RUN THE RACE!

How is training to run similar to strengthening your faith? Developing spiritual disciplines, like gaining physical stamina, is aided through consistency and self-control that becomes easier over time. Join Our Daily Bread author Lisa Samra as she engages spiritual practices rooted in biblical truths that will help you along your journey. Explore Scripture and learn how you can apply practices like prayer, hospitality, and fasting to your life as you run towards the ultimate goal—becoming more like Jesus.

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After the birth of my fourth child, I needed to find a convenient and simple way to care for myself amid my full (though sleep-deprived) life. Running fit the bill. Lace up the shoes and head out the door.

But running didn’t come naturally to me. It took time for my body to acclimate to this new activity. I developed blisters. My legs were constantly sore. It was a challenge to stay motivated in the middle of a run.

Yet, despite my frustrations, I discovered ways to persevere. Local races provided a goal to motivate me when it was freezing outside or I lacked the desire to push myself another mile. The
encouragement of a friend made the seemingly endless miles go by just a little faster. I learned the benefit of proper footwear to help me reach the finish line. 

Still, it was only after many, many miles that I actually began to *enjoy* running. And the blessings of this new discipline have been greater and more varied than I anticipated. I’ve learned the neighborhood where I live really well. I’ve made new friends. I’ve discovered what motivates me when I am struggling. I’ve seen improvements to my health, including increased endurance so I can keep up with my kids on long hikes.

I’ve also gained a new appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the times in Scripture the spiritual life is compared to going on a journey or running a race. Moses instructed the Israelites to follow God, “walking in obedience to him and revering him” (*Deuteronomy* 8:6). And the author of Hebrews encouraged believers to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (*Hebrews* 12:1–2).

Understanding the comparison between running a race and our spiritual journey can provide insight into how we are designed spiritually. It’s not a perfect analogy, yet it is a common metaphor in Scripture, and there is great value in exploring this analogy while asking for God’s Spirit to guide us.

*Lisa Samra*
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Even if the thought of lacing up running shoes holds no appeal or hiking trails are not readily accessible, physical activity remains vital to us. Our bodies were designed to move. We experience greater health when we’re active. Similarly, our souls are the immaterial, eternal aspect of our humanity made in the image of God. We experience greater spiritual wellness—wholeness—as we engage with the One who created us.

Challenges of the Spiritual Journey
Hikes that promise a stunning expanse at the top of the trail entice us. We may set out in eager anticipation of standing beneath a remote waterfall, forgetting that the journey will involve navigating a strenuous path or scrambling up a steep incline.
We see the same extremes in our spiritual trek. There are beautiful parts of our journeys where “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7) sustains us. Like David, we enjoy seasons of rest in which we delight in God’s guidance leading us to lush, green pastures and refreshment along the banks of quiet waters (Psalm 23).

But our spiritual journeys hold periods of struggle similar to that of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who ran in fear after his life was threatened following a great victory over the prophets of Baal. Exhausted, the prophet who’d seen fire come down from heaven and consume a drenched altar (1 Kings 18:16–39) collapsed and cried out, “I have had enough, Lord” (1 Kings 19:4). The apostle Paul wrote of being “hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8–9). Paul also wrote, “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death” (1:8–9).

These seeming contradictions are found in church history as well. John of the Cross (1542–1591) wrote the Dark Night of the Soul, giving Christians a way to describe the times where one feels “this growing suspicion that she has lost her way.” Pioneer missionary to China, Lottie Moon (1840–1912), despite seeing thousands embrace Christianity, wrote, “I pray that no missionary will ever be as lonely as I have been.” Evangelist Billy Graham (1918–2018) reflected on his journey remarking, “The Christian life is not a constant high. I have my moments of deep discouragement.”
Spiritual journeys include a variety of experiences that span these same feelings. We gain immense encouragement knowing that others have traveled these same paths. We find sustenance through the rich legacy of men and women who have left us a treasure trove of spiritual practices rooted in Scripture to encourage us along the way.

**Gift of Spiritual Disciplines**

We refer to these practices as “spiritual disciplines” because we don’t have to wait until the end of our journey to experience the benefits of the Holy Spirit’s work in us. The disciplines are *spiritual* because they are activities and practices designed to aid in the growth of the characteristics produced by God’s Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” ([Galatians 5:22–23](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+5:22-23)). As God’s Spirit grows these traits in us, we continue on our journey toward becoming mature in our faith ([see Ephesians 4:13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4:13)).

