have a church building that is open for times of prayer.
- You might find it helpful to utilize Richard Foster's three directions of prayer: upward, inward, and outward.

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 186.

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## Service

*“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”*

– Colossians 3:23-24

Service is possibly one of the most familiar of all the disciplines. Most people at some point in their lives have had the opportunity of serving in some way. Fewer have had the experience of service as a discipline. Service as a discipline is the intentional use of our time, abilities, or resources for the good of others. Service may take place in a local church setting, volunteering for a charitable organization, or spontaneously in individual settings. The importance is not derived from the context, but the purpose and transformation that takes place in the heart of the one serving.

Service is a discipline that directly targets many attitudes that are present in our culture today, such as entitlement and pride. Today it is very common to find an expectation of “being served” as opposed to “serving.” Dallas Willard points out that service is an excellent way to “train myself away from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, or covetousness.”<sup>i</sup> In other words, many hard to reach areas of sin are confronted and transformed by this simple discipline.

- Many opportunities for service exist right in one’s neighborhood. Consider serving your neighbor by an act of kindness such as mowing his lawn, washing her car, or raking up leaves.
- Be available to assist others with needs that arise. An example of this would be helping someone move.
- If you are not currently involved in a ministry at your church, talk with your pastor about areas where you might be able to serve on a regular basis.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 182.

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## Study

*“. . . but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” – Romans 12:2*

Dallas Willard says, “As solitude is the primary discipline of abstinence for the early part of our spiritual life, so study is the primary discipline of engagement.”<sup>i</sup> Therefore, it is very important that we understand the practice of this discipline in our lives. It is different than meditation. Meditation is more devotional in nature whereas study is more analytical. Study is the primary way we engage ourselves with the written and spoken Word of God. Study can also focus on the reading of good books. An often neglected area of study involves the observation of things and people. Study can also be enhanced by listening to gifted teachers who help us to understand the Bible in deep and refreshing ways, and challenge us to deeper personal levels of study.

While some might be turned off by the idea of study being a spiritual discipline, it is important to understand both the experiential nature of this type of study and the consequential results. Richard Foster defines study as

*a specific kind of experience in which through careful observation of objective structures we cause thought processes to move in a certain way. Perhaps we study a tree or book. We see it, feel it. As we do, our thought processes take on an order conforming to the order in the tree or book. When done with concentration, perception and repetition, ingrained habits of thought are formed.”<sup>ii</sup>*

The discipline of study will provide the basis for knowledge and understanding as you venture on your journey. It is always important to undertake study with an attitude of humility and teachability since any practice of increasing knowledge can have a tendency to feed one’s pride or arrogance.

- Using a concordance (either book form or computer work fine), choose a topic of interest to you that you have been desiring to learn more about. Look up the word/concept in the concordance, reading each portion of Scripture where it is found. After you have done this, write several paragraphs summarizing what the Bible has to say about the topic.
- Obtain a series of tapes on a portion of Scripture by a good Bible teacher. Spend some time listening to these tapes where you can really concentrate, take notes, and reflect on the passage(s) of Scripture being studied. After listening to the tapes, spend some time on your own studying the same portion of the Bible to see what other observations, principles, or application you come up with.
- A significant aspect of study is the constant reading of the Bible as a whole. If you read 3-4 chapters a day, you can read the entire Bible in one year. Many people find it helpful to use a Bible reading calendar to keep track. There are also Bibles that are designed and laid out to be read over the period of a year. If you find it difficult reading the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, you might try reading a chronological Bible instead.
- Choose a book on a topic of interest. If you do not have one, visit a local bookstore. As you read the book, spend at least a half hour in reflection for every hour you spend reading. Use a highlighter or pen to mark sections of the book you find especially helpful. Write down specific page numbers or notes in the front or back of the book that will help you return to portions you find significant. When you are finished reading the book, you might want to write a one page summary listing six to eight key quotations, as well as a paragraph critique describing how the book has had impact on your spiritual formation.
- One of the easiest ways to begin studying people more closely is to go “people watching.” Go to a mall or some place where there are a lot of people participating in a variety of activities. It is even better if you can hear many of them talking. Spend at least an hour just observing and listening. You might choose to go with someone who you can discuss your observations with. How do the things you have observed support what the Bible says about people? What concepts that you are currently learning can be observed?

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 176.

<sup>ii</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 55.

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## Solitude

Solitude is the practice of being alone. While you have already spent some time in solitude as part of your extended times with God, it is crucial to learn the value of solitude as a discipline to be practiced on a regular basis. Solitude needs to have priority among the various disciplines. Dallas Willard says, "Of all the disciplines of abstinence, solitude is generally the most fundamental in the beginning of the spiritual life, and it must be returned to again and again as that life develops."<sup>i</sup> It will provide the foundation for the practice of many other disciplines, such as silence and prayer.

