

CHAPTER 10

# SILENCE AND SOLITUDE . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

*The word discipline has disappeared from our minds, our mouths, our pulpits, and our culture. We hardly know what discipline means in modern American society. And yet, there is no other way to attain godliness; discipline is the path to godliness.*

JAY ADAMS

My favorite short story is “The Bet,” by Anton Chekhov, a Russian writer of the last half of the nineteenth century. The plot involves a wager between two educated men regarding solitary confinement. A wealthy, middle-aged banker believed that the death penalty was a more humane penalty than solitary confinement because “an executioner kills at once, solitary confinement kills gradually.” One of his guests at a party, a young lawyer of twenty-five, disagreed, saying, “To live under any conditions is better than not to live at all.”

Angered, the banker impulsively responded with a bet of two million rubles that the younger man could not last five years in solitary confinement. Convinced of his endurance, the lawyer announced he would stay fifteen years alone instead of only five.

They agreed on the arrangements, and the young man moved into a separate building on the grounds of the banker’s large estate. He was allowed no visitors or newspapers. He could write letters but receive none. Guards watched to ensure he never violated the agreement, but were stationed so that he could not see them or any other human being from his windows. He received his food in silence through a small opening where he could not see the one who served him. Everything else he wanted—books, certain foods, musical instruments—was granted by special written request.

The story develops with a description of the things the lawyer asked for through the years and the observations of the guards who occasionally stole a glance through a window. During the first year the piano could be heard at almost any hour, and he asked for many books, mostly novels and other light reading. The next year the music ceased and the works of various classical authors were requested. In the sixth year of his isolation he began to study languages and soon had mastered six. After the tenth year of his confinement, the prisoner sat motionless at the table and read the New Testament. After more than a year’s saturation of the Bible, he began to study the history of religion and works on theology. During the last two years his reading broadened to cover many subjects in addition to theology.

The second half of the story focuses on the night before the noon deadline when the lawyer would win the bet. The banker was now at the end of his career. His risky speculations and impetuosity had gradually undermined his business. The once self-confident millionaire was now a second-rate banker, and paying off the wager would destroy him. Angry at his foolishness and jealous of the soon-to-be-wealthy man who was now only forty, the old banker determined to kill his opponent and frame the guard with the murder. Slipping into the man’s room, he found him asleep at the table and noticed a letter the lawyer had written to him. He picked it up and read the following:

Tomorrow at twelve o’clock I shall be free, . . . but before leaving this room, . . . I find it necessary to say a few words to you. With a clear conscience, and before God, who sees me, I declare to you that I despise . . . all that your books call the joys of this world. For fifteen years I have studied attentively the life of this world. It is true that I neither saw the earth nor its peoples, but in your books I lived. . . . I sang songs, I hunted the deer and the wild boar in the forests. . . . In your books I climbed to the summit of Elburz and Mont Blanc, and I saw from those heights the sun rise in the morning, and at night it shed its purple glow over the sky and



the ocean and the mountain-tops. I saw beneath me the flashing lightning cut through the clouds. I saw green fields, forests, rivers, lakes and towns. I heard the song of the sirens and the music of the shepherd's reed-pipes. I felt the touch of the wings of beautiful [angels] who had flown to me. . . . Your books gave me wisdom. All that had been achieved by the untiring brain of man during long centuries is stored in my brain in a small compressed mass. . . . I know I am wiser than you all. . . . And I despise all your books, I despise all earthly . . . wisdom. All is worthless and false, hollow and deceiving like the mirage. You may be proud, wise and beautiful, but death will wipe you away from the face of the earth, as it does the mice that live beneath your floor; and your heirs, your history, your immortal geniuses will freeze or burn with the destruction of the earth. You have gone mad and are not following the right path. You take falsehood for truth, and deformity for beauty. To prove to you how I despise all that you value I renounce the two millions on which I looked, at one time, as the opening of paradise for me, and which I now scorn. To deprive myself of the right to receive them, I will leave my prison five hours before the appointed time, and by so doing break the terms of our compact.

The banker read these lines, replaced the paper on the table, kissed the strange, sleeping man, and with tears in his eyes quietly left the house. Chekhov writes, "Never before, not even after sustaining serious losses . . . , had he despised himself as he did at that moment." His tears kept him awake the rest of the night. And at seven the next morning the watchmen ran in to say that they had seen the man crawl through a window, go to the gate, and then disappear.<sup>[1]</sup>

I don't advocate isolating ourselves in this way, and I do not think the Bible does, either. But my point in presenting the story is this: I believe Chekhov looks into a room where every Christian dreams of living—sometimes.

There is something both appealing and transforming about silence and solitude. And there are moments in our pressure-cooker lives when years of escape to some hidden place sounds wistfully compelling.

When we consider it in the light of Scripture, we realize that it would be neither right nor desirable to be cloistered from our God-given privileges and responsibilities involving other people. Biblical reality calls us to family, fellowship, evangelism, ministry, and other aspects of life together in the local church for the sake of Christ and His kingdom. And yet, sometimes our souls crave separation from noise and crowds into silence and solitude. Just as we must engage with others for some of the Disciplines of the Christian life,<sup>[2]</sup> so there are times when we must temporarily withdraw into the Disciplines of silence and solitude. In this chapter, we will explore what these twin Disciplines are, find biblical reasons for practicing them, and conclude with some sensible suggestions for starting.

## EXPLANATION OF SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

The Discipline of silence is the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought. Sometimes silence is observed in order to read the Bible, meditate on Scripture, pray, journal, and so on. Though there is no outward speaking, there may be intentional, biblical self-talk or prayer to God. At other times you might choose not to talk at all, but simply to focus your mind upon God and to "set your minds on things that are above" (Colossians 3:2), resting your soul in the love He displayed through Christ.

