

The Major Disciplines of the Christian Life
Messages given at the First Baptist Church of Bonham
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Part I

Introduction: We live in an undisciplined age. The United States in the last thirty years has given us many examples of this truth. The immorality of Bill Clinton, business profits at all costs, the Enron scandal, our inability to say no to drugs, the scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, moral compromises in the Protestant churches, and the national crusade for an “anything goes” morality.

Christians today seem to be following the example of an undisciplined culture. We need the strength of character that only comes from reviewing God’s purpose for our lives. Tonight I would like to examine God’s purpose for all Christians and to suggest how we can move toward achieving that purpose.

I. God’s purpose for Christians In Romans 8:29 Paul says that God has predestined Christians to be like Christ. I John 3:2 says that when Christ appears “we shall be like Him.” Clearly, God’s purpose for us is that we be Christlike. Colossians 1:22 says that Christ reconciled us to God to present us holy and unblameable in His sight. Early Christians said that God’s purpose for us was to develop a purity of heart; that is, they said that Christians should develop God’s unconditional *agape* love so that our hearts and minds become full of God’s concerns. This is what Christian thinkers call “Being” or “Becoming.” How do we become like Christ? It involves the heart of our spiritual relationship with God.

However, this relationship involves Doing. Paul tells us in I Tim. 4:7, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness. How do we achieve God’s purpose? Through Christian discipline. In the remainder of our time I want to review the first four important disciplines in the Christian life that promote spiritual growth. All of them have been practiced by God’s people since Biblical times. Their purpose is to help us develop purity of heart and mind. Next Sunday night we will look at four more of these spiritual disciplines.

II. The Disciplines of the Christian Life

A. Submission: First, we submit to the God who called us, who forgave our sins, who desires that we reflect His character. This attitude is called humility. In the Bible it is an attitude that gives God His proper place in our lives. I believe that this discipline is the heart of worship. It is the root discipline in our spiritual lives. It means that I sincerely acknowledge Who God is and that I willingly put

myself under His authority.

We demonstrate this attitude every time we pray sincerely, “Our Father, who is in Heaven. May Your name be set apart.” It means, “May Your character become part of our attitude and actions.” May our ministry as a church reflect Your fellowship and guidance in our hearts and minds. It represents our basic attitude toward our God, our Father, and Savior. It means that our hearts are open to enjoying fellowship with Him as well as receiving guidance from Him.

This submission is a discipline. We only fool ourselves if we think that it is a one-time experience. There may have been a time when we first learned the submission taught in Romans 12:1-2. However, we only submitted our lives in a general way. As we walk with Him, He reveals locked rooms and closets that we have kept hidden from His steady gaze. George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis use the illustration that we are living houses. God comes in to rebuild our house. At first He stops the leaks in the roof and repairs the drains. However, He also starts knocking things out of place. He starts to build a new wing, and He adds an extra floor. Lewis says, “You thought that you were going to be made into a nice little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself (*Mere Christianity*, 205). Submission is an ongoing discipline, because the closet that we gave him last month or last year, we just took back because we did not like how He was handling the situation.

B. A second spiritual discipline is Study. As individual Christians we are told, “Study to show yourselves approved unto God, a workman who needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15). To know and serve Him properly, we must learn who God is and what He requires of us. The Bible is God’s message to mankind. It is the only authoritative message from God. It tells sinners how to be saved, and it tells saints how to live. However, we must pursue a consistent pattern of learning God’s revelation so that we may develop spiritual discernment (I Cor. 2). We must learn how Our Father thinks, and we must submit to His instruction. If we are properly submitted to the Lord in this area of our lives, we will have a teachable spirit. As we come to the Lord with open hearts, He will fill them with His truth and His concerns. We should open our Bibles expecting the Holy Spirit to speak to us. Our Communist students in Belarus confessed amazement that God’s book spoke to them.