The practice of solitude is easily passed over in the Bible. Many of the most prominent characters in Scripture made solitude a part of their lives. Jesus practiced solitude throughout his life and ministry. At the beginning of his ministry he went to the wilderness for an extended period of fasting and prayer (Matthew 4:1-2). He sought solitude prior to preaching (Mark 1:35-39), after he had healed a leper (Mark 1:45), after hearing about the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:13), after his followers had been involved in ministry (Matthew 14:23), and before he chose the disciples (Luke 6:12-16). At the end of his life he sought solitude in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36ff).

What makes solitude so important? John Ortberg says, "Solitude is the one place where we can gain freedom from the forces of society that will otherwise relentlessly mold us."<sup>ii</sup> Henri Nouwen describes solitude as "the furnace of transformation."<sup>iii</sup> If Jesus needed time to be with the Father, how much more do we need this time?

The first question people usually have when learning about solitude is: "What do we do during the time?" The best answer to this question is: "Nothing." While at first you might feel like this is a waste of time, allow these feelings to cause you to consider that your worth is not determined by you always needing to keep busy or be "doing" something. For many it is a temptation to take things with them such as books, tapes, a "to-do" list, your calendar, or even that project you've been meaning to get done. You might even be tempted to bring your laptop computer! One of the most important principles to grasp is that solitude is not about doing something . . . it is about *not* doing something. Richard Foster says: "What we must clearly understand and underscore is that our real task [in solitude] is to create a space in our lives where God can reach us. Once that space has been created we wait quietly, expectantly. From this point on, the work belongs to God."<sup>iv</sup>

In solitude, it is important to listen . . . to pay attention to what comes to you. Our desire is to hear Jesus, but there will be many voices. One of the greatest challenges of solitude is to sort through these "voices" and learn to put them aside so that we can hear Jesus. A first step here might be to identify these other voices and what it is they are saying. You might even take time to write these down. If you can identify the influence these voices are having on your life, you will have a much easier time moving beyond these influences to the voice of God.

There are many ways to build the practice of solitude into your life. These include regular alone times with God, preferably on a daily basis. It is good to plan special times maybe weekly or monthly where we can spend a few hours to a day in solitude. We also need periodic extended times, once or twice a year, where we can have several days. Don't worry if it is very difficult at first. It becomes easier or more natural each time you practice it. Like recovery from any sickness, healing takes time.

- Solitude rarely happens unless we schedule it. Therefore, the first step is to get out your calendar and schedule the time in. Determine where you might be able to spend some daily time in solitude. Schedule it just as you would an appointment. Then schedule a time where you can spend 4-6 hours alone. If possible, schedule several days where you can get away for an extended time sometime in the next 6 months.
- Think about where you feel most at peace. Some people like the beach, some like the mountains, some might be able to find it in their own back yard. It is important to note that it is usually very helpful to be out in nature, as long as weather permits. Write out several places where you might be able to spend some solitude time:
- Find a place this week where you can practice solitude in the midst of your work day. It might be finding a quiet, peaceful spot during the lunch hour. Experiment with this to see how God uses it in your life.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 161.

<sup>ii</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 89-90.

<sup>iii</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 13.

<sup>iv</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline Study Guide* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 45.

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## Silence

*"I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent."* – Arsenius

As we begin our journey of exploring various disciplines, it is important to grasp from the very start the truth that we are given a conversational relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus wants to speak to us! He will speak to us and we can learn to recognize his voice. This is why silence becomes so crucial. There are two aspects within this discipline. The first is to pursue silence as **the absence of noise**. Many of us are so used to living in noise that we are afraid of silence. We do whatever is necessary to avoid it. Dallas Willard says "silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life. . . Think what it says about the inward emptiness of our lives if we must *always* turn on the tape player or radio to make sure something is happening around us."<sup>i</sup> Silence helps us to cut through the voices and distractions of our noisy world and listen for God's "still small voice." It becomes rather obvious that if God's voice is "still" and "small" that we need to be both still and small in order to hear it. The best way to do this is through silence.

A second arena of this discipline is to practice the silence of **not speaking**. Silence is more easily practiced in solitude since it is more difficult to be silent in the presence of others. The Bible's admonitions about the tongue are important to consider here. James says: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (James 1:26). Then a little later on he says, "Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." (James 3:5-6).

