

All Together Now (Corporate Disciplines)

James 5:13-20

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We've introduced spiritual disciplines that awaken and enhance our inner life—Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, and Study. Then outward disciplines that express God's presence in our lives—Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, and Service. Today we're considering "corporate disciplines": Confession, Worship, Guidance, and Celebration.

Christian discipleship isn't intended to be lived alone. The spiritual disciplines are for all of us together, not for isolated individuals. Disciplines *are* personal, and we each make our choice about practicing them. But they're best practiced in the context of community and the love, support, and accountability we find there. The four we're looking at today are especially intended to be practiced by all of us together. That's why Richard Foster calls them "corporate." However, we get to remain individuals. We're not absorbed into some big blob. So there is an individual aspect to these disciplines as well.

Before we move into the corporate disciplines, I want to highlight the interplay of *grace* and *discipline*. Foster writes about

...the path of disciplined grace. It is "grace" because it is free; it is "disciplined" because there is something for us to do. ...The grace of God is unearned and unearnable, but if we ever expect to grow in grace, we must pay the price of a consciously chosen course of action which involves both individual and group life. Spiritual growth is the purpose of the Disciplines (*Celebration of Discipline* 7-8).

Dallas Willard expresses the same idea this way: "[I]t is crucial to realize that grace is not opposed to effort, but to earning. Earning is an attitude; effort is action. Without effort, we would be nowhere" ("Kingdom Living," *Renewing the Christian Mind* 229).

The first of the corporate disciplines is *Confession*. The redemptive work of Jesus gives us confidence that confession and forgiveness can really transform us. The cross is the center of our attention in confession. We make confession in the light of the cross and we're assured of forgiveness because of what Jesus did for us at the cross.

Confession involves both grace and discipline. God gives grace so that we can genuinely and truthfully confess our sins. And there's the need for us to confess, to agree with God concerning our sin. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9).

Confession is both individual and corporate. We can each approach God ourselves through Jesus. 1 Timothy 2:5-6 says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all people." Because of the priesthood of all believers, we can each confess our own sins to God and we can each pray for ourselves to God.

Our common priesthood also calls us to pray for each other. There are times when we may need to confess to another person and let that person remind us that we're forgiven. As we read in James 5:16, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other...." This is in the closing section of James' letter and he's calling the church to help each other live out the things he's been writing about. He goes on to assure us about the reality of forgiveness and healing through confession and prayer. He closes this section (and the letter) with a reminder that bringing back someone who's wandering from God rescues the person and covers a multitude of sins or prevents "an epidemic of wandering away from God" (*The Message*).

That verse about confessing our sins to each other has always been kind of threatening to me. There're some things in my life that I'd rather not tell other people. But we need the kind of fellowship where we can recognize that we're all sinners and so we know we're not alone in our sin. That way we don't judge and look down on each other, but we love and encourage each other and share God's forgiveness together.

Thinking about this some time ago, I had an email exchange with one of my college chaplains, Bob Stamps. He stressed the balance between private confession and public confession—that is, confession to a mentor or spiritual director, some trusted person in our life. The early Methodists practiced that kind of openness in small groups.

Bob goes on:

I also think we should not harp on sin too much. Salvation isn't by the "ice pick" digging around in the human heart for undiscovered sins. We never get to the end of it! ...I just pray the prayers of the church every day. I don't worry about digging up all my sins, lest I become discouraged or overwhelmed. I pray a general confession every day from *The Book of Common Prayer* and that's it. When there is a particular sin that is hurting me especially, I know how to confess that and implore God to defeat it in me.

There's a balance to strike here. Sometimes we need to be jolted awake because sin has put us to sleep or hardened our hearts so that we're insensitive to it. We may deny and cover up some sin for so long we can hardly admit it's there. Other times we need gentleness and compassion because we're oversensitive. We get so intent on singling out every sin that we stay focused on ourselves and we're always trying to identify something to confess. We may even make up stuff to confess.

Let's trust the grace of God. Yes, God wants to forgive and cleanse and purify us. But we don't have to be converted all over every time we sin. It's like when Jesus was washing Peter's feet and said, "You've been made clean. You don't need another bath, you just need your feet cleaned from present sin, including running out on me later tonight." God holds us in the embrace of grace. When we're struggling with guilt and shame over something we've done or said or failed to do or say, we can fall into the grace of God and know we are held there.

If you need help confessing and receiving forgiveness, there are several prayers of confession in our hymnal. We normally use one when we celebrate Communion. We make a corporate confession and hear words of

pardon. You can also personalize those confessions—just say “I” instead of “we.” There’s one on page 8 and another on page 26. Numbers 890-893 are all prayers of confession.

Confession and forgiveness are important for community, for genuine fellowship. We try to tolerate each other’s weaknesses and flaws and help each other grow. But when we start getting close to each other, we may bump into each other, we may step on each other. Sometimes in pain or frustration we lash out at another person. There will be bumps and bruises in our relationships. We make mistakes and use poor judgment. We sometimes speak when we should be quiet or we keep quiet when we should speak. We need forgiveness to deal with those wounds so they don’t get infected and spread illness all through the fellowship, the Body.

