

Spiritual Formation: Other Spiritual Practices and Principles

Part Three of Three Part Series

Thesis: I want to challenge and encourage you to find ways to posture yourself before the Lord and to grow in your capacity to be aware of your God.

Text: *“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 NASB).*

The Lord wants to meet with you. He wants to make his home in and with you. That is really good news. More than you want to connect with the Living God, he wants to connect with you.

For any relationship to grow, it takes time, talk, and touch. We want to spend time with the people whom we love. We communicate with the people we love in so many different ways. And, we spend time just being with those we love, becoming aware of how close we are. We find ways to reach out and connect.

I want to challenge and encourage you to find ways to posture yourself before the Lord and to grow in your capacity to be aware of your God.

Jesus knows how to connect with God. Jesus knows how to obey the Father and to walk in the Spirit. The Father and the Spirit are committed to helping you become more like Jesus in your actions, attitudes, affections, and character. To become more like Jesus, it is necessary to engage in spiritual practices like Jesus did—spiritual practices that empowered him to connect with the Father and to be available to the Holy Spirit.

If you plan to live the life that Jesus would live if Jesus were living your life, you must emulate his lifestyle of spiritual practices.

You will want to distinguish spiritual disciplines (which are a focus on your inner life) from religious activity (which focuses on external rules and traditions).

Spiritual practices are a means to connect deeply and authentically with God, self, and others—not an end in and of themselves.

A Spiritual Workout is a rhythm of spiritual practices designed to bring about breakthrough in your relationship to God, to others, and to yourself. A Spiritual Workout is a rhythm of practices that empower you to bring all of what you know about yourself to all of what you know about God. The outcome of consistently engaging in a rhythm of spiritual practices is that you will be able to

bring your true self to loving God, others and yourself—when it is easy and when it is really challenging.

You don't do these [spiritual practices] to get God's approval or so that God will love you more. Instead, you do it believing that Jesus knows better than anyone how to experience the fullness of being a beloved child of God who knows with clarity what God created him to be and to do. This is distinctly different from how people often approach spiritual practices. Far too often, a common practice is to ritualistically set aside half an hour in the mornings because you have a vague sense that this is "the right thing to do"—that is, you think that practicing the disciplines brings righteousness, when they were only ever intended to bring wisdom. When you see the disciplines as an end in themselves rather than a tool to help you connect with God and with yourself as a beloved child of God, you fall into the trap the Pharisees found themselves in:

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).

[Another] thing to keep in mind when developing your own Spiritual Workout is that the practices themselves are not the starting place. That is, the first question to ask is not "What practices do I want to engage?" but, rather, "Where do I want to experience breakthrough in my life?"

Once you have determined what it is you're seeking, then think about what discipline would be the most helpful. Are you seeking peace? Consider cultivating a regular practice of stillness and solitude. Do you struggle with shame? Try meditating on God's love or connecting with a coach or a counselor who can provide a safe listening space. Are you lacking joy? Try regularly engaging in an activity that makes you feel fully alive—for example, art, music, athletics, cooking. There are many resources available to give you a survey of the traditional (and not so traditional) spiritual practices. The important thing to remember is that any given practice is only effective insofar as it helps you to connect with the living God (Faithwalking 201 pps. 26-30).

A key to practicing the spiritual disciplines successfully is to practice them out of desire rather than obligation. You don't do it because you think it is good idea or because you ought to do it. Rather, you do a particular spiritual practice, with the Lord helping you, to connect with the Lord and to experience breakthrough in your life in some area with the Lord.

Practices: Here is an overview of some spiritual practices to help you connect deeply and authentically with God, self, and others.

1. Journaling / reflection

- a. Journaling is writing out your prayers to the Lord and/or reflecting in the Lord's presence.
- b. It is a way to reflect rather than to react.
- c. It is a way to capture and pray through dreams, visions, and other revelation.
- d. It is a way to focus your mind, heart, and spirit, even in the busiest of places.
- e. It is a way to celebrate progress and to become aware of what the Lord is doing and wants to do in your life.
- f. Journaling helps you to tune in to the Lord and to tune out the world around you.

2. Discipline of awareness

- a. It is learning to attune your heart, mind, and spirit to the Lord throughout the day
- b. We want to have a growing awareness of the Lord.
- c. We desire to have a listening heart and attentive focus.
- d. We seek to pay attention to the Lord and what he is doing in us and around us.
- e. You can practice the discipline of awareness when you are doing anything at home, work, or play, and in your relationships and responsibilities.

3. Authenticity: Walking in the light and having Transformation Conversations

- a. Authenticity is about sharing with others in openness and honesty, and in a way that is clear, authentic, and passionate.
- b. Share about what is getting stirred up in you, what the Lord is putting his finger on, what you are celebrating, what you are becoming aware of, or what your current reality and preferred future are in specific areas of your life.
- c. The benefit of walking in the light and having transformation conversations is that it keeps transformation alive in you and gives room for the Holy Spirit to speak to other people.

4. Praying the Scripture

- a. This is reading the Word of God and praying it back to the Lord.
- b. Yes, there are times to read and study.
- c. And, I believe that the majority of our time in the Word is for connecting with the Lord in prayer and obedience.
- d. We don't sit in judgment over the Word of God; rather, we let the word of God examine us and speak to us.

- e. I find it helpful to read the Word and pray it out loud to help me practice this disciple relationally.
- f. Let the Word of God lead you to the Lord, not just inform about the Lord.