And they are called *disciplines* because they require intentional activity. Paul urges us to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” ([Philippians 2:12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+2:12)) while still affirming that it is God’s Spirit who produces these qualities in us (v. 13). Together, the term *spiritual disciplines* refers to intentional habits and practices that orient us toward God so His grace can work in us, cultivating more and more of the Spirit’s qualities to help us on our spiritual journeys.

Although spiritual disciplines must be practiced intentionally, they are not laws or rules, which would turn them into legalistic requirements. Seeing
spiritual disciplines as a set of rules would also make them feel burdensome and draining—the opposite of God’s purpose for them in our lives. Instead, the disciplines are purposeful exercises designed to help us engage with God so His Spirit can work in us.

Regardless of where you are on your spiritual journey, may this booklet encourage you to grow in your awareness of the biblical foundation for the spiritual disciplines. As you explore these disciplines, allow God’s Spirit’s to help you creatively customize any suggestions to allow for your unique season of life and circumstances.

But first, let’s consider a common objection to engaging with the spiritual disciplines.

**Study Question:** In Hebrews 12:1–3, the author wants to help us avoid the real danger of growing weary and losing heart on our spiritual journeys. Identify several encouragements listed in these verses that can help us as we journey toward heaven.

**Reflection Question:** Describe a time when you have experienced rest on your spiritual journey, and a season when your spiritual journey seemed to take you down a difficult path.

**Application:** Can you remember a source of spiritual assistance or blessing to you in both of these experiences? How did they help you?
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The Purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines

Venture into a specialty running store and you’ll find more gadgets, supplies, and varieties of running gear than you ever imagined existed. You can acquire a lot of equipment, but it would be pointless to own all the expensive gear if you never actually used them during training or a race. The gadgets are designed to be a means to reaching the goal, not the focus or goal themselves.

So it is with the spiritual life. A common objection to practicing the spiritual disciplines is the concern that these exercises can become the focus or goal of our spiritual journeys or seen as a means to receive salvation. And that’s a helpful reminder. Like the aids utilized by runners, spiritual disciplines are useful on our spiritual journeys, but they do not qualify
us for eternal life or provide entry to a relationship with Jesus. The Bible assures us it is “by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). There are no activities or exercises that can earn salvation. It is entirely God’s gracious gift.

Once we have accepted the gift of salvation, the amazing promise of God is that we will reach the final destination: eternity with Him. Unlike a physical race where some people never make it across the finish line, there is nothing that will keep us from finishing this journey. Paul comforts us with the reassurance that God “who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Philippians 1:6).

A potential tension arises, however. While we are confident that God has a secure future for us, the Bible also makes clear that there is an important role for us to play. We participate in our experience of salvation through spiritual practices (which we call “spiritual disciplines”).

We see both realities in Paul’s many comparisons between the spiritual journey and a race (see also Galatians 2:2; Philippians 2:16; and 2 Timothy 4:7). Paul observed the need for training as he urged the Corinthian believers to “run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (1 Corinthians 9:24–25). Paul recognized the same grace that gives us salvation and guarantees our future is also available to help us run our spiritual races well.

Consider spiritual disciplines as the training
exercises we do to live self-controlled, upright, and God-honoring lives. Spiritual disciplines can help keep us focused on Jesus, who provides us with strength when we are weary, offers guidance from God’s Spirit for the decisions of life, and pours out His grace to enable us to persevere.

**What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?**

Even though spiritual disciplines have been helpful to Christians on their spiritual journeys throughout church history, there is no established or universally agreed upon list. However, there are common practices rooted in scriptural principles that many believers have found beneficial for reorienting themselves to God’s presence in their lives.

It may be helpful to think about them in three categories: Core, Personal, and Relational. As we explore these disciplines, it will be possible to highlight only a few specific ones in each category. There are many more disciplines worth exploring, and more ways to implement the disciplines than we will have space to discuss. Permit these ideas to serve as springboards into engaging with the spiritual disciplines.

We categorize as “core spiritual disciplines” those practices mentioned in Scripture that function as the center from which the other spiritual disciplines radiate. They allow believers to receive strength from God’s Spirit to empower them to undertake and experience all of the spiritual disciplines.