However, to be a fruitful student of God’s word, we must have some regular plan of Bible reading. That plan depends a great deal on where we are in our Christian walk. I advise young Christians to begin their study of the Bible in the New Testament, perhaps with a reading of the gospel of Mark. We have to understand who Christ is and what He has done for us. We must learn and who we are in

Christ, and who the Holy Spirit is and how He guides us. The Spirit will sometimes prompt us to examine a part of the Bible that relates to His will for our lives or to some problem that we are facing. The point that I am making is that this study takes time and energy. We must take time out of our schedules to answer basic questions: What does the text say? What does it mean? What does it mean to me? He will guide us toward the study of a passage that we need to understand.

Also there are resources that will help us at whatever level we happen to be. I believe that our churches should make available good books for growing Christians.

Sima Tupong was my language teacher in Indonesia. When he was a smuggler, someone gave him a biography of Martin Luther. He read it until he came to Luther's conversion by reading Romans 1:17, "The just shall live by faith." Then he obtained a Bible, began to read the book of Romans, and came to know the Lord. Giving books to others is a real ministry.

C. A third discipline is Confession: If we have true humility, and we study God's word, we see the areas of our lives where we are not what He wants us to be. His word holds up His righteous standard as a mirror, and we see that we have fallen short of it. James 1:22-24 says, **"Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, misleading yourselves. Because a person who is a hearer of the word and not a doer is like a person who perceives his birth face in a mirror, and goes away and immediately forgets what sort of person he was. However, the one who has looked into the perfect law of freedom and remains looking at it, is not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this one shall be blessed in the doing of it."** As we see ourselves reflected in God's word, we must confess to Him our sins, stupidities, and shortcomings (I Jn. 1:9). We should ask for His grace to cleanse us, to transform our minds (Rom. 12:2), so that we act the way He would act in specific situations (I Cor. 2:18). This action is a discipline. Every time we read the Bible or hear a sermon, or hear someone's testimony, we must ask the Holy Spirit to show us how this truth relates to us.

This truth also applies to our other relationships. Jesus said that when a person came to the altar to give a gift to the Lord, and he remembered that a brother had something against him, he should leave the gift at the altar, and go and be reconciled with his brother. We do not show the character of God when we are at cross purposes with one another. If we have offended someone by word or deed, we have a spiritual obligation to go and confess our part in the disagreement or argument or whatever we want to call it. If we want a new beginning at the First Baptist Church of Bonham, some of us or all of us may need to practice this discipline. How long has it been since we have said to a spouse or a child or a

friend, “I’m sorry. What I said was wrong, or what I did was wrong. I see that I have offended you. Please forgive me.”

D. A fourth discipline is Prayer. Another discipline is prayer. Brother Bill Beasley and I have addressed this topic in our prayer meetings this month. For over 2,000 years consistent Christians have set aside a daily time to adore, praise, thank, and make requests to God. There has been a lot of debate about this subject, because some folks have insisted that everyone should pray the way they do: 2 hours a day, 5:00 in the morning, or in a certain bodily position. I believe the goal for an earnest Christian is to pray without ceasing--to be so aware of spiritual matters that any event in our day can be a reminder to pray for someone. Proverbs 15:8 says, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is His delight.”

Prayer, however, is a discipline. It takes an intentional effort to have conversation with God. In tough times, our children and grandchildren will remember our prayers with them and for them, or our lack of prayers. Many people have a regular time of prayer. For some of us it is in the morning before the day dumps its load of cares on us. For others, it comes at night at the end of a day’s load of concerns. My friend Oleg in Belarus remembered his grandmother’s prayers at a crisis point in his adult life, and he went to church and heard the word of God and came to know Christ.

Conclusion: These are what I think are the four most important Christian disciplines for our Christian lives. They insist that we give God our Heavenly Father His proper place in our lives. They demand that we submit to Him as our Creator and Redeemer, as well as our Father and Protector. They encourage us to study God’s truth to help us produce God’s character in our lives as we grow into the image of Christ. They tell us to present all kinds of prayers to the One who loved us while we were yet sinners in rebellion against Him. As we develop these disciplines, we will be examples of truth to our families, our friends, and to the watching world around. In addition, we will be well pleasing to our Heavenly Father.