Solitude is the Spiritual Discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes. The period of solitude may last only a few minutes or for days. As with silence, solitude may be sought in order to participate without interruption in other Spiritual Disciplines, or just to be alone with God and think.

Three brief thoughts before proceeding in depth. First, think of silence and solitude as complementary Disciplines to fellowship. By fellowship I do not mean socializing, that is, talking about news, weather, sports, work, and family. In its broad, God-given place in life, socializing is a great blessing and enjoying it is part of what it means to be human. Biblical fellowship, however, involves talking about God and the things of God. Perhaps we do much less of that than we think, even at church. The emphasis here, though, is that fellowship requires interaction with other people, whereas



silence and solitude do not. It seems that each of us is inclined a little more in one direction than the other. That is, we enjoy meaningful conversation with other Christians more than solitude or vice versa. But both have a place in the life of a biblically consistent believer. Without silence and solitude we can be active, but shallow. Without fellowship we can be deep, but stagnant. Christlikeness requires both sides of the equation.

Second, silence and solitude are usually found together. Though they can be distinguished (as seen in the definitions above), in this chapter we will think of them as a pair.

Third, recognize that culture conditions us to be comfortable with noise and crowds, not with silence and solitude, and to feel more at home in a mall than at a park. In her book *Finding Focus in a Whirlwind World*, Jean Fleming observed, “We live in a noisy, busy world. Silence and solitude . . . fit the era of Victorian lace, high-button shoes, and kerosene lamps better than our age of television, video arcades, and joggers wired with earphones. We have become a people with an aversion to quiet and an uneasiness with being alone.” [3] This is confirmed by the inability of many to ever be at home or in a car by themselves without turning on some “background noise.” Unlike previous generations, technology now makes it possible for us to enjoy the benefits of news, music, educational content, and more whenever we want and wherever we are. But the downside is that the appeal and accessibility of these things means the elimination of almost all quiet spaces in our lives. More than any generation in history we must *discipline* ourselves to enjoy the blessings of silence and solitude. Therefore, be careful not to let the world prejudice you against the biblical witness on the importance of these matters.

## VALUABLE REASONS FOR SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

There are many biblical reasons for making priorities of the Disciplines of silence and solitude.

### *To Follow Jesus’ Example*

The Scriptures teach that Jesus engaged in periods of silence and solitude, some for only a few minutes or hours, and at least one for several days. Note these four references:

1. Matthew 4:1: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” The primary purpose of this event was for Jesus to receive and conquer Satan’s temptations. Still, we note that the Holy Spirit led Jesus to experience this encounter during a lengthy period of fasting and solitude.
2. Matthew 14:23: “After he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.” He sent both the seeking multitudes and His disciples away so He could be alone with the Father.
3. Mark 1:35: “Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.” The previous verses tell us that after dark “the whole city” gathered at the door of the house where Jesus was staying. There He healed many people and cast out demons. But before it was daylight again, He went to spend time alone in prayer. Jesus knew that had He waited until after sunrise, He would have been surrounded again by the curious eyes and urgent voices of the whole city.
4. Luke 4:42: “When it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them.” Put yourself in Jesus’ sandals for a moment. People are clamoring for your help and have many real needs, and you are able to meet all those needs. Can you ever feel justified in pulling away to be alone? Jesus did. We love to feel wanted. We savor the sense of importance/power/indispensability (pick one) that comes from doing something no one else can do. But Jesus did not allow those desires to determine His course of action. Despite the interminable cries of people pressing forward with needs He had the power to meet (indeed, on some occasions He “healed them all”—Matthew 12:15; Luke 6:19), Jesus knew the importance of disciplining Himself to have some time alone with the Father.



By now the point should be obvious: To be more like Jesus we must discipline ourselves to find times of silence and solitude. Then through these Disciplines we can pursue many of the blessings Jesus experienced through them.

### *To Minimize Distractions in Prayer*

One of the more obvious reasons for getting away from the sounds and surroundings that divert our attention is to better focus the mind in prayer. In addition to the examples of Jesus in the previous section, other biblical examples of this might include Elijah going to “Horeb, the mount of God” (1 Kings 19:8) where he heard the “low whisper” of God (see 19:11-13), Habakkuk entering a guard post and keeping watch to hear from and answer to God (see Habakkuk 2:1), and possibly the apostle Paul going away to Arabia after his conversion where he was presumably alone with God (see Galatians 1:17).

Of course, it isn’t absolutely necessary to get far away from noises and people in order to pray, otherwise we’d rarely be able to pray in the course of everyday life or in a prayer meeting. But there are times when it helps to eliminate the voices of the world in order to lift our voices without distraction to the God of heaven.

According to Jonathan Edwards, this desire to be alone with God was part of what attracted him to Sarah Pierpont. In his first record of her, penned while his future wife was still a teenager, he wrote, “She hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on Him. . . . She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.”<sup>[4]</sup> Where Sarah had “fields and groves,” we may have to walk in the park, around the block, or find another place for regular solitude. Wherever it is, it’s good to have a place where we can withdraw and speak uninterrupted with Him whose presence is unseen yet more real than any other.

Many of us need to realize the addiction we have to noise. It’s one thing to listen to the television or another device while doing housework or chores, but it’s another to be unable to stay in a room for a while without it. Even worse is the requirement of background noise during Bible intake or prayer. Sometimes ambient music can mask other, unwanted sounds and increase concentration. But I’m referring to a dependence upon music, an inability to function in silence and solitude. As I’ve mentioned, the portability and accessibility of technology is a mixed blessing. While we should be grateful for its massive benefits, we should also recognize its invasive, distracting tendencies. The more we use audio and video technology, the more we need to learn the Disciplines of silence and solitude.