The discipline of silence is one of three foundational disciplines in addition to solitude and prayer. Henri Nouwen has said,

*Clearly silence is a discipline needed in many different situations: in teaching and learning, in preaching and worship, in visiting and counseling. Silence is a very concrete, practical, and useful discipline in all our ministerial tasks. It can be seen as a portable cell taken with us from the solitary place to the midst of our ministry. Silence is solitude practiced in action.*<sup>ii</sup>

Listening is very important to the discipline of silence. You must pay attention. You must want to hear. This will not come easy for most, so you must persist with this. We often use our ears not to hear, but to sort. We listen merely to identify what is coming that we do not want to hear. Many people only hear what they assume is what they have always heard. Listening through the discipline of silence must get beyond these tendencies.

- If you want to learn the value of silence, how to recognize God's voice, and how to distinguish God's voice from the voices of others, begin by asking God to teach you about this. It is important to persist with this discipline, especially if your mind is racing. It often takes awhile for our minds to quiet down.
- To assist you in cultivating quietness, there are several practices you can experiment with. One is the devotional use of Scripture. Take a verse, such as Psalm 23:1, and repeat it silently. As you repeat it many times, emphasize different parts of the verse and let this speak to you.
- An exercise that might be helpful encourages us to listen more deeply to our surroundings. Start by sitting quietly, listening to your breathing. Then enlarge your listening to include the room you are sitting in. Slowly listen for sounds coming from other places in the building you are in. Then include the sounds outside such as birds, traffic, a lawnmower, etc. By extending the range of your listening in this way, your mind can become less obsessed with particular concerns and more sensitive to the space in which all sounds are happening.<sup>iii</sup>
- You might attempt to spend a day using as few words as possible, and complete silence if possible. It is best to do this without telling anyone what you are doing. As you go through your day, take note of tendencies such as desiring to fill empty space with talking, how being silent aids you in listening, etc. At the end of your day you might find it helpful to write down what you observed and learned.
- If it is difficult for you to find a place of silence in the midst of your daily work and family life, you might consider getting up in the middle of the night for a short period of time.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 163.

<sup>ii</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 30.

<sup>iii</sup> Roger Housden, *Retreat – Time Apart for Silence & Solitude* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 5.

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## Fasting

Fasting is the practice of abstaining from food, or both food and drink, for a specified period of time. While fasting is often practiced for physical reasons, the practice of fasting as a discipline is primarily for spiritual reasons. There will possibly be physical benefits, but this is not the motivation in pursuing the discipline.

Fasting is a discipline that teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly. It helps us to see our longing for and preoccupation with food. It will indicate to some how food can be used to cover up or anesthetize feelings. It will show you how powerful your body is in seeking to fulfill its desires. Many profound and insightful lessons come out of fasting.

Fasting has a unique way of turning our eyes on God. Dallas Willard says, "Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food."<sup>1</sup> This is why fasting can be very significant when combined with intense or extended periods of prayer.

Fasting is one of the best ways to practice the self-denial that Jesus expected of his followers – "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" (Matthew 16:24).

- Whenever we practice spiritual disciplines, it may be helpful to consider the interrelationship between them when practiced in combination. For example, solitude and fasting get at the same need. Some combinations may be too much to handle. In this module, fasting has been combined with celebration for a very specific reason: if we cannot celebrate, we should not fast. If we cannot celebrate, our fasting might be too painful. So as you attempt to practice these disciplines, think about how you might practice them in relationship to each other.
- Spend some time reading Isaiah 58. In your disciplines journal write down some characteristics of true fasting that you learn from this passage.
- You might begin to explore fasting by skipping a meal and dedicating the time and money saved to God in some way.
- A typical fast may last 24 hours without food. Many people like to use juice and water. It is often convenient to fast after breakfast until breakfast the next day.
- If you have some experience in fasting, you might consider trying a fast for several days or more. The purpose should not be the length of time, but what you desire God to do in your life during the time.
- If you have any physical or medical issues, be sure to consult your doctor before fasting. It is usually helpful to do some reading and research as well about the potential effects fasting will have on your body. A good rule of thumb is to start small and increase the amount of time with experience. Also, listen for God's prompting regarding if and when to fast.
- In addition to food, you might want to expand this discipline into other areas of life. Some examples of other kinds of fasts might be television, shopping, exercise, etc. Spend some time thinking through anything in your life that you might have become too dependent on. This is fair game for the discipline of fasting.

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 166.

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## Secrecy

*“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” – Matthew 6:6*

In the discipline of secrecy we do not allow our good deeds or qualities to be known by others. The goal is to be involved in ministry, or some form of giving of ourselves, without others knowing what we are doing.