Part II

Introduction: Last week we discussed 4 of the most important disciplines of the Christian life. Tonight we continue with another 4. Disciplines are related to the word “disciple.” They are what the disciple should practice to become what the Master wants to achieve in his or her life. Proverbs 12:1 says, “He who loves discipline loves knowledge, But he who hates reproof is stupid.” Knowledge is about what is true, what is real. The disciplines of God are His means for bringing His

children into a closer relationship with Him. They are His appointed way to develop Christlikeness in our lives.

E. Let's consider the discipline of Love: There are three words for "love" in the New Testament: *eros* for sexual love, *phileo* for "liking" or friendship love, and *agape* for unconditional love. This word is used in the New Testament for God's love. John says that "God loved the world so much that He gave His only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life." God loves the world, but He hates what the world does, and one day He will judge the world for its thoughts and deeds. His *agape* love has caused Him to provide human beings with a way of escaping the final judgment and demonstrating His presence in the world.

This love does not have to be earned. It is expressed in mercy and grace. When we accept His forgiveness of our sins through repentance and faith in Christ, He adopts us as His children. We have peace with Him, and He puts His unconditional love into our hearts through the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is part of our position in Christ.

As redeemed people, we have an obligation to love Him unconditionally. He first loved us. He desires the best for each of us. At the same time, we do not naturally love Him. The first evidence of our sinfulness is that we love ourselves more than we love God. Loving God is desiring His presence and wanting His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. So God's plan of salvation involves living a life that shows His character. I John 4:16 says, "God is Love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." Thus, love should be a natural part of our Christian lives.

God says that this unconditional love should be demonstrated among every community of believers. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 13:8, "Owe no person anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the Law." He says in Galatians 6:10, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." Paul also says in Ephesians 5:1-2, "Therefore, be imitators of God, as dear children, and walk in love, as Christ has also loved us and gave Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. The Apostle John gives a startling statement in I John 3:14; "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death." He goes on to say, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth, and by this we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before Him" (I Jn. 3:18). So the expression of God's unconditional love should be a natural part of the Christian life. Why is it a discipline? Why do we have to work so hard at demonstrating unconditional love in our lives?

1. Because our culture is confused about love. Our language shows this confusion. We say that we love our dogs, our cats, our cars, our dolls, our homes, our

gardens. We had the “free love” movement in the 1960’s. We had the women’s lib movement saying that women do not need a man’s love. We had the existentialist movement claiming that there is no such thing as love. In one of the books that I have read this summer, a woman said, “No one should have to die without being loved.” She said that she grew up with fighting parents who each tried to manipulate her, high school classmates who rejected her or used her as a pawn in their various plots. On the verge of middle age, she feels that no one in her life has ever loved her.

2. It is a discipline because loving God or my Christian brothers and sisters unconditionally is not easy when I am walking in the flesh. Someone has said,

“To live in love with saints above,
Oh that will be glory;
But to live in love with saints below--
Now that’s another story.”

Loving others unconditionally is not easy because it is a basic spiritual choice that goes against my selfish nature. I have to believe that God’s will is better than my will. I have to allow God’s love to penetrate my heart so that I can choose to want God’s best for my neighbor, which includes fellow Christians. The beginning point in actual living is to treat others with respect. That is easier for some of us because we were reared in a Christian family where this kind of love was generally modeled by at least one of our parents. For others, it is far more difficult, because they have never seen a consistent example of unconditional love.

