

Summary of Spiritual Practices



There are three key, interrelated ways in which Christians grow spiritually and true life transformation occurs:

- ◇ The Work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
- ◇ The Ordinary Events of Life which God uses to shape us.
- ◇ Planned Spiritual Exercises or Disciplines.

We need God's grace and power in order to change, and yet God does expect us to make a committed effort too. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (Col 3:12)

The spiritual exercises are training exercises helping us to be more like the people God has called us to be. *"train yourself to be godly. ⁸For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come."* (1 Ti 4:7-8)

A spiritual exercise is something that we can do, that will enable us to do what we cannot. For example, we can choose to spend a few hours in silence, which will help us with that difficult task of controlling our tongue.

Some of the spiritual practices are:

solitude, silence, fasting, prayer, study, secrecy, service, chastity, keeping a journal, spiritual direction, guidance, submission, confession, worship and celebration.

We need to experiment with these and develop a plan for becoming more like Jesus by making these a regular part of our lives. What are your plans for "putting off the old person and putting on the new" so you can enjoy *the life worth living* in the Kingdom with Jesus now?

Prayer - as a Spiritual Practice



Prayer is probably one of the best known spiritual exercises, and yet many Christians do not pray very much. One helpful definition of prayer is: Talking to God about what we are now doing together."

Prayer is action - probably the most important action you can take for the day.

- ◆ Don't get all worried about how much more you feel you should be praying. Thank God for prompting you to think about prayer more and simply pray. "Pray as you can, not as you can't."
- ◆ Focus on exactly what you want to happen. Be specific.
- ◆ Enlist others in the prayer cause on a regular basis.
- ◆ Stick with it. Don't quit. (Lk 18:1-8)
- ◆ Try both spontaneous and written prayers.
- ◆ Consider what you do with your body when you pray as prayer involves our whole being. As you are able, try kneeling, lying prostrate before God, raising your hands in prayer...
- ◆ We need other spiritual disciplines (such as solitude and silence) in place if we are to pray effectively.

Some Benefits of Prayer:

- Removes the habit of self-reliance and the despair that comes from the mind of the flesh (Rom 8:6-7).
- Puts us in touch with the 'real world'.
- We engage the impossible in dependence on God.
- Builds our faith as we see answers to prayer.
- Trains us to reign with Christ eternally

Solitude - as a Spiritual Practice

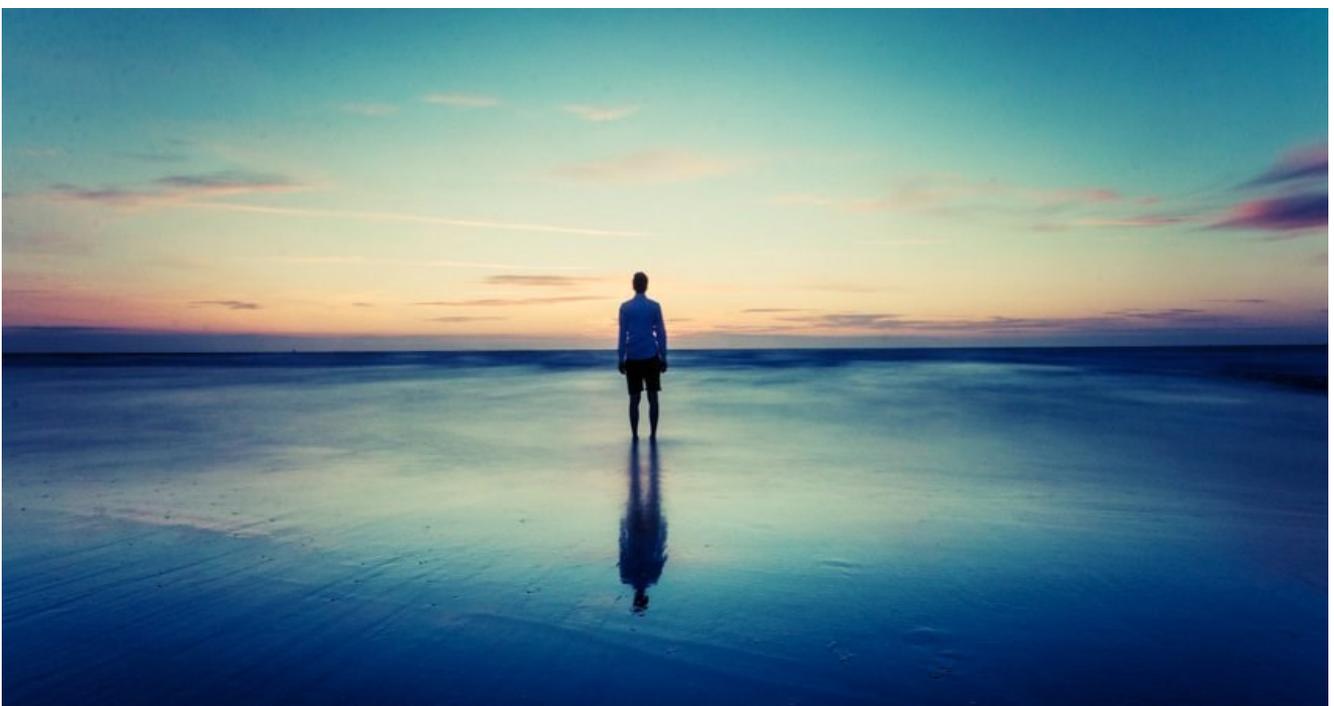
Solitude is choosing to step free from human relationships for a period of time, in isolation or anonymity, to make room for occupation of our lives by God.