The practice of this discipline will have many powerful results in our life. It teaches us to be secure in only God knowing what we are doing. This security makes us less dependent on the thoughts or approval of others. Dallas Willard says, “as we practice this discipline, we learn to love to be unknown and even to accept misunderstanding without the loss of our peace, joy, or purpose.”<sup>i</sup>

People pleasing, or what is sometimes called approval addiction, is a major problem in the church today. John Ortberg describes this addiction more fully:

*Some people live in bondage to what others think of them. The addiction takes many forms. If we find ourselves often getting hurt by what others say about us, by people expressing other than glowing opinions about us, we probably have it. If we habitually compare ourselves with other people, if we find ourselves getting competitive in the most ordinary situations, we probably have it. If we live with a nagging sense that we aren't important enough or special enough, or we get envious of another's success, we probably have it. If we keep trying to impress important people, we probably have it. If we are worried that someone might think ill of us should he or she find out we are an approval addict, we probably are.*<sup>ii</sup>

The discipline of secrecy is a vaccine that targets this pervasive disease. It helps us build our security in what God thinks of us, rather than what others think of us.

There is a lot of hiding that goes on in God's world. Isaiah speaks of God as a “hidden God.” In the ultimate sense, if God were not hidden, human life could not go on. The Bible is an objective witness to things that do not happen every day. God is hidden and his people are hidden. The discipline of secrecy is a discipline of hiddenness.

- One of the easiest ways to practice this discipline is to do something kind for someone anonymously. You might send someone in need some money. You can also buy something for them and have it delivered. The key is to be sure that they do not know who is doing it.
- Another way to practice this discipline is to participate in some form of ministry without telling anyone what you have done. You might choose to visit a rescue mission or a convalescent hospital, just to be with people who are hurting. After you have given of yourself this way, be sure that no one finds out what you have done.
- A more difficult assignment is to secretly do something kind for someone who has recently criticized you or excelled beyond you. This will directly attack the presence of any approval addiction.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 172.

<sup>ii</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 152.



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## Simplicity

*“God made man simple; man’s complex problems are of his own devising.” – Ecclesiastes 7:29 (Jerusalem Bible)*

Simplicity is one of the most beautiful disciplines, because it helps us to make space in our lives for other disciplines and graces of God. Richard Foster has summarized it well: “Simplicity is freedom.”<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard says simplicity is “the arrangement of life around a few consistent purposes, explicitly excluding what is not necessary to human well-being.”<sup>ii</sup> Simplicity goes far beyond the concept of money or material possessions to our attitudes and perspectives about everything we “own” and all we do.

So how does one practice simplicity in the daily decisions of life? Decisions like: Where do we eat dinner? What do we do with our free time? Where do I buy new clothes? What do I have that I do not need? What activities am I involved in that I could say “no” to? Two of the best places to start practicing simplicity are our *closets* and our *calendars*. So you might want to try cleaning out your closet (or house for that matter). Enjoy the feeling of giving things away (or throwing things away!). Feel deeply the freedom that comes from having less stuff to be responsible for. Then attack your calendar with an eraser (or the “delete” key). Eliminate all unnecessary appointments and obligations, and make a commitment to only add the most important priorities in your life to your calendar.

- Consider having a “Simplicity Garage Sale.” Go through your home with the mindset of practicing simplicity. Sell anything that will help your life to be less complicated and more simple. Call a local charity to donate whatever is left over from the garage sale.
- As you go through an average day, ask yourself the question: “What can I change that will make my life more simple? Think about the places you go, the transportation you use, the way you eat, what you watch, what you buy, how you spend your free time, and anything else that comes to mind. Whenever you can eliminate something that will make your life more simple . . . give it a try.
- Spend a day without using any modern technological devices. See if this helps you live more simply. You might want to journal your thoughts and experiences.
- Review your financial budget with a priority of assisting poor and needy people around the world.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 69.

<sup>ii</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 170.

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## Frugality

*“Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.” – Ecclesiastes 5:10*

Dallas Willard says,

*In frugality we abstain from using money or goods at our disposal in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hunger for status, glamour, or luxury. Practicing frugality means we stay within the bounds of what general good judgment would designate as necessary for the kind of life to which God has led us.<sup>1</sup>*

The discipline of frugality is different than the discipline of sacrifice in that sacrifice involves abstaining from what is *necessary* for living, while frugality involves abstaining from what is *extra*. While it is also similar to the discipline of simplicity, it is different in that it specifically involves the area of money, finances, debt, possessions, etc.