3. Living out *agape* love is a discipline because we want to make it conditional. We try to make deals with God. We tell God, “I’ll do what You tell me if You will do X for me. Jesus tells us that His children should love their neighbor as themselves (Matt. 19:19). He does not say, “I command you to like your neighbor.” It is a matter of the will, not of our feelings. He is telling us to wish for, indeed to work for, our neighbor’s best good. Now we sometimes have a fondness for a particular type of personality. We feel drawn to this type of person. Then there are other types of personalities that we do not like. For instance, some people seem to have a “cold” temperament. However, that is often the person’s nature; it is no more a sin that having a cold would be a sin. My responsibility is desire the best for this person, to pray for this person. As I begin to do what God says that I should do, I sometimes find that I begin to like the person. Perhaps I begin to have conversations with the person, and I find out why this person sometimes acts the way he or she does. I begin to understand the person as an individual. Often what I like says more about me than it does about the other person.

4. Living out *agape* love is a discipline because of the fact that our neighbor sometimes includes our enemies. Christ says in Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who

spitefully use you and persecute you.” He later said, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15). C. S. Lewis says that he used to wonder how a person could hate what a person did, but love the person. Then years later he realized that he had been doing this to himself for years. He said, “However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact the very reason I hated the things was that I loved the man” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity* 117).

5. Living out *agape* love is a discipline because love hurts. When Jesus existed in the framework of God’s existence, He came to earth to reconcile rebellious man to God. He became small, weak, lonely, rejected, despised, and dependent on the Father. When we practice God’s love we too become small, weak, lonely, rejected, despised, dependent on the Father. We want our Lord’s best for those around us, but they often do not want His best for us.

F. Closely connected to the discipline of love is the discipline of **SERVICE**. Serving is not just making a choice to want God’s best for someone; it is actually doing something for someone. Hebrews 9:14 says that Christ cleanses our conscience so that we may serve the living God.” Psalm 100:2 says “Serve the LORD with gladness.” God does not want His children to be idle; there is no spiritual unemployment agency or retirement program. Besides calling us His children, He also calls us His servants. However, two of our deadly sins, **pride and laziness**, hate to serve. We need this spiritual discipline because our natural nature will serve only when it is convenient, or when it brings glory or material advantage. John Newton once gave this illustration about serving God:

“If two angels were to receive at the same moment a commission from God, one to go down and rule earth’s grandest empire, the other to go and sweep the streets of its meanest village, it would be a matter of entire indifference to each which service fell to his lot, the post of ruler or scavenger; for the joy of the angel lies only in obedience to God’s will.” (Whitney, 112)

Why do we look around and see so many co-called Christians sitting on the sidelines or in the bleachers? Brethren, these things ought not to be this way. In I Corinthians 12 Paul says that when we are saved we are indwelt by the Spirit of God and that He bestows on each Christian at least one spiritual gift. We are all to be involved in the work of the ministry of His church. Peter says in I Peter 4:10, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”

You might say, “I do not know what my gift is.” Well, accept some regular assignment in this church and see if the Holy Spirit enables you to do it. We serve our Lord because we are grateful for His deliverance from a life headed for eternal hell and His gift of Himself at the core of our being. We serve the Lord because we are forgiven. We serve because

we are following Christ's example, not because we are looking for some kind of recognition or reward. Paul says in Galatians 5:13 that we are not to indulge our sinful nature, but we are to serve one another in love. Here is a merging of the discipline of submission and the discipline of love. The various disciplines work together. They are mutually interdependent.

G. Witness: A seventh discipline is bearing witness for our God and Savior. Some people say that we can do this without saying a word. There is truth in that statement. I have heard many testimonies saying that the person saw something in a Christian that did not exist anywhere else. Of course, it was the practice of unconditional love. It was a respect for others that included the unlovely, the alcoholic, the druggie, the outcast, the unloved. It was a light shining in the darkness of the lost person's life. In Hindu India the outcast caste is called the Dalits. They have been won to the Lord by the tens, and the hundreds of thousands. Their testimony is this: "Only the Christians love us."

However, the silent witness is only a beginning. One medieval writer once said, "Go into all the world and declare the Gospel to every person, **and when necessary, use words.**" When we were at Gaston Avenue Baptist Church, Ralph Neighbor held a series of special meetings to teach our church to give our personal testimonies to God's loving grace. There were three parts to his presentation:

- (1) What were you like before you met Christ?
- (2) How did you meet Him and accept His offer of salvation?
- (3) How has His presence in your heart made changes in your life?

