

Keep in Step with the Spirit: Inward Disciplines

Galatians 5:22-26

John Breon

Some parents were in the stands watching the marching band's performance. Their son was in the band. The proud father turned to his wife and said, "Look! All those kids are out of step except for Junior!"

Paul says to "keep in step with the Spirit." In Galatians 5 we've seen that we're to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit (Christ's character), walk by the Spirit, and *keep in step with the Spirit*. God's Spirit has brought us into new life, now we're learning to walk in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us life in Christ and energizes us to walk, to live in the way of Christ.

We can mix metaphors a bit and see that life in Christ involves training and discipline like with athletes or soldiers. It includes walking and keeping in step with the Holy Spirit. And it's like farming or gardening. Life in Christ is growing and dynamic. We continue to put our roots down deep in the life of Christ. The Holy Spirit's influence in us grows, producing Christ-like qualities in our lives. God leads and enables us to practice virtues that demonstrate character, the character of Christ.

Here in Galatians 5, Paul mentions the fruit of the Spirit. We're exploring some ways to give the Holy Spirit the climate and environment to grow that fruit in us. These are actions, activities, and attitudes that are part of the environment for spiritual growth. They're ways to cultivate life in Christ and the growing fruit of the Spirit. "In the garden of obedience the fruit of the Spirit will grow" (Jim Buskirk).

The specific ways of promoting spiritual growth we want to examine are called the Spiritual Disciplines. As *disciples* of Jesus Christ, we're called to a *disciplined* life. Many Christians have discovered particular disciplines or practices that enable them to grow in their experience of God's grace, their commitment to Christ, and their living as God's people in the world.

Forty years ago, Richard Foster published *Celebration of Discipline*. It's recently come out in an anniversary edition. Foster lays out twelve classic disciplines and introduces or re-introduces modern Christians to the practice of the disciplines.

The goal of practicing Spiritual Disciplines is to grow in Christ. We don't want to be weighed down with a bunch of legalistic requirements and duties. We aren't trying to earn God's favor. Grace is opposed to earning; it's not opposed to effort. Having received God's grace, we want to grow in grace. We want to use what God has given to help us grow. We want our lives to be shaped and formed by Jesus who dwells in us by the Holy Spirit. Foster uses the term "means of grace" to describe these disciplines (*Celebration 7*). John Wesley saw the need for us to use the means of grace God provides to help us be open to grace, receive grace, and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

"Spiritual Formation" is the term many people use to describe this whole process. In various places, Paul writes about Christ being *formed* in us (Gal 4:19), our being *conformed* to Christ's image (Rom 8:29), and the Holy Spirit *transforming* us into the Lord's image (2 Cor 3:18).

We're going to be sharing ideas about how to remain open to the influence of God's Spirit and how to allow the Spirit to work in and through our actions, attitudes, thoughts and relationships so that Christ's life will be expressed in our lives.

Foster begins with what he calls the "inward disciplines": Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, and Study. These work together and support each other to develop our inner life.

Meditation

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Ps 19:14). In Psalm 119:97 we find, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long."

Meditating means considering or reflecting on something we've seen or heard or read. As a spiritual discipline, meditation is a form of prayer. It's a way to get focused and to develop the ability to listen to God and obey God's word.

In some religions, meditation is used to empty the mind. Christian meditation is a process of filling the mind. We meditate on Scripture. One way to do that is to use our imagination to get into the Bible story and see

it come alive in our lives. We can meditate on God's creation, allowing the heavens to declare God's glory to us (Ps 19:1). We can meditate on who God is—his wonder and majesty, holiness and love. We might meditate on the events of our time and try to grasp their significance.

The Quakers have a practice they call "centering down." This is getting quiet in God's presence, allowing our mind to focus, listening, and waiting on God. Foster suggests a technique for doing this: Place your hands "palms down" in front of you—a symbol of surrender—and give to God your anxiety, questions, thoughts, struggles, yourself. "Lord, I give you my resentment toward so and so. I release my fear of my dentist appointment. I surrender my anxiety over finances. I release my frustration over some situation." After several moments of surrender, turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord. "Lord, I would like to receive your love for so and so, your peace, your patience, your joy."

Our goal is to move out of special moments of meditation into considering and contemplating Christ in every moment. I love those stretches of time when God is almost continually in my thoughts. There's a real awareness that "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). We can refer everything to God and seek his insight and help at every moment. Those stretches of time don't last nearly long enough in my life.

Prayer

Prayer is such a vital theme throughout Scripture that we can barely even introduce a portion of it here. Foster says, "Meditation introduces us to the inner life, fasting is an accompanying means, study transforms our minds, but it is the Discipline of Prayer that brings us into the deepest and highest work of the human spirit" (*Celebration* 33). John Wesley called prayer, "The grand means of drawing near to God" (cited in Steve Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* 19).

Prayer is a learning process. We try, we make mistakes, we have success. We should be making progress. We can't start too soon praying for and with our children. We started praying for our kids as soon as we found

out they were on the way. We prayed at meals and bedtime together. We still pray for them daily.