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Core spiritual disciplines include Scripture reading, prayer, and corporate worship. Personal spiritual disciplines include exercises focused on the transforming work of the Spirit on the individual. Solitude and fasting are two such helpful personal practices. Finally, relational spiritual disciplines are practices that recognize our spiritual journeys involve others who are traveling alongside us. Service and hospitality are relational disciplines because they are done in and for our communities.

As we look in the following chapters at how each spiritual discipline is modeled in Scripture, it’s helpful to implement practical ways to incorporate these practices into our journeys. You may need to modify them for your current situation. Our hope is that you will be excited to try a new exercise that you had not considered before, or feel equipped to explore a previously unfamiliar spiritual discipline for the first time.

Study Question: In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Paul writes about his intentionality in training for his spiritual journey. What are some of the comparisons Paul makes about training for a physical race and a spiritual race?

Reflection Questions: What has been your experience practicing the spiritual disciplines? What disciplines do you find easier to implement, and which ones are more challenging? Why?

Application: How does the reminder that spiritual disciplines are the work of God provide freedom and grace to explore these practices?
To safely train and finish a race it’s vital that every runner consume plenty of fluids. There are many different preferences on how to stay hydrated. One runner may choose water, while another might prefer a sports drink or chocolate milk; some like to take small, frequent sips, while others opt for larger quantities of fluids less often.

Spiritual disciplines are similar. A few core practices are frequently mentioned in Scripture and traditionally recognized as valuable, even essential, to foster spiritual growth. We can learn much by reading the many Bible stories or biographies of how faithful men and women modeled these habits. However, calling these core spiritual disciplines essential still
allows for great freedom in the specific way we might incorporate them into our spiritual journeys.

The core spiritual disciplines are: engaging with Scripture, prayer, and corporate worship.

**Engaging with Scripture**

Just as we need water and food for our physical health, engaging with Scripture provides us with living, sustaining refreshment for the many different needs we have on our spiritual journeys. Scripture is a primary means by which God communicates truth and guidance. It helps us understand the character and purposes of God. The Bible shows us how to find peace with God and receive eternal life. Scripture also comforts us when we are suffering and encourages us to celebrate God’s faithfulness and goodness.

The Bible repeatedly calls us to engage with Scripture. God instructed Joshua, “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it” (Joshua 1:8). The psalmist, who had a more limited canon of Scripture referred to as the “Law,” declared blessing for the person “whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night” (Psalm 1:2).

In response to temptation by Satan, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy saying, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4), a reference to the life-giving nourishment found in Scripture. Among Paul’s final remarks to his young protégé Timothy is the encouragement to continue in the Holy Scriptures because they are useful for “teaching, rebuking,
correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Revelation 1:3 says, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.”

**Specific Practices**

Reading plans help guide us through the entire Bible in a set period of time, typically three, six, or twelve months, and assist us in spending time in the entire word of God. Some churches have a lectionary—a collection of pre-selected Scripture passages—that provides an established reading plan each morning and/or evening. Or simply select one book of the Bible, such as Psalms, and read through it one chapter each day.

Another suggestion is to choose a devotional that provides insight or encourages reflection on a specific portion of the Bible each day.

Finally, consider memorizing meaningful verses or helpful passages. This allows us to internalize Scriptural truth and meditate on it when we don’t have access to our Bibles. It may be helpful to start with a smaller section or memorize only a portion at a time and gradually add verses or phrases.

**Prayer**

God is present with His people when they pray. Moses told the Israelites, “The LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him” (Deuteronomy 4:7). “The LORD is near to all who call on him,” affirms Psalm 145:18.

The Bible invites us to “always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1) and to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Ephesians 6:18). Examples abound in Scripture of the myriad reasons people pray. In 1 Samuel, Hannah pled with the Lord to give her a specific request, a son (1 Samuel 1:11). Psalm 51 is a prayer written by King David asking for forgiveness. James encouraged Christians to “pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Paul wrote a prayer of praise proclaiming the majesty of God (Romans 11:33–36). James reminded his readers to pray for wisdom, saying “if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all” (James 1:5).

