

Greater Pleasant Branch Baptist Church

Connect Learn Grow

Wednesday Bible Study - Theme: Practicing Spiritual Disciplines- September 8,2021

I. Introduction

During this study we will focus on the practice of spiritual disciplines as described in two books: Celebration of Discipline- The Path to Spiritual Growth-Richard J. Foster and Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life-Donald S. Whitney.

Foster makes the following statements regarding spiritual disciplines: “ The Spiritual Disciplines are God’s means of grace by which we are enabled to bring our little, individualized power pack we call the human body and place it before God as a “ living sacrifice,” as the wise apostle Paul put it in (Romans 12:1). Having done this , the disciplines have reached the end of there tether. God then steps into our small offering and produces in us graces and virtues we could hardly imagine. Again, the Spiritual Disciplines are the means God uses to build in us an inner person that is characterized by peace and joy and freedom.”

“ It is critical for us to understand that the Spiritual Disciplines possess no moral rectitude or righteousness in and of themselves. They are , most definitely , not “works righteousness,” as it is sometimes said. They place us-body,mind, and spirit-before God. That is all. The results of this process are all of God, all of grace.”

“ Now, with the Spiritual disciplines, the form that God’s grace takes is interactive relationship. God invites us into a variety of Spiritual Disciplines, and we step into them as best we can. These actions place us before God as a living sacrifice. God, in turn, uses our actions to build within us deeply ingrained habit patterns of “ righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14: 17). Back and forth,back and forth, in interactive relationship so that, through time and experience, we are learning to “ grow in grace.”

“ God is working, always working, to form us and conform us and transform us into the image of Christ. God is intent upon this forming, conforming, transforming process. And God invites us to participate in this process by means of interactive relationship.”

“ This deep character formation in the chambers of our hearts does not occur overnight. This is no quick fix. It is crucial to respect the slow work of God upon the soul. Slowly, ever so slowly, over days and weeks, and months and years, the soul is being carefully formed and transformed. Throughout this holy work we are learning patience, stillness, perseverance and timeliness.”

“ Spiritual Disciplines are actions of body and heart and mind and soul that we actually do. Not just admire. Not just study. But practice.”

“ One thing will always be central to our exercise of the Spiritual Disciplines-Holy Scriptures. Reading Scripture. Studying Scripture. Meditating upon Scripture and memorizing Scripture.”

“ If we truly desire to be like Jesus, then we will want to take up the overall way of life Jesus lived when he was among us in the flesh. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John give us this picture in vibrant, living reality. We learn from the Gospels that Jesus undertook Spiritual Disciplines as a fixed pattern of his life. So should we. And, as we give attention to the whole trajectory of Scripture, we quickly discover that all the great ones in the Bible exercised a large variety of Spiritual Disciplines themselves. Surely this is an incentive for us to follow the lead of our leaders.”

“ By themselves the Spiritual disciplines can do nothing ; they only get us to a place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace. The inner righteousness we seek is not something that is poured into our heads. God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us. In this regard it would be proper to speak of “ 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.”

In his book on Spiritual disciplines, Donald S. Whitney makes the following statements that help to provide a framework for this part of our study: “ The only road to Christian maturity passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. These personal and interpersonal activities given by God in the Bible and practiced by God’s people since Bible times. They are the sufficient means Christians are to use in the Spirit-filled pursuit of godliness, that is closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ. Jesus modeled them for us and expects us to pursue them. In doing so , we will taste the joy of a spiritually disciplined lifestyle.”

“ God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends for us to grow toward Christlikeness. This leads us to ask what every Christian should ask: How then shall I pursue holiness? How can I be like Jesus Christ, the Son of God ? We find a clear answer in I Timothy 4:7 “ Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” (NASB). Godliness is the goal of disciplines, and when we remember this , the Spiritual Disciplines can become a delight instead of drudgery. “

A great take away from Whitney’s book is that practicing the Spiritual Disciplines leads to closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ. Practicing Spiritual Disciplines draws us close to Christ and conforms us to the character of Christ.

Whitney states that the urgent question every Christian should ask is : How can I become more like Jesus Christ? The clear answer is provided in I Timothy 4:7 “ Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (NASB) . According to this verse , you discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.