### *To Express Worship to God*

The worship of God does not always require words, sounds, or actions. Sometimes worship consists of a God-focused stillness and hush. Scriptural precedent for this includes texts like Habakkuk 2:20, “But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him”; Zephaniah 1:7, “Be silent before the Lord GOD”; and Zechariah 2:13, “Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD.” Notice that it’s not just a silence that’s enjoined, but a silence “before him,” “before the Lord GOD,” and “before the LORD.” That’s not merely silence; it’s a worshipful silence. There are times to speak to God, and there are times simply to behold and adore Him in silence.

Recorded in the journals of the great evangelist George Whitefield is an incident of silent worship that he once had in the solitude of his home. He wrote that in the May 9, 1739, experience, “God was pleased to pour into my soul a great spirit of supplication, and a sense of His free, distinguishing mercies so filled me with love, humility, and joy and holy confusion that I could at last only pour out my heart before Him in an awful silence. I was so full that I could not well speak. Oh, the happiness of communion with God.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Worshiping God in silence may occur because your heart, like Whitefield’s, is so full that words cannot express your love for Him. At other times you may feel just the opposite, so passionless that any words seem hypocritical. Regardless of the state of your emotions, there is always a place for wordless worship, a God-centered silence based upon what God has revealed of Himself in His Word.

### *To Express Faith in God*



The simple act of silence before the Lord, as opposed to coming to Him in a wordy fret, can be a demonstration of faith in Him. Twice in Psalm 62 David displayed this kind of faith. In verses 1-2 he affirmed, “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.” Then in verses 5-6, he said again, “For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.” Verbalized prayers can sometimes be filled more with fear and doubt than faith; silence before the Lord can sometimes express more faith and submission to God’s providence than words.

A favorite verse of many, Isaiah 30:15, connects silence before God with faith in Him: “Thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, ‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in *quietness* and in *trust* shall be your strength’” (emphasis added). Trust in the Lord God is frequently expressed through prayer. But sometimes it is better exhibited through a wordlessness before the Lord that, by its quiet absence of anxiety, communicates trust in His sovereign control.

I discovered a daily-life illustration of this in the journal of the early American missionary to the Indians, David Brainerd. On Wednesday, April 28, 1742, he wrote,

Withdrew to my usual place of retirement in great peace and tranquility, and spent about two hours in secret duties. I felt much as I did yesterday morning, only weaker and more overcome. I seemed to hang and depend wholly upon my dear Lord; wholly weaned from all other dependences. *I knew not what to say to my God, but only lean on his bosom*, as it were, and breathe out my desires after a perfect conformity to him in all things. Thirsting desires and insatiable longings possessed my soul after perfect holiness: God was so precious to my soul that the world with all its enjoyments was infinitely vile: I had no more value for the favor of men than for pebbles. The Lord was my all; and he overruled all; which greatly delighted me. *I think my faith and dependence upon God scarce ever rose so high. I saw him such a fountain of goodness, that it seemed impossible I should distrust him again, or be any way anxious about anything that should happen to me.* [6]

We may not be able to express ourselves in a journal as well as Brainerd, but we can, in seasons where we intersperse supplication with silence, express our faith to God in ways He deems equally precious.

### ***To Seek the Salvation of the Lord***

Times of silence and solitude to seek the salvation of the Lord can refer either to a non-Christian seeking salvation from sin and guilt in Christ or to a believer seeking God’s salvation from certain circumstances. The words of Jeremiah in Lamentations 3:25-28 are appropriate in either case: “The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit *alone in silence* when it is laid on him” (emphasis added).

In a sermon on this text, C. H. Spurgeon said:

I commend solitude to any of you who are seeking salvation, first, that you may study well your case as in the sight of God. Few men truly know themselves as they really are. Most people have seen themselves in a looking-glass, but there is another looking-glass, which gives true reflections, into which few men look. To study one’s self in the light of God’s Word, and carefully to go over one’s condition, examining both the inward and the outward sins, and using all the tests which are given us in the Scriptures, would be a very healthy exercise; but how very few care to go through it! [7]

As Spurgeon later did on this and all occasions when he was in the pulpit, and as we find throughout the New Testament narratives, whenever the Bible is publicly preached we too should call people to seek salvation in “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2) without delay. But in addition to such a call to hearers among the crowds, we shouldn’t minimize the value of urging seclusion to help avoid distractions when considering the state of one’s soul. Solitude and silence can



help us come to grips with the realities of our sin, death, judgment, and so on—solemn themes that are frequently drowned out of our consciousness by the audio track of everyday life. Given the ubiquity of the sights and sounds conveyed by personal technology, how often do you think an unconverted person sits alone, attention undiverted, and considers himself or herself in light of the gospel? In my estimation, the incidence per one million people is extremely rare. We should never reduce the emphasis on coming to Christ immediately, but we also need to encourage people more to “sit alone in silence” and, in Spurgeon’s words, “to study one’s self in the light of God’s Word.”

### ***To Be Physically and Spiritually Restored***

Everyone has a regular need for restoring the resources of both the inward and outward person. It was true even for those who lived most closely with Jesus. After spending themselves in several days of physical and spiritual output, notice the means of replenishment Jesus prescribed for His disciples: “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). Doesn’t that sound good?

Like the twelve disciples, we all need times to unstring the bow of our routine stresses and enjoy the restoration that retreat can provide for our bodies and souls.