He taught us that our personal testimony is evidence that our God is still interested in saving those who come to Him in repentance and faith. He recommended preparing a one-minute, a five-minute, and a 10-minute written testimony. He recommended memorizing it and being prepared to give it at the bus stop, on the telephone, in the bus station, or on the airplane.

Your testimony is the story of your relationship to God, our Creator and Savior, our Father and Teacher. There are always those to whom your testimony will carry weight. When the Holy Spirit prompts you to give it, He has prepared the situation for His glory. It is an expression of God's love for the person to whom you testify.

Acts 4:12 says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." This exclusive claim is an offense in the modern world, where absolute truth has been denied by the movers and shakers of our culture. We have to live in a way that sheds light into this culture. We have to earn the right to be heard. However, the moment comes when the unbeliever, perhaps in a moment of great crisis in his or her life, asks us to give a reason for the hope that the person sees in us--the light that shines into the darkness. We must be ready to give our witness in words, and that takes preparation

and discipline.

H. Patience: In the New Testament the most common Greek word for “patience” means “endurance.” What does our heavenly Father use to teach us the discipline of patience?

1. First, He uses **suffering** caused by distress or affliction or pressure on our lives. There are a number of passages that teach this truth:

Rom. 5:3-4, We glory in afflictions, knowing that affliction produces perseverance, and perseverance (produces) character, and character (produces) hope. Jesus told His disciples that in the world they would have affliction, but that they should rejoice because He had overcome the world. As Christ is us gives us peace in the pressures of life, we gain confidence in His victory over the world, which with patient endurance, we begin to experience in our own lives.

II Cor. 1:3-4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we are comforted by God.” Submission to affliction in the will of God gives us comfort from Him. Then we are prepared to share the Lord’s comfort with others in similar situations.

Heb. 12:1-2, “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that so easily besets us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” That besetting sin is unbelief: the attitude that the Lord does not care for us, that we are not accomplishing anything worthwhile, that the Holy Spirit is not using us. Lay us lay aside this attitude and thrust that the Lord will use us in our current unpleasant situation.

Jas. 1:2-3, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith works patience.” In other words, we are full of both virtues and vices. The afflictions that fall on all human beings and pressure them are God’s means of revealing Himself to the lost and refining the character of His children so that they develop a spiritual core in our being that helps us to become dependable vessels of His grace so that we may be worthy reflections of His character to other Christians and to the lost world around us.

2. Second, God uses **temptation** to build patient endurance into our lives.

Paul says in I Cor. 10:13, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” he

Lord always provides a way of escaping a given temptation; we simply need to exercise faith and look for the way out.

So patience is a discipline imposed by God on us to help us become like Christ. It comes as we submit to Him in the midst of trials, afflictions, tribulations, and temptations.

Conclusion: We must die daily. We must put aside our attraction to worldly matters. We must ask the Holy Spirit's aid in fostering our efforts at becoming spiritually disciplined. We can attempt undisciplined efforts at spiritual discipline, but they will fail without the consistent, purposeful practice of these disciplines in our lives. We may feel that these efforts will confine us or squelch our personalities. However, as we shift from self-centered decisions to decisions directed by the Spirit of God, we will live in the freedom of the truth.

As a mature pastor, John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace," once said, "I'm not what I want to be. I'm not what I should be. I'm not what I'm going to be. But, thank God, I'm not the man I once was." He could see progress in becoming like Christ. Am I living a disciplined life that is allowing God to remake my character in the image of Christ?