5. Fasting

- a. Fasting is saying “no” to something so that you can say a better “yes” to something else.
- b. Fasting is saying that you are hungrier for the Lord than for other things.
- c. Fasting helps to attune us to the Lord and to his voice and presence.
- d. When you fast (Matthew 6:16): Jesus assumed that we would fast, so he teaches us to do it in a way that honors God and benefits us.
 - i. *“When you fast, don’t look like those who pretend to be spiritual. They want everyone to know they’re fasting, so they appear in public looking miserable, gloomy, and disheveled. Believe me, they’ve already received their reward in full. When you fast, don’t let it be obvious, but instead, wash your face and groom yourself and realize that your Father in the secret place is the one who is watching all that you do in secret and will continue to reward you openly” (Matthew 6:16-18 Passion Translation).*

6. Giving

- a. Giving is growing in the capacity to be generous like your Heavenly Father.
- b. For me, giving starts with tithing, because the first-fruits and first ten percent belongs to the Lord.
- c. And, I want to get in on the kingdom economy rather than operating under the economic systems of this world, which are limited and broken.

7. Unplugging

- a. Unplugging calls you to leave the virtual world of technology in order to become present to God and others.
- b. It recognizes that personal beings are created for personal interaction with a personal God and with others.

8. Celebration

- a. Celebration is a way of engaging in actions that orient the spirit toward worship, praise, and thanksgiving.
- b. It involves identifying and pursuing the things that bring the heart deep gladness and reveling in them before the Lord.

9. Community

- a. Community exists when people connect with each other in authentic and loving ways that encourage growth in experiencing the love of God.

- b. True Christian Community means that people engage in authentic and vulnerable relationships that cultivate, celebrate, and make evident God's love for all the world.

10. Hospitality

- a. Hospitality creates a safe, open space where a friend or stranger can enter and experience the welcoming spirit of God in another.
- b. Hospitality is about connecting with others deeply and blessing them.

This list is just a small sample of the countless disciplines that are out there. There are books on spiritual practices and spiritual disciplines that can help you. And, anything can be a spiritual practice if it helps you connect with the Lord.

Resources for further study

- *The Celebration of the Disciplines* by Richard Foster
- *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard
- *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun
- *Relational Christianity* by Steve Meeks

Principles: Here are some keys for helping you engage the Lord and stay active in spiritual practices.

- 1. Practice the disciplines intentionally.**
 - a. Tell others what you want to get in action around and declare your intentionality.
 - b. Engage the disciplines with sufficient intentionality that they create space to connect with the Lord.
 - c. Get coaching or input in helping you to do the disciplines and to connect with the Lord.
 - d. Remember, mastery takes a lifetime. Don't give up; don't quit. If you don't quit, you win.
- 2. Practice the disciplines relationally, not perfunctorily or out of duty.**
 - a. Engage your heart and head in the spiritual practices.
 - b. Just don't check them off your to do list.
 - c. Prior to doing your spiritual discipline(s), ask the Lord to meet with you, to reward you and to help you (Hebrews 11:6).
- 3. Find disciplines that fit your lifestyle and your current stage in life.**
 - a. Some people say that they are going to set aside 2 hours a day to pray and have solitude. Then, they feel guilty when they don't make the time

because they have young children or they have a job that takes 10 hours a day.

- b. Find what works for you and schedule them accordingly.
4. **Be flexible with your schedule and inflexible with your priorities.**
 - a. In other words, you can flexible on when you do spiritual practices; just make sure that they are the priority in your day.
 - b. My schedule changes almost every day. So, I don't have set times each day when I do the disciplines. Therefore, I am flexible with my schedule, but I still keep my priority of meeting with the Lord through spiritual practices each day.
 - c. Schedule your disciplines; scheduling helps you to be intentional. Be flexible with your schedule, but keep your priority of meeting with the Lord that day.
5. **Find disciplines that work for you and help you to connect with the Lord.**
 - a. Journaling was so helpful for me when I was going to seminary, working full time, and raising a family. Today, it is still one of my "go to" spiritual practices to help me focus on, reflect with, and engage with the Lord.
 - b. Prayerwalking is a way that I engage my total being in connecting with the Lord.
6. **Engage in a mixture of daily, weekly, and occasional spiritual practices.**
 - a. You may want to do some practices every day at a particular time.
 - b. Other practices fit better in a weekly schedule.
 - c. Still other practices may happen only once every so many months (like taking a whole day of solitude or doing a personal retreat).
7. **Try both traditional creative spiritual practices.**
 - a. There are a few practices that are considered time-tested classics. Specifically, most people could benefit from a regular practice of solitude. However, don't feel limited by the well-known disciplines. Often, the most life-giving Spiritual Workouts are those that allow you to experience God, yourself or others in brand new ways. Remember, anything that helps you connect with God, yourself or others can be engaged as a spiritual practice (e.g., going on a walk, getting a meal with good friends, taking one day a week to rest from work, playing an instrument, taking a nap and so on) (Faithwalking 201 pps. 33-34).
8. **Make adjustments as needed in your spiritual practice.**
 - a. Ask: Is this practice helping me connect more authentically with God, myself, and others?
 - b. If not, try something else.
 - c. Remember, there are seasons to life. A spiritual practice that was helpful in one season may lose its impact in another season.

Summary

The outcome of consistently engaging in a rhythm of spiritual practices is that you will be able to bring your true self to loving God, others and yourself—when it is easy and when it is really challenging.

The purpose of spiritual practices is to help you connect more authentically with God, yourself, and others.

Question

What are some spiritual practices that will help you connect deeply and authentically with God, self, and others?