One evening I saw a news report about the life of pianist Glenn Gould. He was described as a miraculous instrumentalist when he burst onto the music scene as a teenager during the 1950s. He toured the world and amazed listeners with his skills. But in 1964 he quit playing in public. From then on, even though he was one of the world’s greatest pianists, Gould played only in private and for recording. Even his recording sessions were accomplished in complete privacy. He was convinced that *isolation* was the only way to create. Anyone who likewise has to “create” music, lessons, papers, reports, sermons, art, presentations, and so on knows that it can’t be done well in five-minute snatches between digital or personal interruptions. Gould’s musical monkishness is not a practice most can or should imitate. But as he found that isolation helped him to create, discover for yourself how silence and solitude help to physically and spiritually *re-create* you in ways that are deeply therapeutic.

### ***To Regain a Spiritual Perspective***

One of the best ways to step back and get a more balanced, less worldly perspective on matters is through the Disciplines of silence and solitude.

When Zechariah was told by the angel Gabriel that he and his elderly wife would miraculously have a son, he doubted. In response Gabriel said, “And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time” (Luke 1:20). And what happened to Zechariah’s perspective about these things during this time of enforced silence? When the baby was born, Luke 1:63-64 says, “He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.” A negative illustration perhaps, but it shows how closing our mouths can sometimes help us open our minds to see things God’s way.

One of the most famous and life-changing events in the life of Billy Graham happened in August 1949, immediately preceding the Los Angeles crusade that thrust him into national prominence. For a short period prior to Graham, the unofficial title of North America’s best-known evangelist applied to a man named Chuck Templeton. However, by 1949 Templeton was crumbling spiritually under the influence of men who doubted the inspiration of Scripture, and this eventually led to his complete denial of the faith. He began to share with Graham the books and ideas that were shaping him. And only days before Graham drove to California, Templeton told him that by continuing to believe the Bible the young evangelist was committing intellectual suicide.

While speaking at a youth conference in the San Bernardino Mountains, Graham knew he had to get God’s perspective on the matter, and he found it through solitude. Here’s how he described that night: “I went back alone to the cottage and read in my Bible for a while, and then I decided to take a walk in the forest.” There he recalled that phrases such as “the Word of the Lord came” and “thus saith the Lord” were used more than two thousand times in Scripture. He meditated on the attitude of Christ, who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, who quoted from them constantly and never indicated that they



might be wrong. As he walked he said, “Lord, what shall I do? What shall be the direction of my life?” He saw that intellect alone couldn’t resolve the question of the Bible’s inspiration and authority. Beyond that it ultimately became an issue of faith. He thought of the faith he had in many everyday things that he did not thoroughly understand, such as airplanes and cars, and asked himself why it was only in regard to the things of the Spirit that such faith was considered wrong.

“So I went back and got my Bible,” he continued, “and I went out in the moonlight. And I got to a stump and put the Bible on the stump, and I knelt down, and I said, ‘Oh, God; I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions Chuck is raising and some of the other people are raising, but I accept this Book by faith as the Word of God.’”<sup>[8]</sup> And through that time of solitude and the spiritual perspective he gained that night, Billy Graham was further shaped into the man the world has known since.

Graham’s experience demonstrates what the prolific Puritan theologian John Owen said of our solitudes: “What we are in them, that we are indeed, and no more. They are either the best or the worst of our times, wherein the principle that is predominant in us will show and act itself.”<sup>[9]</sup> In other words, what we are when we are alone is what we really are. If we habitually seek God and His perspective through His Word when we are alone—and not just at church or when with other Christians—then we may be hopeful that we do know God.

### ***To Seek the Will of God***

Perhaps one of the most common reasons believers pursue God in silence and solitude is to discern His will about a matter. Jesus did this in Luke 6:12-13 when deciding among all His disciples those who would travel with Him: “In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles.”

Christian history is rich with memorable stories of men and women who secluded themselves from all others in order to seek the will of Him who matters most. A favorite of these stories involves Hudson Taylor, a young, exhausted missionary to China. In 1865, while back in England to rest and continue some medical studies, he struggled with a decision. He sensed that God might be leading him to start a daring and unprecedented mission work—taking the gospel to the unreached millions in the vast interior of China. For decades, almost all missionaries worked only in the coastal cities, rarely going inland. But Taylor was fearful of leading such a great enterprise, knowing that the burden of enlisting missionaries, as well as finding and maintaining their financial support, would rest on his shoulders.

By the quiet summer Sunday of June 25, Hudson Taylor could stand the uncertainty no longer. Worn out and ill, he had gone to rest with friends at Brighton. But instead of enjoying their constant company, he also sought refuge in silence and solitude, and he wandered out along the sands left by the receding tide. Although the scene was peaceful, he was in agony. A decision had to be made. He must know God’s will. As he walked, the thought came,

Why, if we are obeying the Lord, the responsibility rests *with Him*, not with us! *Thou*, Lord, *Thou* shalt have all the burden! At Thy bidding, as Thy servant I go forward, leaving results with Thee.

How restfully I turned away from the sands. . . . The conflict ended, all was joy and peace. I felt as if I could fly up the hill to Mr. Pearse’s house. And how I did sleep that night! My dear wife thought Brighton had done wonders for me, and so it had.<sup>[10]</sup>

And so, on the hinge of seeking His will through silence and solitude, God opened the door for the China Inland Mission. That same work continues with the blessing of God and has grown into the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, one of the world’s great missionary endeavors.

God often makes His will clear to us in public, but there are times when He discloses it only in private. To discover it requires the Disciplines of silence and solitude.