Some Hints:

- ♦ Try setting aside 3 or 4 hours at first in a pleasant place (even if you live alone, plan a specific times of solitude).
- ♦ Just observe. Don't do anything. Notice your surroundings - especially if you are outside enjoying God's creation.
- ♦ Try walking along the beach.
- ♦ You might pray, but don't make a job of it. Simply talk to your Heavenly Father.
- ♦ If you are at home and you fall asleep, don't worry. Enjoy the rest and talk to God when you wake up. (1 Kg 19:4-9)
- ♦ Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born.

Some Benefits of Solitude:

- It breaks our co-dependency. Others can live without us and us without them.
- We learn to appreciate other people more, without needing to control them.
- It frees us from busyness and overwork (and other things that bind us).
- It builds trust in God as we take our hands off and allow God to take charge.
- It provides time to focus on God and to develop other spiritual practices such as prayer and Bible study.



Silence - as a Spiritual Practice

Noise is inherently exhausting. It agitates us. Silence is associated with being able to rest, listen and trust God.

Two kinds of silence

A) To be in a quiet place:

- ♦ Try to get away from all unnatural, artificial sounds (traffic, electronic beeping, telephone...)
- ♦ If you have a quiet room in your house, go there and spend half an hour in silence. Don't worry if you fall asleep.
- ♦ You may be able to walk by the river in the quiet, or visit one of our lovely beaches.
- ♦ Your communication with God will be richer. Your prayers centred on God.
- ♦ Families will need to negotiate these times so each family member has opportunity for times of silence.

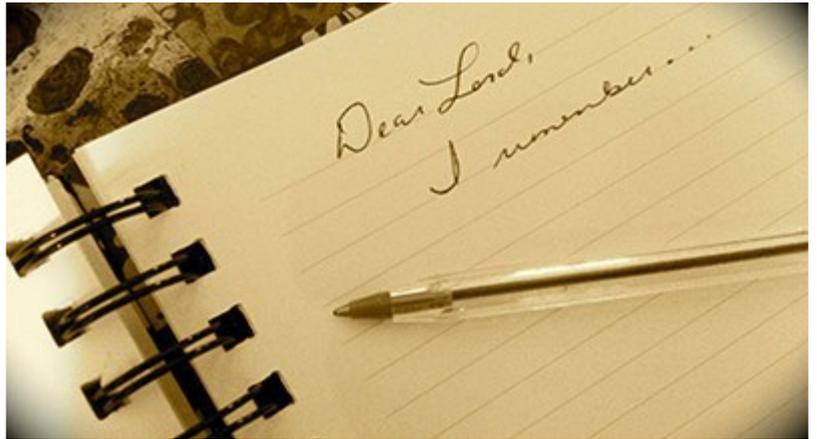
B) To refrain from speaking:

- Talk can be necessary, but it can also be controlling, manipulative and even brutal.
- Arrange to have an hour or more when you will not talk. This can even be achieved in families by negotiation.
- Don't be legalistic about it. You may *have* to say something.
- You will begin to come to a place where you are at peace and your tongue is not running out of control
- How did you feel while not talking? Were there any arguments during the time?



Journaling - as a Spiritual Practice

A Journal is simply a notebook where you can record your conversations with God and reflect on your spiritual journey.