Part III

Introduction: We have previously discussed 8 of the most important disciplines of the Christian life. Tonight we continue with another 4. Disciplines are related to the word "disciple." They are what the disciple should practice to become what the Master wants to achieve in his or her life so that we become free to become like Christ in our character and our actions. Elton Trueblood has pointed this relationship: "The one who would be an athlete, but who is unwilling to discipline his body by regular exercise and abstinence, is not free to excel on the field or the track. His failure to train rigorously denied him the freedom to run with the desired speed and endurance. With one concerted voice, the giants of the devotional life apply the same principle to the whole of life: Discipline is the price of freedom" (Whitney 21). Tonight we will look at four more Christian disciplines.

I. First is the discipline of Silence: There are many kinds of silence. There is the silence of hatred where the mind plots revenge. There is the silence of ignorance, where we do not know how to answer. There is the silence of wonder, where even a word would shatter the appreciation of beauty, or the sacrifice of a deed of love. The discipline of silence comes from the wisdom of knowing when not to speak, for silence can be a betrayer of truth or justice. There are several aspects of this discipline.

1. Perhaps the highest fruit of this discipline is a silence as we sit quietly and listen for the voice of God. We must find a quiet place away from the television, the telephone,

the computer and Ipad, and all of the other sources of interruption and distraction in our lives. Our minds must be relaxed from the frantic business of our lives. We have to push out the thoughts of unfinished business and conflicts. We may have to push out carnal thoughts of discontent, anger, or confusion in order to enter into the presence of our Heavenly Father. We must intentionally offer ourselves to Him on the altar of submission. It is a holy hush that even angels admire. Edward H. Richards has written:

“A wise old owl sat on an oak.
The more he saw, the less he spoke.
The less he spoke, the more he heard.
Why aren't we like that wise old bird?”

2. It involves prayer before our God and Savior. Often we are wrestling with an issue, and we need to come aside and present it to Him. It involves submission to the Father's will. As I said before, the spiritual disciplines are interconnected. They involve a quieting of our hearts so that we may hear the voice of God. Sometimes fervent prayer opens our hearts to God's answer.

3. The silence before God also involves meditation. One of the curses of the New Age movement has been to discredit meditation as a Christian discipline. I believe that the devil often copies some good Christian activity and then twists it in his own direction. The devil's meditation is the emptying of a person's mind so that the meditator can create his or her own reality. The devil can simply introduce thoughts into the person's mind. Biblical meditation consists in filling our minds with God's truth and then chewing on it, much like a cow chews its cud. Philippians 4:8 teaches us: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is on good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your minds dwell on these things.”

Meditation is simply thinking carefully about God and His truth. In Joshua 1:8, the Lord said to Joshua about the revelation that Moses had written, “Do not let this book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you will be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” This is not prosperity theology. God is telling Joshua how to be spiritually prosperous and successful in his relationship with the Lord of Life. David in Psalm 39:3 said, “As I meditated, the fire burned.” This burning in the soul involves insight into God's truth and a desire to carry it out.

Perhaps the best known passage on meditation is Psalm 1, which begins: “Blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the path of sinners or sit in the seat of the scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.”

4. This discipline begins with the discipline of study, of prayer, of submission, of delight in God's revelation, of a spirit of acceptance of the teaching of the Holy Spirit. However, it moves into the absorption of God's truth into our daily lives so that we consistently live it. Proverbs 15:21 says, "Folly is joy to him that is destitute of wisdom, but a person of understanding walks uprightly." This discipline produces godly results in our minds and in our hearts. The burning in the soul warms to the reasonableness of God's truth, and the light of God's reason illuminates the sometimes irrational impulses of our hearts. As we continue this practice, we become spiritually mature people who walk uprightly.

J. Another discipline is the discipline of Fellowship: In church history some have promoted solitary religion. However, the Lord has called us to be part of a body of believers. Each member has at least one gift and at least one function assigned by God's plan for our lives. The basis of a Christian community is the submission to God of all of its members. Then we can serve each other in the body of Christ. Charles Ringma writes, "This service is meant to free others and empower them" (174). It leads to a community without paternalism and domination.