### ***To Learn Control of the Tongue***

Learning to keep silent for short periods of time can help us better control our tongue all the time.



There's no doubt that learning control of the tongue is critical to Christlikeness. The Bible says that the religion of the person with no tongue control is worthless (see James 1:26). Proverbs 17:27-28 relates the Christlike qualities of godly knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and discernment to the power to rein in words: "Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent."

Ecclesiastes 3:7 refers to control of the tongue in a twofold sense, that is, the ability to restrain it as well as to use it, for it says there is both "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." Godliness, therefore, involves learning when you shouldn't talk as well as when you should.

In the New Testament, James 1:19 also describes power over the tongue in terms of the ability to keep it in check: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." This applies to our online "speaking" as well as that done with our lips.

How do the Disciplines of silence and solitude help with Christlike tongue control? On a long fast you discover that some of the food you normally eat isn't really necessary. When you practice silence and solitude, you find that you don't need to say some things you previously thought necessary. In silence we learn to rely more on God's control in matters where we would normally feel compelled to speak, or to speak too much. We find out that He is able to manage situations in which we once thought our input was indispensable. The skills of observation and listening are also sharpened in those who practice silence and solitude; when they do speak there's more of a freshness and depth to their words.

One reason why the dual Disciplines of silence and solitude can be so thoroughly transforming is because of how they help connect us with the other Spiritual Disciplines.<sup>[11]</sup> They should normally be the context, for example, where we engage in personal Bible intake and prayer. They are also a necessary component of private worship. In silence and solitude we can maximize time for Disciplines such as learning and journaling. It's also common to practice fasting during times of silence and solitude. But more than anything else, the Disciplines of silence and solitude can be so transfiguring because they provide time to think about life and to seek God. The plain fact is that most of us don't do that enough. Not many generations ago, most of our forebears would have spent their days working in the fields or in the home where the only other sounds were those of God's creation or human voices. Without electrified motors and media, there were fewer artificial distractions from the voice of conscience and the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls. This is not to glamorize the supposed "good old days" (a sinful practice; see Ecclesiastes 7:10) or to suggest we try to return to them. I'm simply reaffirming what we've said from the beginning of this chapter: One of the costs of technological advancement is a greater temptation to avoid quietness. While we have broadened our intake of news and information of all kinds, these advantages may come at the expense of our spiritual depth if we do not practice silence and solitude.

Remember that the great purpose for engaging in these Disciplines is godliness, that we may be like Jesus, that we may be more holy. In *The Still Hour*, Austin Phelps wrote, "It has been said that no great work in literature or in science was ever wrought by a man who did not love solitude. We may lay it down as an elemental principle of religion, that no large growth in holiness was ever gained by one who did not *take* time to be often long *alone with God*."<sup>[12]</sup>

### SUGGESTIONS FOR SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Some people enjoy the Disciplines of silence and solitude like they enjoy reading or watching some great adventure. Instead of developing these practices for themselves, they enter into them only vicariously and admire them from afar. They dream about these Disciplines, but they don't do them. Here are some practical helps for making silence and solitude less a mere longing and more a reality and a habit.

#### "Minute Retreats"

A Christian radio station in my area used to air a thirty-second spot emphasizing the benefits of silence. Then it provided ten silent seconds to make its point. As simple as it sounds, the impact of that unexpected quiet moment was remarkable.



It's possible to provide that same kind of brief refreshment on occasion throughout your day. A moment at a traffic light, in an elevator, or in line at a drive-through can become a "minute retreat" when you consecrate it as a time of silence and solitude. You can use the time of prayer at a meal for a spiritual pause.

I can't provide suggestions for every person's circumstances. But I can encourage you to find ways to turn the routine into the holy, to "improve" (as the Puritans used to say) a stray minute here or there even in the busiest of days, by repurposing it as a minute retreat.

Of course, the key is not just taking a breath and relaxing for a moment, as helpful as that is. What I'm advocating is looking to Christ more intentionally during that moment and resting by faith in Him. It's practicing what we sing in the hymn, "Take my *moments* and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise."<sup>[13]</sup> Seize these unexpected opportunities given you by the Lord and concentrate exclusively on Him and life in the Spirit. Even if you are provided with only a few seconds, even if you are not in an absolutely quiet or completely solitary place, enjoy the restoration found in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

### ***A Goal of Daily Silence and Solitude***

Without exception, the men and women I have known who've made the most rapid, consistent, and evident growth in Christlikeness have been those who develop a daily time of being alone with God. This time of silence is devoted to Bible intake and prayer, and in this solitude they enjoy an occasion of private worship.

Many battle to develop this daily devotional habit because they lead such busy lives and face such a determined Enemy who's aware of the stakes involved. Missionary martyr Jim Elliot knew of the struggle: "I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds. . . . Satan is quite aware of the power of silence."<sup>[14]</sup> Our days are usually filled with more than enough noise, plenty of hurry, and equally busy people. Unless we *plan* for daily times of solitary silence before God, these other things will rush in to fill our time like water into the *Titanic*.

These daily times are the lifeblood of the Disciplines of silence and solitude. Those who practice silence and solitude well on an everyday basis are more likely to discipline themselves to enjoy them on an occasional basis, such as on "minute retreats," the Lord's Day, and on extended periods. The person who rarely exercises struggles with both a brief climb up the stairs and a mile run. The one who jogs every day has no trouble with either. In the same way, the person who has a time of daily spiritual exercises is the one who most enjoys both "minute retreats" and extended periods of silence and solitude.