When we pray, we have the astounding assurance that God hears us regardless of our requests (1 John 5:14). Our heavenly Father is attentive to our prayers (1 Peter 3:12), even if we don’t get exactly what we asked for. There is no more dramatic example than in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus asked His Father if He could avoid the torture and pain of the crucifixion (Matthew 26:39). Jesus’s ultimate submission to the Father’s will does not negate the fact that Christ asked the Father for another way, which God chose not to provide.

When we accept the invitation to engage with God in prayer, regardless of the answer or outcome of our requests, we have the promise that He will be
near to us and “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (PHILIPPIANS 4:7).

**Specific Practices**

As God’s Spirit encourages growth in the spiritual discipline of prayer, consider these suggestions—but please don’t feel limited or restricted by this short list of specific practices!

Journaling, or writing out, prayers is a meaningful practice many Christians use to help focus their hearts and minds when they pray. Keeping a prayer journal can also serve as a powerful record of answered prayer.

Creating a simple prayer calendar provides structure for anyone who feels overwhelmed by the number of people or situations to bring before the Lord. Dividing our regular prayer concerns into separate days gives us peace to know we are regularly bringing those requests to the Lord.

Prayer can also be an active endeavor. Consider taking a prayer walk. This prayer opportunity can provide variety to our prayer lives as we walk around an area, such as a neighborhood, workplace, or apartment complex, to pray for the people who live or work in the vicinity. Whether praying aloud or silently, this form of prayer allows us to see the places and people of our prayers while we pray.

To engage the creative gifts God has given us, we might consider drawing our prayer concerns. Those with artistic talents could prayerfully sketch out their requests. Others with more limited artistic abilities can explore using words and colors to create a visual
prayer. Posting these creations in a meaningful place can serve as a helpful reminder that God hears our prayers for all that is contained on the page.

**Corporate Worship**

While corporate worship may seem like a newer development, the people of God have always assembled together. In the Old Testament, the Israelites gathered regularly for festivals and sacred assemblies to experience the presence of God as outlined in Leviticus 23. At the beginning of the church recorded in the New Testament book of Acts, the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” *(Acts 2:42)*, creating an early catalog of communal activities found in the early church. While not an exhaustive list, it provides a picture of the recurring practices found among the first Christians as they gathered together. Knowing the importance of these corporate activities, the writer of Hebrews urged the church to continue to meet together in order to encourage each other and to draw near to God *(Hebrews 10:22–25)*.

**Specific Practices**

Worshiping in a gathered community takes many forms around the world. In addition to dedicated church buildings, Christians worship in homes, schools, movie theaters, or wherever God provides space. We can thank God for the church where we participate in corporate worship. Or, we can pray for His guidance to help us find a faith community where we can worship with fellow believers.

Visiting a different church can expand our
understanding of the beauty of many different expressions of worship. You might gain a greater appreciation for diversity in worship through visiting a number of churches within your own city.

As we prepare to gather with others for worship, consider how we might be a blessing or encouragement to others in our community.

**Study Question:** In Paul’s final charge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14–17, Paul outlined some specific ways Scripture could assist Timothy on his spiritual journey. Create a list of ways Scripture helps us and include an example of each one.

**Reflection Questions:** Consider the various types of prayer found in the Bible (for example, praise, petition, and lament). Which kind of prayer do you typically incorporate into your prayers and which do you tend to include less frequently? Why?

**Application:** Choose one specific practice from the core spiritual disciplines to focus on implementing for the first time or in a new way. Reflect on the blessing and struggle of attempting this spiritual discipline.
Although it began in 1897 with just 15 participants, recent Boston Marathons average 30,000 runners navigating the 26.2-mile course. While it may appear to be a massive, homogenous crowd of people weaving through the streets as they head for the finish line, each runner has a unique number that distinguishes them in the crowd.

Our spiritual journeys feel similar. We are part of larger communities of people heading toward a common goal, but it is also a deeply personal and unique experience. The dual perspective of the individual among the throng is celebrated in Psalm 121, a song the Israelites sang on their way to the temple to worship God as part of annual religious festivals. The Lord, who “watches over Israel” (Psalm 121:4), also
“watches over you” (v. 5). In Hebrew, “you” in verse five is singular, emphasizing how God lovingly oversees both the whole nation and each individual.