The author of Hebrews tells us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. **Fellowship means to share together what we have in common.** We need fellowship with God and with His people as a part of the process of becoming Christlike. We need to hear what the Lord is doing this week in our lives. It encourages us to keep on letting the Lord help us to deal with the hard parts of our lives. The person who is out every Sunday morning "being one with Nature" is not practicing Biblical Christianity. He or she is practicing an old Greek experience of enjoying the little part of an impersonal god that is in everything. It is an illustration of nature worship. A nineteenth-century American Romantic poet once wrote, "Nowhere is one closer to the heart of God than in a garden." But that is a lie. The heart of God is at the cross of His Son, offering grace to a sinful world. That grace is nurtured in the fellowship of believers who are submitted to their Lord. The Indian chief Tecumseh once said, "A single twig breaks; a bundle of twigs is strong."

There are a number of other verses that teach this same lesson:

Acts 2:42, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

I Cor. 1:9, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." The heart of what we share in common is the indwelling presence of the life of the Son of God, which Paul says is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

In the days of our youth, we were taught that all Roman Catholics were going to hell.

Remember? I remember the first Roman Catholic that I ever met. I had finished my first year of college, and I was told that there was a good living to be made selling *Colliers Encyclopedias*. So I was hired, and I learned my spiel. At one of the first houses I met a man who let me into the living room. We exchanged pleasantries, and I learned that he was a Baptist. When I began my spiel, he interrupted me, gave me my spiel, and told me that it was a blankety-blank pack of lies. He told me that it was a blankety-blank shame that a ministerial student would get involved in such a blankety-blank business, and he stormed out the door.

His wife had been listening from the door. She came into the room and began asking me questions about how to know that she was saved. She said that she was a Roman Catholic. So I took her through the “Romans Road,” and she said that she believed it all--that Christ was her Savior, but that she was afraid of losing her salvation. I asked her where she had learned these verses, and she said that her mother had taught them to her. Then we had a conversation about Jesus’ words in John 10: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.” She became teary and said, “That’s it,” and she thanked me. It was a defining moment in my life. I had met a saved Roman Catholic who had a cursing Baptist husband who did not act like a saved person. That was also my last night as a *Colliers Encyclopedia* salesman. I realized that the Lord had led me to that experience to see that there are fellow believers in other folds.

Eph. 3:8-9, “To me, who am the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things through Jesus Christ.” We have fellowship involving a great spiritual mystery: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” We have disagreements of interpretation with other kinds of Christians. We make our distinctions based on those interpretations. As we stand before God, however, the question will not be Catholicism or Protestantism, Calvinism or Arminianism, Pre-millennialism or Amillennialism. It will be whether we have accepted God’s only sacrifice for our sins.

Phil. 2: 1-2, “Therefore, if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”

K. The next discipline is Stewardship: Christlikeness comes from a consistent application of God’s word in our lives. Stewardship is the use proper management of what God gives us. Several important areas of life call for our attention:

1. We need Discipline in the use of time: God gives each of us the gift of time and specific responsibilities during that time. Everyone receives the same amount of time in a day, but some of us have far more responsibilities than others. The disciplined use

of time is a critical matter in our spiritual growth. In Ephesians 5:15-16, Paul says, "Therefore, be careful how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise ones, making the most of your time because the days are evil." In other words, Paul is saying that Christians should make the best use of the opportunities that God gives us, because the days are evil. Many--perhaps most--of the people are walking in darkness. The days are evil for them because life can be short and uncertain in an evil culture or a culture that glorifies violence. Or perhaps the evil days refer to persecution of Christians and limitations on our opportunities to witness. Rather than being foolish, we should understand what God's will is (Eph. 5: 17) and be filled with the Holy Spirit so that we can use the time wisely (Eph. 5:18). There is a short poem that makes this same point: **"Time goes, you say? Ah, no. Alas, time stays; we go."** Christians should live their lives in view of eternity. The time of our earthly influence is passing. In the rest of this section of Ephesians, Paul stresses that under the control of the Holy Spirit we should submit to one another in our personal relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, servants and masters. We must use the time wisely, because all of our relationships are passing away, and we should grow in our relationship with the Lord as we relate to others.