### ***Getting Away for Solitude and Silence***

"Getting away" for an extended time of silence and solitude may be nothing more than finding an empty room in your church in which to spend a few hours, an evening, or a Saturday. Or it may involve spending a night or a weekend at a retreat center, lodge, or cabin.

On some of these getaways you may want to take nothing but your Bible and a notebook. On others you might want to devour a book you believe will help you develop as a disciple of Jesus. Such retreats are also a good time for planning, goal-setting, and evaluation.

If you've never spent an entire evening, half a day, or longer in silence and solitude, you may be wondering what you would do with all that time. I would advise you to prepare a schedule either in advance or first thing upon arrival, because you'll be surprised at how quickly the time will pass if you remain busy, and how it will drag if you don't have a plan. Don't feel as though you must stick slavishly to your schedule. Even if it's not an overnight event, sleep if you need to. But a plan can help you use your time for the intended purposes rather than inadvertently mispending it.<sup>[15]</sup>

Although overnight getaways at distant places are wonderful, don't wait for times when you can go like Elijah to Mount Horeb for forty days before you start practicing silence and solitude. Remember that, generally speaking, all the Spiritual Disciplines, including these two, are intended for common practice in the places where we live our daily lives.



### *Special Places*

Locate special places that can be used for silence and solitude. Find them within the home, within walking distance, within a few minutes' drive, and within a reasonable distance for overnight or longer retreats.

If you have children at home, finding a secluded spot there to meet with God may be difficult. You may need the creativity (or desperation!) of A. W. Tozer, who for a while could find the necessary privacy only in the furnace room.<sup>[16]</sup> Or you might repurpose a closet.<sup>[17]</sup> Godly Susanna Wesley, mother of John (the founder of the Methodist movement) and Charles (the prolific hymn writer), raised a very large family and for many years found it virtually impossible to experience physical isolation. But almost as well known as being the mother of two influential sons was her habit, when she needed silence and solitude, to bring her apron up over her head and read her Bible and pray underneath it. Obviously that did not block out much noise, but it was a sign to her children for those minutes that she was not to be bothered and that the older ones were to care for the younger.

Perhaps you can find sufficient solitude outdoors. Jonathan Edwards found seclusion in an open field. While traveling on the Connecticut River he recorded, "At Saybrook we went ashore to lodge on Saturday, and there kept the Sabbath; where I had a sweet and refreshing season, walking alone in the fields."<sup>[18]</sup> More commonly he retreated to the woods for silence and solitude with God: "I rode out into the woods for my health, . . . having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer."<sup>[19]</sup> You may not live near fields or woods, but there may be a park not far away that could provide a place to walk and think and pray with few distractions. A pharmacist in my church frequently stops at a park two blocks from his house for a few minutes of silence and solitude before going home in the evening to his wife and four young children. For years my favorite spot was the Morton Arboretum near where I lived; now it's a quiet, leafy lane where I can stroll alone.

Dawson Trotman routinely walked to a knoll at the end of his street. "Here he spent precious hours alone, praying aloud, singing praise to the Lord, quoting Scriptures of promise and challenge that flooded his mind—now wrestling in urgent prayer, now pacing the hillside in silence."<sup>[20]</sup> One of my good friends takes index cards containing his prayer concerns and walks for blocks in his neighborhood while silently pouring out his heart before God.

As already noted, the building where your church meets might be an ideal location for a few hours of isolation. Most church buildings have a lot of unoccupied space during the week. It may be relatively close to you (if not, another church willing to accommodate you probably is), and would be free, safe, available on short notice, and provide a number of conveniences.

The prophetic Welsh preacher Howell Harris, a friend of George Whitefield, had a special place for silence and solitude in a church building. Writing about the time prior to the Welshman's evangelistic ministry, Arnold Dallimore says,

Harris's knowledge of Divine things during these days was small. He simply knew he loved the Lord and wanted to love Him more, and in this pursuit he sought out quiet places where he could be secluded with Him in prayer. One of his favourite retreats was the church at Llangasty—the village in which he then taught school—and on one occasion shortly after his conversion he climbed into its tower to be more alone with the Lord. There, as he remained in intercession for some hours, he experienced an overwhelming sense of the presence and power of God. That lonely church tower became to him a holy of holies, and afterwards he wrote, "I felt suddenly my heart melting within me, like wax before the fire, with love to God my Saviour; and also felt, not only love and peace, but a longing to be dissolved with Christ. There was a cry in my inmost soul which I was totally unacquainted with before, 'Abba, Father!' . . . I knew I was His child, and that He loved and heard me. My soul being filled and satiated, cried, 'It is enough! I am satisfied! Give me strength and I will follow Thee through fire and water.'" <sup>[21]</sup>

Like Susanna Wesley's apron, your regular place may not be ideal, and you may have to change locations from time to time, but do your best to locate some singular spot for you to pursue godliness



through silence and solitude.

### ***Trade Off Daily Responsibilities***

Arrange a trade-off system of daily responsibilities with your spouse or a friend when necessary in order to have the freedom for extended times of silence and solitude.

Your initial response to the suggestion of extended times in these Disciplines may have been, “You don’t know my situation! I have a family to feed and children to take care of. I can’t just go off by myself for hours at a time.” Most people, including those who practice silence and solitude, have similar obligations that can’t be neglected. The most practical, inexpensive method of overcoming this problem is to ask your spouse or a friend to temporarily assume your responsibilities in order to give you time alone. Then return the favor by providing the same or another service. Mothers of young children tell me this is the best, most workable way they’ve found for getting extended time for these Disciplines. So, for example, your spouse or a friend might keep the kids (at home or at, say, your church) during the morning while you meet with God alone. Afterward you have lunch together, and then trade off in the afternoon. Perhaps you could organize a group to serve as do some in one church I know where they provide child care for a couple of hours one morning per week so that moms can enjoy some time alone with God elsewhere in the building.

