

## Spiritual Disciplines Series - Spring 2006 - King's Centre Church

### **Study & the Word (12.02.06)**

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#### Introduction

A couple of weeks ago now Marjorie gave a very helpful and stirring introduction to the topic of the Spiritual Disciplines. She painted a picture of *why* it is worth putting effort into the Christian walk, *why* we should aim to build out life with deep foundations. This week – I'm going to give a little more introduction to the topic of the Disciplines of the Spiritual Life, and speak about one in particular – study, and related to that, the Bible.

#### Disciplines of the Spiritual Life

Another way of phrasing what we are looking into is the 'Disciplines of the Spiritual Life'.

In everyday life – lets call it 'natural life' or 'physical life', we practice disciplines regularly, so that they become routine and we get good at them.

- I have repeated my mobile phone number so that I know it off-by-heart
- I have built up my fitness programme at the gym so that I can cycle, run, row and cross-train for about an hour, including well-earned breaks
- We practice our car-driving, so that we are confident to drive on the road alone at night and not hit people
- In other words – we are all, already, engaged in the disciplines of life, to aid our 'natural' lives. And a lot of it is achieved by routine, but training, in other words - by discipline

As Christians we are followers of Christ. To know Him, to have our characters changed to be more like Him, to love Him, to act like Him, to share in His salvation on earth and after death, to make Him known. The aim of the Disciplines of the Spiritual Life is to build our routine responses to be Christ-like. To be Christlike in character and in action. To do everything Jesus commanded & laid as example (how to genuinely bless someone who is cursing at you, how to be able to pray without ceasing, to deflect the arrows of the enemy) and to possess the fullness of life that is on offer.

You know the phrase WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? I want to act like Jesus would act in any given situation – that's one of the aims of being a follower of the master, Jesus. But – have you ever thought about how Jesus got Himself into the situation of being *able* to act like that? The *HOW* of Jesus – the How Did Jesus Do It? the TRAINING of Jesus – the INNER LIFE and PREPARATION of Jesus. Because even He had to train and live in a certain kind of way, using the Disciplines of the Spiritual Life, in order to be able to respond to given situations with such grace, humility, authority, power, endurance etc, in the way we see recorded in the gospels.

Jesus' emphasis was on the inner life. That's what needs to be changed and developed.

- The heart & motivations.
- The food of the soul - where the nourishment is coming from (is it good nourishment or bad?) And what activities of the body we need to do (or not do), in order to be able to change and mature, and become more Christ-like

I want to make the point that many of the Disciplines of the Spiritual Life are actually focussed on our bodies – our physical self, not our 'spiritual' self. So don't go away from today thinking that the Spiritual Disciplines are all about a battle of the mind. They aren't – they are primarily achieved

with our body – fasting, solitude, service, prayer. Last week – Paul – spoke about Silence & Solitude – both of which involve what you do (or do not do) with your bodies.

Having said that, we need to have faith too, and much of that is Head knowledge – to believe Jesus, what he taught and knew to be true. The Spiritual Disciplines are to mould us to be more obedient to Trinity. We've got to *want* to be obedient first, because we know and love God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit

- One of the key ways of building our faith is...the word of God and the study of the Bible.
- Romans 10:17 - Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Finally in overview of the Disciplines of the Spiritual Life – as we work through this series, we will be covering some of the habits which Christians over the years, centuries in fact, have found to be useful in developing the Christian walk, as well as taking the example of Jesus and St Paul.

There is no fixed set of SDs or programme – none given in bible. But you can pull some specific practices out

- Eg. Jesus = Fasting, prayer, solitude, fellowship, study
- Col 3:1-17 good list too
- As we've mentioned, the list can broadly be separated into 2 kinds of discipline
  - Abstinence
    - we deliberately abstain from something for a period (usually something normal and even nice in life) in order to clean out our inner selves, to make space for more of God and his spirit. To subjugate – to bring under our control – these desires and controlling ways of behaviour, to get the balance right between these normal and nice things in life and the life of the kingdom of God
  - Engagement
    - The balance to abstinence (and vice versa). To make up for what practices we miss out in regular life, which are significant to living kingdom lives. Deliberately taking-on certain acts, in order to grow in Christ-likeness

## Study and the Bible

Knowing the word of God as revealed through the scriptures is vital to a healthy Christian life. I'm sure you agree. One of the reasons it's a key discipline is because to be successful at this training course – this curriculum for Christ-likeness, we need to have a vision, a goal. Knowing the character and voice of God builds in us that vision and goal.

The scriptures – and I recommend you read and study both the OT and NT – are the primary place where we can find God revealed, and hear His word to us today.

- **2 Tim 3:15-17** "...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."
- **Psalm 37:30-31** The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is just. The law of his God is in his heart; his feet do not slip.
- **Psalm 119:9-11** How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
  - That is surely one of our chief aims. How to build in-grained habits, inner responses in life so that our automatic responses to pressure or opportunity are in line with the

principles of living the kingdom life. Basically – being Christ-like. Our inner life needs to start with /have a major part in the love of his WORD

- The writer to the Hebrews makes the point that we should be aiming to be spiritually mature and that comes from a knowledge of the word of God
  - **Hew 5:12-14** – “In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”

So we must become familiar with an overview of the scriptures, and the key themes, teaching etc in them. Then we can apply it to specific circumstances in life. **Titus 1:1-3** – Paul says a knowledge of the truth leads to Godliness (or Christ-likeness). So we are back to the question Paul Maconochie posed a couple of weeks ago – where am I taking my counsel? What is imputing into my life, my mind, my motivations, my thoughts, my eyes and ears etc.