2. We also need Discipline in the Stewardship of material resources: A great many verses in the Bible concern the believer's use of material resources. Our use of these resources is a testimony to those around us of our spiritual maturity. Donald Whitney makes this point in his excellent book, *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christian Life*:

"Because we invest most of our days working in exchange for money, there is a very real sense in which our money represents *us*. Therefore, how we use it expresses who we are, what our priorities are, and what's in our hearts. As we use our money and resources Christianly, we prove our growth in Christ likeness" (134).

In Job 41:11 the LORD says, "Everything under heaven belongs to me." Our culture denies this truth by denying the existence of a Creator. Christians are simply temporary managers of what He gives to them. In Philippians 4:18 Paul argues that the financial gift that the church sent to Paul to support his ministry was actually an act of worship toward God. Giving to God's work is an evidence of faith in God's provision for our needs. In Luke 16:10-13 Jesus seems to be saying that our stewardship of material matters reflects spiritual trustworthiness (Whitney 135, 139).

Many of us believe that 10 per cent is the minimum Biblical standard of giving to God. Others tell us that we are being legalistic when we teach tithing. It is true that there is no command to tithe in the New Testament. Paul teaches that Christians should give from the heart (II Cor. 9:7), cheerfully (II Cor. 9:7), as they prosper (I Cor. 16:2). He notes that for a special offering, the Macedonians gave with generosity beyond their normal ability to give (II Cor. 8:1-5).

There are even some Christians who speak of a discipline of generosity. I remember being struck by John Wesley's advice to the poor people who sat under his preaching: "Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can." In his later years he accepted no raise in salary; he continued to live on his usual salary and gave the rest away to those who needed it. Generosity is a discipline born of love and concern for others. It makes us save what we would spend on ourselves and hold it until we are prompted by God's Spirit to help lift up someone in great need. It is a reflection of the generosity of the One who pours mercy on us even before we pray. Proverbs 3: 27-28 says, "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it,' when you have it with you." Proverbs 19:17 says, "He who is gracious to a poor person lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his good deed." Proverbs 28:27 declares, "He who gives to the poor will not want, but he who shuts his eyes will have many curses." Robert Smith says that the true measure of a person is not what he does, but what he gives. There is an old epitaph that says, "What I gave, I have; what I spent, I had; and what I kept, I lost."

3. We need Discipline in the use of spiritual gifts: Our spiritual are divine gifts that enable us to serve the Lord in the ways that He directs. They enable us to serve the body of Christ and to witness to the lost world around us. They enable the Christian community to be unified in the tasks that the Lord God puts before us. We need practice in the use of our spiritual gifts. They are divine enablements that demonstrate His presence, His truth, and His direction to us as individuals, to our local congregation, and to the body of Christ at large. We need humility in the recognition of our gift. It comes by the grace of God to show us our function in the body of Christ. We need practice in the use of the gift so that we see the fruit of our labor. We need to recognize gifts that others exercise in our local body to see how God's gifts work together to accomplish His purposes in our congregation. Some gifts may be permanent; others may be temporary to help a church in a particular set of circumstances. I have seen people gifted in working with youth and later gifted in counseling adults, teaching in a Christian school, or pastoring a church.

Time, material resources, and spiritual gifts are treasures that God puts into our lives to serve Him for His glory. We need understanding, patience, and loving service as we manage them for the furthering of His work in the world and in His church.

Conclusion:

So, there are many good disciplines that help us to become Christlike. Dr. Martin-Lloyd Jones has said that the neglect of the discipline of the Christian life is the reason the contemporary church is in its present state. "I see no hope whatsoever of any true revival and reawakening until we return to it" (Whitney 125). The main purpose of God's will for us is that we become like Christ in our attitudes and actions. Let's seek

Him so that the His will can be the main purpose in our lives. **Read Colossians 3:12-17.**