One word of warning: Reality can hit especially hard when you come home again. A mother of five told me she cushions the shock by preparing a meal in advance for the microwave or in a slow-cooker. If things are disorderly around the home when she returns, she can make her adjustment without having to worry about cooking right away. As tough as it is sometimes to come back, the rigors of reality only prove how much we need the refreshment of silence and solitude.

### **MORE APPLICATION**

***Will you seek daily times of silence and solitude?*** When Solomon’s temple was erected, “neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the house while it was being built” (1 Kings 6:7). In like manner, our personal “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19) needs to be built up with interludes of silence and solitude. Schedule such a retreat for every day. The busier you are and the more hectic your world, the more you need to plan daily spaces of silence and solitude.

A. W. Tozer expanded on this by saying,

Retire from the world each day to some private spot, even if it be only the bedroom (for a while I retreated to the furnace room for want of a better place). Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart. . . . Give yourself to God and then be what and who you are without regard to what others think. . . . Learn to pray inwardly every moment. . . . Call home your roving thoughts. Gaze on Christ with the eyes of your soul. . . . All the above is contingent upon a right relation to God through Christ and daily meditation on the Scriptures. Lacking these, nothing will help us; granted these, the discipline recommended will go far to neutralize the evil effects of externalism and to make us acquainted with God and our own souls.

[\[22\]](#)

As daily sleep and rest refresh the body, so daily silence and solitude refresh the soul. These Disciplines have a way of airing out the mind and ironing out the wrinkles of the soul. Plan to come to the quiet every day to meet God in His Word and through prayer.

***Will you seek extended times of silence and solitude?*** Plan for them. Put them on the calendar. The routine and responsibilities of daily living will expand to fill all your time and keep you from spending protracted periods alone with God unless you act decisively.

You may need an extended time of silence and solitude to settle your doubts or reestablish your spiritual moorings. That’s what the late Francis Schaeffer did during a critical period of his life in 1951. He came to a crisis that had two parts. He described his struggle this way:

First, it seemed to me that among many of those who held the orthodox position [that is, biblically orthodox doctrine] one saw little reality in the things that the Bible so clearly said



should be the result of Christianity. Second, it gradually grew on me that my own reality was less than it had been in the early days after I had become a Christian. I realized that in honesty I had to go back and rethink my whole position.<sup>[23]</sup>

This was a crisis important enough to warrant extended times of silence and solitude. Of this period of many days he said, “I walked in the mountains when it was clear and when it was rainy I walked back and forward in the hayloft of the old chalet where we lived. I walked, prayed, and thought through what the Scriptures taught as well as reviewing my own reasons for being a Christian.”<sup>[24]</sup> Gradually he began to see that his problem was a lack of understanding what the Bible says about the meaning of the finished work of Christ for our present lives. And little by little, in his soul the sun came out again and the song came back. Those days of silence and solitude were a major turning point in Schaeffer’s life and the foundation upon which the rest of his unique and now-famous ministry, L’Abri, in Switzerland, was built.

Perhaps you need to get alone with God and deal with some issues and questions. Maybe you have come to a crisis of faith that needs time for prayer, meditation on Scripture, deep thinking, and much soul searching. There’s too much at stake to neglect the matter or to deal with it superficially. If your body had an emergency, you would take the necessary time to deal with it. Don’t do any less for an emergency of the soul.

But don’t think of extended periods of silence and solitude as times only for dealing with crises or for spiritual urgent care. The memoir of the first missionary from America, Adoniram Judson, tells this story:

Once, when worn out with translations, and really needing rest, he went over the hills into the thick jungle, far beyond all human habitation. . . . To this place he brought his Bible, and sat down under the wild jungle trees to read, and meditate, and pray, and at night returned to the “hermitage” [a bamboo house he’d built at the edge of the jungle].<sup>[25]</sup>

Judson spent an incredible forty days like this in the dangerous jungle of Burma. But of this lifestyle, we are told, “He only adopted it *for a time*.” Why would he break his routine for this prolonged period of silence and solitude? His biographer says it was “as a means of moral improvement by which the whole of his future life might be rendered more in harmony with the perfect example of the Saviour whom he worshipped.”<sup>[26]</sup> Judson engaged in this extended time of withdrawal for purposes of rest, his future usefulness, and “for the purpose of godliness.” Shouldn’t you seek to do the same (even though something closer to forty hours may be more realistic for you than forty days)?

**Will you start now?** The time for silence and solitude will rarely be easy to chisel out of your schedule. The world, the flesh, and the Enemy of your soul will see to that. But if you discipline yourself to do it, your only regret will be that you didn’t start sooner.

Don’t expect each occasion to have the same effect on your life as some of those quoted here from Christian history. Dramatic results or intense emotions may rarely occur. However, as with all the Spiritual Disciplines, silence and solitude are profitable even though you often conclude them feeling “normal.” Still, there is a delight that comes from meeting alone with God that, while not always remarkable, is almost always refreshing.