Some Hints:

- ◆ Write down what you pray about; what you sense God saying to you as you read your Bible and listen to God.
- ◆ Look back in your journal over time to discover what was indeed God speaking to you and what were your own thoughts - this becomes more obvious as time goes by.
- ◆ Use the journal as a place for reflecting on your spiritual life and on things that happen to you.
 - ⇒ Describe a particular event (not too big like 'my marriage is failing' but a smaller part of it like 'last night we squabbled over how to discipline the kids')
 - ⇒ Who said what? How was I feeling?
 - ⇒ Think more broadly:
 - ⇒ What assumptions and expectations were there?
 - ⇒ Any bias or prejudice?
 - ⇒ Look to the past?
 - ⇒ Has this happened before? Traditions?
 - ⇒ Identify what is bad and what is good?
 - ⇒ Where is God in all this? How does God want me to change?

Some Benefits of keeping a Journal:

- It encourages us by revealing where God is at work.
- It gives us greater insight into our behaviour and where we need to grow spiritually.
- It helps us be more honest with ourselves and with God.
- It fosters prayer and patience & compassion for others.

Fasting - as a Spiritual Practice



Fasting is going without food (or some other thing) for a limited time for the spiritual purpose of focusing on *God* and glorifying Him. Fasting is not a hunger strike, nor trying to get *God* to do what we want; nor an attempt to earn our way into heaven, nor a way of appearing to be deeply spiritual.

Some Hints:

- ♦ Fasting usually helps our physical health, but check with your doctor if you are uncertain (e.g. diabetics, expectant mothers should probably not fast.)
- ♦ Fasting and Prayer go together.
- ♦ Begin gently. Try missing one meal. Then fast from after dinner until the next dinner, missing breakfast and lunch, drinking fruit juice. Then try drinking only water.
- ♦ Your stomach will initially complain - especially at meal time. Try sipping a drink at those times (not too cold).
- ♦ Then consider longer periods. Headaches from caffeine withdrawal and feelings of weakness or dizziness will pass.

Some Benefits of Fasting:

- It puts the non-essential things in perspective. "We do not live by bread alone..."
- We affirm and experience another world. Fasting is feasting.
- We humbly learn to trust *God* to sustain us.
- It develops self-control over our body. Our bodily passions need not rule over us.
- It often reveals the things that control us (anger, pride...), and begins to deal with them.

Guidance - as a Spiritual Practice

Guidance is a spiritual exercise or practice in the sense that the more we practice seeking God's guidance, the better we get at recognising the Good Shepherd's voice.

"He goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." John 10:4

Some Hints:

- ◆ Spend time quietly with God. Read your Bible and pray, but also listen expectantly. (Jer 6:16; Acts 10:9-16)
- ◆ Write down what you sense God is guiding you to do, whether it is words or a picture, or a prophecy. (Acts 2:17,18)
- ◆ Test it against God's Word in the Bible. God doesn't contradict himself. (Acts 17:11)
- ◆ Reflect on whether the circumstances of life confirm the guidance. God will open and close doors. (Rev 3:8)
- ◆ Explain how God is guiding you to trusted Christian friends or mentors and seek their wise counsel, and words of prophecy or knowledge. Listen and consider what they say. (Prov 12:15) Guidance is best tested together with others. (Acts 15:22,28) Our preoccupation with private guidance comes more from Western individualism than from the Bible.
- ◆ Don't forget to use your common sense. Guidance is not an escape from wise, responsible decision making. (Jam 1:5; 3:13)

Some Benefits of Guidance:

- We grow in following God's will and God's ways.
- We get better at identifying our own selfish ways or hidden motives and confessing them to God.
- We grow closer together and support each other as we seek and test guidance together.

Spiritual Direction - as a Spiritual Practice

A Spiritual Director is a trained person we can talk with about our relationship with God and our Christian walk. He or she will help us discern what God is saying and where God is leading.

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Je 29:13)

How can spiritual direction help?

- ◆ It provides a special time to discuss how we hear from God.
- ◆ Sharing our deepest thoughts, feelings and inner struggles can help us understand our spiritual journey better.
- ◆ It enables us to assess our growth as Christians.
- ◆ A Spiritual Director can often ask the hard questions about our relationship with God, that everyone else is too polite to ask us.
- ◆ It helps us discern if we are seeking "the narrow way" and faithfully following Christ, or just being stubborn
- ◆ It helps us discover our blind spots.
- ◆ It will be beneficial only if we seriously want to grow and make progress on our spiritual journey
- ◆ Meeting regularly with a spiritual director (every month to six weeks) provides a sense of progress.

A trusted, mature, Christian friend can help us reflect on our relationship with God in a more mutual and informal way. This might be someone who is a prayer partner. It can happen within a home group/small group if there is agreement about being open and honest with each other, and that confidentiality is assured.



Chastity - as a Spiritual Practice

We live in a culture of sensual stimulation and temptation. Chastity or abstinence is to refrain from sexual acts, thoughts and desires as a way to freedom from domination by sex.