Worship is the next corporate discipline. In worship, we focus on God and declare God’s worth. God alone is worthy of honor and glory and praise and adoration. Also worship increases our awareness of God’s presence. That is faith, not feelings. Worship may produce any number of feelings in us, but the goal of worship is to remind us that God is with us and to give us the opportunity to express love to God.

There are many forms of worship and there are many outward things that enhance our worship—music, setting, other people, posture, gestures, and certain words and phrases. These forms are not the worship, but they can lead us into worship.

We worship God only. We worship because of who God is and what God does.

Worship is a priority. Jesus said the *first* commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Matthew 22:37-38).

We need to prepare for worship and develop a “holy expectancy.” As we live each day we seek to be open to God, to listen for his voice and obey his word. Then, when we come into the place of worship, we’re ready. We want to live each day so that all we do becomes preparation for those times when we’re alone with God or when we gather together to adore him.

As you enter here, lift your heart in adoration to the King of Glory. Invite God to make his presence known. Pray for your pastors and other leaders. Find someone in the congregation and silently lift them to God in prayer.

Jesus Christ is our worship leader. He's alive and present among us in all his power and love.

Foster concludes, "Worship is not for the timid or the comfortable. It involves an opening of ourselves to the adventurous life of the Spirit."

Guidance is another corporate discipline. God does guide individuals, but he often uses the community of faith as part of that guidance. "The body of Christ has greater resources for discerning the mind of Christ than the individual has" (Tuttle).

Also, God wants to guide the community of his people, the church. Because we want to experience Spirit-directed unity, we submit to the rule of the Holy Spirit. Jesus talked about being present wherever his people are gathered in his name (Mt 18:20). The book of Acts records how the early church was guided by the Holy Spirit. In chapter 13 a local church, worshipping and fasting together, received the Spirit's guidance to send out Saul and Barnabas—and so launched a great missionary movement. In chapter 15 the church was trying to settle a dispute. After much debate and prayer, they finally could say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." Let's pray for that kind of unity in the Spirit and in being guided by the Spirit for this church.

I want us to come together in prayer for God's guidance for this church. Of course, each of us can pray for that on our own. But there's something about joining together in prayer. So, be on the lookout for an announcement of a First UMC prayer meeting. It'll be a time of praying for discernment, vision, and guidance.

The fourth corporate discipline is *Celebration*. This is at the heart of the way of Christ. Celebration gives strength to our lives. The path to joy is the way of obedience to Christ. God gives us joy in the ordinary times and

places of our lives. Jesus reaches into our work and play, redeems them, and gives us joy.

Our Scripture in James says, "Is anyone happy or cheerful? Then sing songs of praise." When forgiveness and freedom and new life and hope happen to us, we should be happy and celebrate.

Celebration saves us from taking ourselves too seriously. It's an antidote to the constricting and oppressive sadness that sometimes comes on us. Celebration gives us perspective. It frees us from an inflated view of our own importance and so frees us from a judgmental spirit. Celebration produces more celebration. It's contagious.

Have you ever tried to keep from laughing when you were supposed to be quiet? You feel the power of laughter then. Once when I was in college, the drama department put on "Hamlet." It's one of Shakespeare's great tragic plays. There's not much happiness or celebration in it. They did this performance on a small stage and set up chairs on three sides so the audience could be close to the action. The chairs were on risers about four rows high. I was sitting next to a friend of mine on the front row and another friend of ours was sitting across from us.

At one particularly dramatic moment, we heard a crash behind us. Obviously a chair had fallen off the top row. The play was still going on and we couldn't turn and look. A few minutes later, we heard some more noise from the top row and then another crash. It was all we could do to keep from laughing out loud. But the actors were bravely carrying on, so we stifled our laughter until our sides ached. We looked across at our friend who could see what was going on behind us and he was clutching his side and almost doubled over.

Finally the play was over and we found out what had happened. There was a guy sitting on the top row who moved over to another chair. He leaned back and fell off the riser. After getting the chair back up and then climbing up himself, he sat down, leaned back and fell off again. He wasn't hurt, so we felt free to laugh.

Celebration says go ahead and laugh—not at people's misfortune—but at the goodness of God, at ourselves, for the sheer joy of being alive in God's world. For the forgiveness of our sins. For Jesus' resurrection victory.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Go ahead and sing for joy. Go ahead and celebrate.

Right now, maybe you need to confess something to God and receive God's grace and forgiveness. Maybe you need to share forgiveness with someone else. You may simply want to worship and adore God for who he is and all he means to you. Maybe you're seeking God's guidance for some area of your life or some decision. Don't wait to discover God's will and then decide if you'll do it. Commit yourself to doing God's will no matter what. And begin to do what you already know God wants you to do. Finally, let's celebrate Jesus. We have to have some way of celebrating, rejoicing, showing our joy. "If you're happy and you know it"—do something. Notify your face. Sing songs of joy. Do something to show that God's grace is real to you, that you're forgiven and free and alive in Jesus.