In our praying we want to learn to listen to God, to be led by God, to find out what God's saying and doing so we can pray according to God's will and desire. The Holy Spirit leads and we walk by the Spirit, we align our praying with the Spirit.

Ask for God's guidance in how to pray and then try to pray for everyone you meet. We spend time praying for guidance, then we use "flash prayers" throughout the day.

Prayer isn't something we do in addition to our work. We can pray as we work. "We precede, enfold, and follow all our work with prayer" (Foster 45).

For a time when I was in high school, at the beginning of each class I would often pray silently, "Lord, I lift this teacher and each person in here up to you. Touch them, bless them, meet their needs."

We don't have to pray long, involved prayers. Just ask God to touch people, to give them an awareness of his love and presence, to draw them closer to himself. Imagine what would happen if every Christian were constantly praying that way for the people around us.

Pray for and during our worship service. That raises our expectation and increases our openness to God. It helps me and it will help you experience God in the service.

Persevere, hang in there, in prayer. I heard a pastor tell about his wife's father, who wasn't a believer. She prayed for her father for years. When she was an adult, their relationship hit a snag and they didn't see each other or speak to each other for twelve years. But she kept praying for him and asking others to pray for him. She kept asking for her daddy to be saved. At some point something happened that caused this pastor and his wife to reach out to her dad. He had been in the hospital. They went to his house to see him. They prayed all the way, not knowing if he would shut the door in their face or welcome them or what. But when he opened the door and they saw each other, for the first time in twelve years, they fell together hugging, kissing, saying, "I love you." About a year earlier, he had come to the Lord. The pastor says it was the most incredible reconciliation

he's ever seen (Tom and Melissa Tanner, *That Sounds Fun with Annie F. Downs* podcast, Episode 86, July 2, 2018). Keep praying and don't give up.

Fasting

I tried fasting a few times in high school. I first read Foster's book during my sophomore year of college and I decided to make regular fasting a part of my life. For several months, once a week, I would fast from noon one day to breakfast the next morning. And that was a growing time for me spiritually.

My practice of fasting has been erratic, at best, since then. Still, it's an important spiritual discipline. The practice of fasting is found throughout Scripture. Fasting means to go without food for a time for spiritual purposes. It's often associated with repentance or intensely seeking God in times of great need or preparation for times of ministry. Although Scripture includes many examples of fasting, and Jesus assumes that his follower will fast, it's not commanded.

Fasting reveals the things that control us and it helps us keep our balance in life. Its purpose is self-control or discipline and devotion to God.

We can fast or abstain from things other than food. I abstain from alcohol. We might go for a time without TV or the Internet or social media or some other routine. Our goal is to master desires and appetites that would control us and bring them under Christ's control.

Catherine Marshall tells about a time when she felt the Lord leading her to go on a one day "fast" from criticism. She wasn't to criticize anything or anybody. It was difficult and she struggled. For the first half of the day, she felt empty and wiped out as she was in conversations but couldn't express her usual critical comments—and they weren't even missed. Later in the day, she made a discovery:

For several years I had been praying for one talented young man whose life had gotten sidetracked. Perhaps my prayers for him had been too negative. That afternoon, a specific, positive vision for this life was dropped into my mind with God's unmistakable hallmark on it—joy.

Ideas began to flow in a way I had not experienced in years. Now it was apparent what the Lord wanted me to see. My critical nature had not corrected a single one of the multitudinous things I found fault with. What it *had* done was to stifle my own creativity—in prayer, in relationships, perhaps even in writing—ideas that He wanted to give me. (*Spiritual Classics*, ed. Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, 57-58)

Study

In Romans 12:2, Paul says to be *transformed* by the renewing of your *minds*. In Philippians 4:8 he gives a list of things to *think* about. Jesus said to love God with all your heart, soul, *mind*, and strength. A disciple is a learner.

We practice the spiritual discipline of study so we can learn from Jesus and be transformed.

Sometimes folks are confused in their spiritual walk by simple ignorance of the truth. False teaching can bring us into bondage. While good theology isn't what saves us, it can keep us out of all kinds of bondage.

In study, we give careful attention to reality and move our mind in a certain direction. It's another means of focusing on God and growing in our relationship with him. One reason I wanted to study theology was so I could grow spiritually. I remember showing a passage from one of my theology textbooks to another professor one time. He read it and said, "Isn't that nourishing?" Study can nourish our spirit. I spent six years in a doctoral program researching the influence Christian doctrine has on our spiritual formation.

We study Scripture, various books, people, and events so that we can know better how to live as God's people.

Are you ready for a relationship with God that goes beyond surface and shallow feelings? Do you want an experience of God that reaches the depths of your heart and integrates your life? Are you ready to commit yourself to the discipline that's part of being a disciple of Jesus?

Now's the time to begin. God doesn't want to weigh us down with unbearable burdens. God wants to increase our experience of grace and fill

us with joy. We'll find this as we intentionally open ourselves to the Holy Spirit's influence and learn to walk in the Spirit. And these spiritual disciplines show us one of the ways God gives for that to happen.