While the spiritual disciplines all inform and interact with other disciplines, it’s helpful to separate the remaining disciplines into two groups: the personal spiritual disciplines that focus on each person’s individual relationship with God, and the relational spiritual disciplines often practiced in the communities of faith journeying alongside us. Here we highlight the disciplines of solitude and fasting because they feel particularly relevant to current issues.

**Solitude**

Most of us live in the new reality of instant communication, an abundance of easily accessible information and media, and the constant introduction of devices designed to help us accomplish tasks at home and work. While we are grateful for technological advances, a constant clatter of beeps, dings, alerts, and distractions can also easily overwhelm and distract us.

God often speaks to us not in a loud thundering boom or crackling lighting but in the “gentle whisper” the Old Testament prophet Elijah heard after the storm had passed (1 Kings 19:12).

Into the noise of our lives, solitude is the intentional decision to spend time apart from the responsibilities and distractions of everyday life, whether just a few minutes or a longer period, in order to engage with God. Author Henri Nouwen wrote, “Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life,” reflecting not only his personal experience but the example set by Jesus.
The Bible gives us many glimpses into Jesus’s pattern of prioritizing solitude despite facing pressing ministry opportunities. When we read Luke’s account that “news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses” (Luke 5:15), we might expect Jesus to be constantly available to the people. How does Jesus actually respond? “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (v. 16).

If Jesus needed solitude to pray, we should not be surprised that we need it as well. During solitude, God invites us to listen, which might come as we engage in other spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, or meditating on Scripture. Solitude provides an opportunity to experience “deep call[ing] to deep” (Psalm 42:7) as we allow the innermost desires of our souls to express themselves to the Lord.

Finding solitude sometimes requires creativity, but it’s usually possible. Perhaps you need a comfy chair in a small corner of the attic that can be off limits to other family members in the early morning. Many churches offer space for solitude and prayer, and even hospitals have areas set aside for reflection and quiet. A walk in the outdoors can be a “lonely place” offering space for reflection and prayer. Even in a chaotic break room, earplugs and a well-placed chair can create a quiet area.

Whenever we carve out time and space to hear God’s voice, we can experience the reality of our loving God’s constant presence and be reminded that He delights to meet with His children.

In the New Testament, Jesus affirms His guidance is available to Christians with the reminder that He is our Good Shepherd and that we, His sheep, “follow
him because [we] know his voice” (John 10:4). This is all possible because of Jesus’s Spirit, whom He promises to all believers (John 10:26). As we rely on God’s Spirit to practice the spiritual disciplines, we can affirm it is God who directs and guides us.

**Fasting**

The spiritual discipline of fasting is designed to free us from the control of anything that competes with God for our trust and affections. Choosing to relinquish something we depend on is a small way of affirming and reminding ourselves that God is our only true provider and sustainer.

Fasting is found frequently in both the Old and New Testaments. Fasting in the Old Testament often involved abstaining from food. Hannah fasted and prayed for a child (1 Samuel 1). When the prophet Nehemiah learned the walls of the city of Jerusalem had fallen into disrepair, he fasted and prayed as he sought guidance from God (Nehemiah 1:1–11). King David fasted regularly, as well as at specific times when he faced overwhelming circumstances (2 Samuel 12:16–23; Psalm 35:13; 69:10). The prophet Daniel fasted and prayed on several occasions (Daniel 9:3; 10:2–3).

In Matthew 6:16–18, Jesus gave His disciples an explicit encouragement to fast, along with specific guidelines as part of a sermon on living a spiritual life. Jesus started his discussion with, “When you fast” (v. 16), not “if you fast.” In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer agrees: “Jesus takes it for granted that His disciples will observe the pious custom of fasting.”

Following Jesus’s resurrection, we read of several
occasions when leaders in the early church fasted (Acts 13:2–3; 14:23). And Paul encouraged married believers to occasionally fast from sexual intimacy “so that you may devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Corinthians 7:5).

While fasting in the Bible often involved abstaining from food, British pastor Martyn-Lloyd Jones helpfully explains the definition can be expanded to include “abstinence from anything which is legitimate in and of itself for the sake of some special spiritual purpose.”

If we are medically able to do so, a gentle way to begin the spiritual discipline of fasting from food might be to skip lunch and use that time to read the Bible or pray. Consider not eating breakfast and lunch on a day reserved for fasting, before moving to longer fasts. When fasting from food, it’s important to still drink plenty of fluids.