- Read Romans 13:8. Financial debt is a bondage directly addressed by the discipline of frugality. Take some time to examine your personal financial situation. If you have outstanding financial debt other than a home mortgage, determine a strategy to pay this off as soon as possible. If you struggle with the use of credit cards, you may want to consider either not using them or getting rid of them. You might consider sharing your commitment in this area with your community so that they might hold you accountable.
- Review your spending habits of the past few months. With a highlighter or pen, mark those expenditures which are not necessary for living. Of these items, which might you choose to eliminate in order to help you practice the discipline of frugality? Write these items below.
- Many times in order to pass along something to others, it requires some kind of giving on our part. What are some ways that the practice of frugality will assist you in a commitment to reproduction? List some ways you can use whatever resources you have so that others can learn to make space for God and grow as disciples in the kingdom of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 168.

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## Chastity

*“Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” – 1 Corinthians 7:5*

The name of this discipline does not specifically describe what it is. In the discipline of chastity, “we purposefully turn away from dwelling upon or engaging in the sexual dimension of our relationships to others – even our husbands or wives.”<sup>i</sup> As the discipline of fasting deals with the hunger drive, chastity deals with the sexual drive. Actually, chastity is the result of experiencing the discipline.

Sexuality is a huge part of our culture today. Sexuality also reaches deeply into the essence of who we are as humans. Because of this, it often has a huge control over us. Therefore, the goal of chastity is not to eliminate or escape sexuality, but rather to help us learn to control it rather than it controlling us.

- If you are married, one of the simplest ways to partake of this discipline is to discuss with your spouse a period of time that you will refrain from sexual relations. Then, purposefully use this time for prayer or ministry to others.
- A very profitable way to exercise this discipline is to consciously abstain from any sexually related thoughts or actions. Choose a period of time wherein you will follow this commitment.
- Spend some time meditating on Matthew 5:27-28. Write out a list of ways that you are guilty of what Jesus describes as “adultery.” Purposefully commit to change in these areas.
- If you struggle with any form of sexually oriented material, take some time to eliminate these stumbling blocks from your life. Allow God’s grace and love to permeate those areas of insecurity and escape. You might even consider sharing this with your community or another member from your community.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 170.

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## Sacrifice

*“The cautious faith that never saws off the limb on which it is sitting never learns that unattached limbs may find strange, unaccountable ways of not falling.” – Dallas Willard*

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is filled with examples of sacrifice. For hundreds of years, sacrifices were required for the forgiveness of sins and the worship of God. Today, this type of sacrifice is no longer required, but there is still something very valuable in the concept of sacrifice.

The discipline of sacrifice involves abstaining from the possession or enjoyment of those things that are necessary for living. Dallas Willard says, “The discipline of sacrifice is one in which we forsake the security of meeting our needs with what is in our hands. It is total abandonment to God, a stepping into the darkened abyss in the faith and hope that God will bear us up.”<sup>i</sup>

- Read Genesis 22:1-19. What do you learn about sacrifice from this story? What are the things that would be hardest for you to live without?
- Read and meditate on Luke 21:2-4. What do you learn about sacrifice from this story? What might be an equivalent sacrifice in your life that would be similar to what the widow did?
- Choose something necessary in your life that you will go without for at least a week.
- Identify your favorite charity and write a check for whatever amount you have remaining in your check book. Trust God to meet your needs for the rest of the month.
- Pick a material item that you use a lot and feel you need. Give it away to someone who needs it more than you do.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 175.

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## Submission

*“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” – Ephesians 5:21*

Dallas Willard says, “In submission we engage the experience of those in our fellowship who are qualified to direct our efforts in growth and who then add the weight of their wise authority on the side of our willing spirit to help us do the things we would like to do and refrain from the things we don’t want to do.”<sup>i</sup>

Richard Foster points out that of all the spiritual disciplines, submission is the one that has been most abused. In many churches, submission has been a controversial topic where power and authority are abused. Submission can be abused in leadership. Submission can be abused in marriage. Therefore, it is crucial to see that the Bible teaches mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21 and Philippians 2:3). The discipline of submission involves the practice of one *freely* submitting himself to the wisdom and guidance of another.

- Create a list of people in your life who you respect because of their wisdom and maturity. These are an ideal place to start in your practice of the discipline of submission.
- Without telling him or her, practice submitting to your spouse in a way that you might not normally.
- In your place of work, when asked to do something that you might usually disagree about or argue with, say nothing and submit to the request that has been made.
- If you have a spiritual director, ask him or her to identify an area of your life where you need to practice submission. Submit to whatever it is you are told.
- Ask your Journey Community or another group to identify an area of needed change in your life. Without arguing or justifying, do what they say.

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<sup>i</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 190.