II. The Spiritual disciplines-What are they?

1. The Spiritual disciplines are those practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times.

2. First, Spiritual disciplines are described in the Bible as both Personal and Interpersonal. Some disciplines are practiced alone and some with others. The former are personal Spiritual Disciplines and the latter are interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines. Reading and studying the Bible is both a personal and interpersonal discipline as is worship. Both the personal and interpersonal disciplines are means of blessings for followers of Jesus and a part of growth in godliness.

3. Second, Spiritual Disciplines are activities, not attitudes. Disciplines are practices, not character qualities, graces or fruit of the spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). Disciplines are things you do such as read, meditate, pray, fasting, worship, serve, learn, ,and so on. The goal of practicing a given Discipline, of course, is not about doing as much as it is about being, that is being like Jesus. The biblical way to grow in being more like Jesus is through rightly motivated doing of the biblical Spiritual Disciplines. It is safe to say that doing (practicing the Spiritual Disciplines) results in being (more like Christ).

4. Third, Spiritual disciplines are those described in the Bible, which limits what one may claim to be a Spiritual Discipline. You will find various lists of Spiritual Disciplines in Bible literature, however, those not described in the Bible cannot be Spiritual disciplines.

5. Fourth, Spiritual Disciplines found in Scripture are sufficient for knowing and experiencing God, and for growing in Christlikeness. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that Scripture, because it is divinely inspired, provides the guidance Christians need to “ be complete, equipped for every good work, including the good work of pursuing “ the purpose of godliness.”

6. Fifth, Spiritual Disciplines are practices from the gospel , not divorced from the gospel. When the disciplines are rightly practiced, they take us deeper into the gospel of Jesus and its glories, not away from it as though we have moved on to more advanced levels of Christianity.

7. Sixth, Spiritual Disciplines are means, not ends. The end-that is, the purpose of practicing the Disciplines -is godliness. Whitney defines godliness as both closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ. A conformity that is both inward and outward.

III. The Spiritual disciplines-The means to Godliness

1. The most important feature of any Spiritual Discipline is its purpose. Just as there is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar or piano apart from the purpose of playing music, so there is little value in practicing Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them (see Colossians 2:20-23, I Timothy 4:8). That purpose is godliness. Thus we are told in I Timothy 4:7 to discipline ourselves “ for the purpose of godliness” (NASB).

2. Godliness comes through discipline.

3. God uses other people (Proverbs 27:17) , circumstances (Romans 8:28) and Spiritual Disciplines to conform us . God uses people and circumstances to change believers from the outside in. God uses Spiritual disciplines to change believers from the inside out. Believers have little choice regarding the first two, however, God allows us to decide which Spiritual disciplines we choose to work on at any given time.

4. Growth in godliness is a gift from God (see John 17:17, I Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 2:11). On the other hand that does not mean that believers do nothing , as Colossians 1:29 indicate achieving godliness is the result of effort on the part of the believer and the work of God.

5. The word rendered “ discipline” in the New American Translation is the Greek word *gymnasia* from which our English words *gymnasium* and *gymnastics* are derived. This word means to exercise or discipline, which is why the King James Version renders I Timothy 4:7 as “ exercise thyself rather unto godliness”, the English Standard Version as “ train yourself for godliness” and the New International Version as “ train yourself to be godly. Physical disciplines promote bodily strength and Spiritual Disciplines promote godliness.

6. Think of the Spiritual disciplines as ways by which we can spiritually place ourselves in the path of God’s grace and seek Him, much like Zacchaeus placed himself physically in the path of Jesus and sought Him.

IV. Spiritual Disciplines- God’s will for Christians

1. The original language of the word’s “ discipline yourselves for the purpose of godliness (NASB) makes it plain that this is a command of God, not merely a suggestion.

2. Discipline is at the heart of discipleship as validated by 2 Timothy 1:7, which state that : “ God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

3. The Lord Jesus not only expect these biblical Disciplines of believers, He is the model of discipline for the purpose of godliness.

V. Conclusions

1. The Spiritual Disciplines are those practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth.

2. Spiritual Disciplines are actions of body and heart and mind that we actually do. Not just admire. Not just study. But practice.

3. We learn from the gospels that Jesus practiced Spiritual Disciplines as a fixed pattern of his life.

4. Spiritual growth is the purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines.

5. Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines leads to closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ.

6. God is working, always working, to conform us and transform us into the image of Christ.

7. The urgent question every Christian should ask is: How can I become more like Jesus Christ? The clear answer is provided in I Timothy 4:7 “ Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.”