Non-food fasts might include fasting from social media one day per month and gradually increasing to one day per week. Some find it meaningful to fast from email or texting for several hours each evening. They might use that time to engage with family, read the Bible or an inspiring book, or even go to bed early!

Whatever type of fast we explore as part of our spiritual journeys, the opportunity is to use the time for a spiritual purpose such as concentrated prayer (Ezra 8:23), listening for guidance or direction (Acts 13:2), asking for protection (Esther 4:16), confessing sin (1 Samuel 7:6), or worshiping (Luke 2:37). I have also discovered when I seek God through the spiritual disciplines, He affirms and provides the spiritual blessing of rest (Matthew 11:28–30).

After the fast, as we again enjoy food or engage with technology, we are also reminded anew of the
truth that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights” (James 1:17).

In the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Abraham. This unconditional covenant outlined God’s promise to bless Abraham, his descendants, and all the nations of the world (Genesis 15:6–21). Later, God made a conditional covenant with Moses that promised additional blessings but also required the Israelites to fulfill certain requirements (Exodus 19:3–6). This is called the Mosaic law.

When Israel was unable to keep the Law, God revealed through the prophet Jeremiah that He would replace the conditional Mosaic covenant with the unconditional new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34). This prophecy was fulfilled in the person of Jesus (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 9:15) and made available to all people (Galatians 3:26–29). The new covenant is best outlined by Jesus when He said the greatest commandment is to love God and our neighbors (Matthew 22:37–40).

**Study Question:** In the section on fasting found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:16–18, Jesus gave several guidelines for fasting. What are these guidelines and how might we incorporate them when we fast?

**Reflection Questions:** What are the biggest challenges you face in creating space for solitude? How might you ask God to help you overcome those obstacles?

**Application:** Consider choosing one item to fast from in the coming week. When you complete your fast, take time to reflect on your experience.
To the casual observer, watching individual runners go by may lead one to assume races are a solitary venture where each runner is completely on their own. However, most races have pace runners who are tasked with helping fellow racers maintain a desired speed from beginning to end. Other people participate as part of a running group that was created for training accountability and mutual encouragement. In the same way, while our personal spiritual journeys might appear to be solitary endeavors, they involve both giving and receiving support and assistance. One of the passages in the Bible where we see a strong emphasis on exercising faith in community is Paul’s description
of the church as an interdependent body, each part reliant on other members for health and proper functioning (1 Corinthians 12:12–26).

Relational spiritual disciplines is the designation we give to those practices that highlight the communal aspect of our spiritual journeys, the exercises we undertake as part of a community to help and support each other. Two relational spiritual disciplines we will explore in more detail are service and hospitality.

**Service**

The word “service” may conjure visions of reluctantly doing menial tasks or an arduous list of demands. But while service does involve specific actions, at its core the spiritual discipline of service is the willing offering of one’s self, through the power of God’s Spirit, for the benefit of another person.

Service embodies the greatest commandment taught by Jesus, which calls us to wholeheartedly love God and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Jesus provided a beautiful picture of this love in the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the Samaritan goes beyond the bare minimum expected of him when he encountered a man who had been beaten and left for dead. The Samaritan cared for the man until his health was restored (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus elevated the act of service beyond simply completing a task to assisting people out of an attitude of love. He radically transformed our philosophy of serving.

Despite our best intentions to come alongside friends and family, having a lifestyle that embodies the spiritual discipline of service is only truly possible
when empowered by God’s Spirit. When our service is not enabled by God’s Spirit, it can feel like drudgery. In our own strength we become weary, or serve for the wrong reasons. While not completely removing all the difficulties associated with serving others, we can learn to rely on God’s Spirit, encouraged by Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul references the spiritual life as a journey and then urges his readers to live by the Spirit. As evidence of the Spirit’s work, Paul writes that those who live by the Spirit can choose to “serve one another humbly in love” (Galatians 5:13).

Another aspect of the spiritual discipline of service is intentionality. Jesus knew the purpose for His earthly ministry, telling His disciples, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45). Reminding ourselves of the purpose in serving helps us focus on why we are doing a particular task and pushes the “what” or the actual details of the task to the background.