## **Study as a Spiritual Discipline**

To recap – The Aim of SDs – transformation of our inner life, by disciplines of physical and mental self. If you are genuinely wanting to be a disciple – to learn to live for, obey and love God the Trinity deeply, then you need to get into this discipline of study. Our relationship with God, as with any person, requires a contribution from us – and the main way of getting to know God is through the scriptures.

Other things are great too – Worship, prayer, spirit gifts, but you need the depth of understanding and knowledge of God to underpin them. And much prayer, worship, spiritual warfare etc is based on the character of God – and understanding God's character comes from studying his Word.

We are transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom 12:2). So we need to apply to the mind, those things which will transform it towards Christ (and avoid some of those things which won't – Phil 4:8). What we study will influence the shape our minds & thoughts come out afterwards

- (eg. if you read 'Hello!' your mind will be full of celebrities,
- if you study 'Men's Health' it will be full of useful tips of keeping healthy)
- Our minds/heads are full of clutter! Of 'unholy' thoughts – almost every minute of every day. I say things in my head about the car driver in front of me that I certainly wouldn't want to say to his face! I catch myself being what the apostle Paul calls 'double-minded'

Study is the primary discipline of *engagement* (as solitude is the primary abstinence). Jesus knew the scriptures inside out, so did St Paul. **The key purpose is not to know more doctrine – its inner transformation**

- Study – not just the bible,
  - other good Christian authors, teachers, biographies of Christians etc
  - Also study the world around you and analyse it in light of God, his plan for redemption etc
    - Nature is full of lessons to us (its all God's creation) Sowing, seasons (eg. winter now, followed by spring)
    - Human interactions - How people act towards each other? Jostling for position, serving, justifying? What controls people? Observe their lives (TV, money, time, partner, job). What frees other people?

- See what the Word of God has to say about situations – eg. Jesus’ teaching about our characters in Sermon on Mount, or the insights of Proverbs often really come alive in everyday situations. You see something going on, and you think “ah, the Bible has something to say about this.....”
- Foster – 4 steps of study
  - Repetition (channelling the mind in a direction regularly – to build in-grained habits)
  - Concentration (focus the mind, give your attention to it)
  - Comprehension (leads to insight & discernment)
  - Reflection (to understand the significance of what we are studying. To see things in God’s perspective)
- This applies to reading books too - What is the author saying (understanding). What does the author mean (interpreting). Is the author right? (Evaluating). How many times have a you read a book, then put it down and forgotten 95% of its contents?
- Use the LEARNING CIRCLE. To be useful it must be linked with reflection, meditation (which is devotional not analytical like study)

### **You turn information into wisdom & knowledge – thru reflection & application**

Foster – mediation & study not the same thing, tho they overlap. Mediation is devotional not analytical like study. Study provides a framework, its objective, it lays the foundations upon which to mediate. Practically, for most of us study is not something we have (or make) time for in everyday life. I hope that you make the effort to read your bible every day (even if it is a small bit).

But study is slightly different – its looking indepth, thinking around what you are reading and investigating. How often do you read a passage, think to yourself “well what on earth was that about?” And then move on with the day, and never get around to finding out what it was about!

Nick example – Amazed at how little time it took me to understand something of Isaiah and the prophets at St Johns. A 2 or 3 hour session on Isaiah and you’ve got an overview of its structure, history, what some of the passages refer to. So – it doesn’t have to take much to open up the scriptures

### **Study of scripture is different from devotional reading of scripture**

- Study – priority on understanding & *interpreting* it – what it means
- Devotional - priority on *application* - interpreting it *for me*
- Daily devotional reading is important – but it is not study (its usually very short, for a start)

You need to be humble (might sound odd). But you can’t expect to be a teacher all the time, sometimes you’ve got to be a pupil. One of the character traits that HS will be improving thru SDs is a ‘teachable spirit’ and that’s necessary for study. Be ready to be challenged, and even have our ideas changed by God

Neither is it an academic pursuit for the sake of it. You don’t have to be academic. Remember ‘the Word of God is living and active’ (Hew 4:12). Expect and ask God to help you, and speak to you through His Word. God gives us wisdom & understanding thru his Word .

Study social stuff too like culture, films, whats going on in ethics, impact technology, future of the church (& sharing the gospel) in light of this etc

## **Practical examples of how to study**

- Retreat
  - o For a half/full day
  - o Away from home & distractions
  - o Sunday afternoon?
  - o For an evening a week for a time - during Lent etc
- Start with the bible (and a helpful book/commentary)
  - o Read a whole book through
  - o Or a whole section – Paul’s letters, Gospels, Books of the Law
  - o Or read a whole smallish book repeatedly – jotting down thoughts, structure, questions
- Join other people
  - o Helps motivation and its fun
  - o You don’t have to be academic!
  - o To a short College course or Short-study block (Cliff College, Church Army etc)
  - o Distance Learning – (New Wine, Open Theological College, St Johns etc)
  - o KC can get a group going and bring in some quality teachers for specifics
  - o Find someone else who knows the scriptures better and spend time learning from them
  - o Day time group – read a short book (Ephesians etc) then a few people read a commentary on the book, come and discuss it
- Internet
  - o Loads of sites

## **Summary**

Think of the potential. Disciplines of the Spiritual Life train us to inherit the spiritual life. To be capable of receiving more of God’s life and power, and being able and fit to handle them. This series best followed up in SGroups & accountability – so join one!!

Study can be fun and enriching – it doesn’t have to be boring. “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hew. 4:12)

John Ortberg quote – “The words that bombard us all day long from billboards and tabloids and talk shows pull us in a thousand directions. But the word God speaks to us from his Word can renew our minds.” (*The Life you’ve always wanted* p.192)