- Sex is not bad in itself, but part of God's good creation. God created us male and female and designed us to come together in faithful marriage. (Genesis 1-3)
- People get hurt by sexual relationships outside marriage
- Forgiveness and restoration can occur.

What can we do?

- ♦ We do have a will. We are not slaves to our desires.
- ♦ We can choose not to have sex. Even a married couple might agree to abstain for short periods of time as a spiritual practice to seek greater intimacy with God and with each other.
- ♦ A desire for intimacy, drama and excitement has drawn many people into a wrong sexual relationship, so:
 - ⇒ Experience other forms of intimacy such as praying together, looking into each other's eyes, talking about your hopes and dreams... (Careful that in our confused world this doesn't lead to sex)
 - ⇒ Have several close friends - don't get exclusive.
 - ⇒ Build healthy excitement, drama and joy into your life. Attempt great things for God and get caught up in the huge drama of the Kingdom of God.

Benefits:

- We realise we won't die if we don't have sex.
- Helps us deal with the thoughts that come to mind.
- Points us beyond the wow of sex to the wow of relationship.
- God becomes part of our sexual intimacy.

Submission - as a Spiritual Practice

God, today I submit
my **mind**, my **eyes**,
my **mouth**, my **ears**,
my **hands**, my **feet**,
my **heart**, my **whole**
life to you.
Use me for **your** purposes!

This exercise involves setting aside our own ideas and our own will as supreme and ultimate. Sadly, over the years this practise has been abused by men, and by leaders of religious cults who gained unhealthy control over people.

Submission does not mean:

- refusing to take responsibility for ourselves,
- abandoning our own judgment on matters of truth,
- or allowing others simply to dictate to us.

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21)

How do we practise healthy, biblical submission?

- ◆ Submit to God and His word. Thomas à Kempis' first words of the day were: "As Thou will, what Thou will; when Thou will." (meaning God's will be done, not ours)
- ◆ Submit to Family. Listen to each other and make allowances for each other.
- ◆ Submit to neighbours. Help out those in need with simple acts of kindness (Both those here and overseas)
- ◆ Submit to other Christians by looking to their interests.

Benefits:

- Frees us from the burden of having our own way and being all wise in our own eyes.
- It allows us to see that most things in life are not as important as we think they are.
- We discover that our happiness does not depend on getting what we want.
- Permits us to benefit from the wise counsel of others.
- Allows other people's ideas room to blossom and grow.

Service - as a Spiritual Practice

When we speak of serving and helping people, we often fear being exploited and walked over. But if we have voluntarily chosen to be a servant, we are free from worrying about being taken advantage of or manipulated.

True Service must be distinguished from self-righteous service.

- ◆ Self-righteous service is concerned with results and rewards. It needs to know that people see and appreciate our efforts. True service is free of the need to calculate results and is content to remain hidden and unacknowledged.
- ◆ Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims. It can serve only when it feels like it. True service helps simply and faithfully because there is a need.
- ◆ Self-righteous service is without sensitivity. It insists on meeting the need even when it is destructive to do so. True service can withhold the service as freely as perform it. It can serve by waiting in silence.
- ◆ Self-righteous service destroys community because it centres on the glorification of the server. True service builds community because it quietly and unpretentiously cares for the needs of others without obligation for the service to be returned.

The results of serving:

- We learn humility. (John 13:1-17)
- We realise our time and agenda are not as important as we thought.
- It helps us experience God's love for people, even our enemies.

Simplicity - as a Spiritual Practice

Simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle that is not extravagant, not lusting for status or power, and not dominated by material possessions.

Some Hints:

- ♦ The key is in Matt 6:33 "seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." God's Kingdom comes first - even before a simple lifestyle.
- ♦ Try having a simple (and cheap) meal once a week and giving the money you save to someone in need.
- ♦ Instead of asking, "How can I earn more?" ask, "How can I spend less?" The greatest saving is the 'bargain' you decide you don't need to buy.
- ♦ Learn to enjoy things without owning them. Enjoy the beach without feeling we have to buy a piece of it.
- ♦ Avoid making new 'laws' about Christian lifestyle, but discover what 'treasures' you have that may compete with God for your heart. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt 6:21)
- ♦ But, don't be stingy, shabby, small, or mean. God is not poor.

Sim·plic·i·ty  [sim-plis-i-tee]

noun

Some Benefits of Simplicity:

- Simplicity trains us to be comfortable without having all our wants and desires met.
- It helps break the power of mammon (wealth) over us and sets us free to give.
- Simplicity helps us to be free from anxiety.
- We learn more about being grateful for God's gifts to us.