**Specific Practices**

There are a wide variety of ways to practice the spiritual discipline of service. It can be as simple as choosing to relook at some of the ways we already serve. We may need to consider some of the people and places God has already put in our lives and invite God’s Spirit to empower us to care for others with a willing and loving attitude.

To look for ways to practice this discipline, consider identifying a ministry in the community or church that offers opportunities to serve others. Perhaps it might be working with children in the church nursery or at an afterschool program. Consider donating accounting
skills to a local food pantry or electrical expertise to a widow in a church’s senior adults ministry.

Ask the Lord to highlight a family member or neighbor who might have a particular need, such as caring for a lawn or babysitting children, and offer to serve them by meeting that need at no cost to them.

As we consider incorporating service in our unique season of life, be encouraged that there are always opportunities to serve, right where we are. Pray for God’s help to see opportunities to serve others during our days, whether it’s opening a door or doing a chore for a family member, as a way to demonstrate God’s love to others in their everyday lives.

**Hospitality**

Although modern portrayals of hospitality often equate the practice with elaborate spreads of food or a beautifully decorated home all done with the appearance of ease, the spiritual discipline of hospitality is one of welcoming others into our lives. We can embrace this discipline as we come to understand that the goal of hospitality is not merely entertaining but sharing God’s grace and love with others.

In the Bible, we see numerous examples of hospitality involving the provision of food and shelter to those in need (**Genesis** 18:2–8; **Luke** 10:38; **Philemon** 22). In the New Testament, hospitality became a mark of authentic Christian living commanded of believers along with other expressions of love (**Romans** 12:9–16; **Hebrews** 13:1–3; **1 Peter** 4:8–11). Hospitality is also listed as a qualification for church leaders (**1 Timothy** 3:2; **Titus**
Choosing to practice hospitality requires vulnerability, often asking us to reach out to others when we might be tempted to keep to our current circle of friends. Yet, enabled by God’s Spirit and remembering God’s compassionate heart inviting us into relationship with Him (1 John 3:1), we can learn to share our lives with others and welcome them into our communities.

**Specific Practices**

Welcoming others begins with noticing—for example, noticing those who are new or linger on the edges of established communities. As we notice new faces in our churches or workplaces, we gain the opportunity to share our lives.

Perhaps we can be willing to introduce ourselves to an unfamiliar face at church and, if they are interested in participating in the life of the congregation, offer to attend an event with them so they don’t have to go alone.

Those who live near a college or university with international students can investigate if the school or a local church offers opportunities to host a student. International students usually enjoy learning about the areas where they are studying and appreciate being invited for a typical local meal or included in a visit to a nearby attraction.

Another simple way to extend hospitality might be to host a casual potluck dinner. Extend an invitation to people who may not know each other as a way to create community and provide a welcoming environment for people to enjoy a meal.
and fellowship together. Having an easy activity or using a set of conversation-starting questions can help people relax and engage with each other.

**Study Questions:** In the parable of the Good Samaritan (LUKE 10:25–37), contrast the Good Samaritan with the priest and the Levite. How did the Good Samaritan go beyond what was expected of him? What might Jesus’s words to “go and do likewise” (V. 37) mean for us?

**Reflection Questions:** When was a time that you were a “stranger,” new to a college, company, church, or other community? How did you feel? What were the memorable and meaningful ways others reached out to you?

**Application:** Pick one of the specific practices listed above, and consider how you might implement one of them. Or try to create your own practice of service or hospitality that aligns with your current life circumstances.
Although I have incorporated exercise into my weekly routine and appreciate the benefits associated with physical activity, I sometimes still struggle to find the motivation to run or ride bikes with my children. I can always find a good excuse, or even a bad one, not to go. Giving myself that freedom helps me to keep from feeling burdened by a rigid schedule. However, every time I make the effort to exercise, there is always some benefit, even if it as small as being able to affirm I made a healthy choice.

How might God’s Spirit be inviting you to engage with the spiritual disciplines? How can you incorporate these disciplines into the rhythm of your spiritual life?

On our most challenging days, through faith,
we can remember God is present even in the most difficult parts of the journey.

As we venture on our journey, we find encouragement from this prayer of blessing from Paul to the church at Colossae: “We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light” (Colossians 1:9–12).
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