These words from Jonathan Edwards are an appropriate concluding reminder:

Some are greatly affected from time to time, when in company; but have nothing that bears any manner of proportion to it, in secret, in close meditation, secret prayer, and conversing with God, when alone, and separated from all the world. . . . A true Christian doubtless delights in religious fellowship, and Christian conversation, and finds much to affect his heart in it: but he also delights at times to retire from all mankind, to converse with God in solitary places. And this also has its peculiar advantages for fixing his heart, and engaging its affections. True religion disposes persons to be much alone in solitary places, for holy meditation and prayer. . . . It is the nature of true grace, that however it loves Christian society in its place, yet it in a peculiar manner delights in retirement, and secret converse with God.<sup>[27]</sup>



Have you experienced this “true grace,” the work of God in your soul that causes you not only to delight in fellowship with God’s people, but also compels you “to converse with God in solitary places”? God created us for rich communion with Himself, but in the Garden of Eden that communion was broken by sin. Since then, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). We “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), so we turn to our own way and show little interest in knowing the way to God and drawing close to Him. But just as God came seeking Adam in the garden after he had sinned, so God came seeking us when He sent His Son, Jesus, “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). In order to remove the barrier of our rebellion against God and restore our fellowship with the Father, Jesus offered Himself on the cross as a substitute to God and received the judgment we deserve for our sins. As the apostle Peter put it, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). God showed His acceptance of Jesus’ death on behalf of others by raising Jesus from the dead. And God shows His willingness for Jesus to bring us to Him by inviting us to come to Him in Jesus’ name. All who will turn from going their own way, and who will place their faith in Jesus to make them acceptable to God, are eternally welcome. Those who come to the Father through Jesus receive the Holy Spirit, who makes them alive to God and causes them to cry, “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15). And thus those who know God feel a Spirit-ignited heart-cry for Him, longing to worship Him with His people, seeking to talk about the things of God in “religious fellowship” with others, and delighting in “secret converse with God.”

***Will you commit yourself to the Disciplines of silence and solitude?*** If you’ve experienced God’s saving grace, then silence and solitude will be, in the words of Edwards, a “delight,” a faithful fountain of refreshment, joy, and transformation. If I had them, I would almost bet you two million rubles on it.



CHAPTER 11

## JOURNALING . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

*The present benefit of spiritual discipline is a fulfilled, God-blessed, fruitful, and useful life. If you get involved in spiritual gymnastics, the blessings of godliness will carry on into eternity. Although many people spend far more time exercising their bodies than their souls, the excellent servant of Jesus Christ realizes that spiritual discipline is a priority.*

JOHN MACARTHUR JR.

More than almost any other Discipline, journaling has a fascinating appeal for nearly all who hear about it. One reason is the way journaling blends the Bible and daily living, like the confluence of two great rivers into one. And since each believer's adventure down life's river involves bends and hazards previously unexplored by him or her on the way to the Celestial City, something about journaling this journey appeals to the adventuresome spirit of Christian growth.

### EXPLANATION OF JOURNALING

A *journal* (a word usually synonymous with *diary*<sup>[1]</sup>) is a place (tangible or digital) in which a person records information important to him or her personally for preservation or consideration. As a Christian, your journal is a place to document the works and ways of God in your life. Your journal also can include an account of daily events, a record of personal relationships, a notebook of insights into Scripture, and/or a list of prayer requests. Spontaneous devotional thoughts or lengthy theological musings can be preserved there. A journal is one of the best places for charting your progress in the other Spiritual Disciplines and for holding yourself accountable to your goals.

Woven throughout this fabric of entries and events are the colorful strands of your reflections and feelings about them. How you respond to these matters, and how you interpret them from your own spiritual perspective, also express the heart of journaling.

Does a Christian have to keep a journal in order to grow more like Jesus Christ? No, nothing in Scripture obligates the followers of Jesus to keep a journal. In fact, I have never read or heard anyone make such a claim. Many of the most Christlike people in history have kept journals, and many equally godly men and women have not.

Can we say, then, that there is any biblical basis for journaling?

On the one hand, unlike prayer, the practice of journaling certainly isn't a direct outgrowth of the gospel. Scripture would support the fact that all those who come to know God through the gospel will pray, for the Spirit causes them to cry, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15). Salvation through the gospel of Christ also causes all converted people to hunger for the Word of God. But it can't be said that the gospel always produces disciples of Jesus who keep spiritual journals. Such a preposterous claim would necessarily imply that throughout history no lifelong illiterate people have ever been converted, for they were unable to produce journals.

On the other hand, something very similar to what has historically been called journaling is found by example in Scripture. King David poured out his soul to God in the scrolls of the Psalms, repeatedly writing things such as, "Incline Your ear, O LORD, and answer me; For I am afflicted and needy" (Psalm 86:1, NASB). Cries like these are not unlike a believer today writing a very similar heartfelt plea to the Lord in a journal. When the prophet Jeremiah expressed to God the depth of his grief about the fall of Jerusalem in his Lamentations, he was doing something not very different from the contemporary Christian who types his or her Godward feelings into a word processor file named "Journal." Of course, unlike the words of David and Jeremiah in Scripture, no believer's writings today are divinely inspired.



But the example of these men in writing their prayers, meditations, questions, and so on provides scriptural validation for encouraging Christians today to consider the value of doing the same in a journal.

As long as people have been able to write, they have written about what is most important to them. And thus the people of God, of course, have recorded their thoughts about the things of God, and they have done so in something akin to what is today referred to as a journal. The fourth-century theologian Augustine opened his heart in the pages of his famous *Confessions*. Jonathan Edwards found the practice so useful for sharpening his thinking and deepening his devotion that he kept several different kinds of journals and notebooks (such as his “Miscellanies” and “Notes on Scripture”) concurrently. Whether in something called a *journal*, *diary*, *commonplace book*, *notebook*, or something else, Christians have been irrepressible chroniclers of their spiritual lives.

Let’s make clear that Jesus did not live and die for sinners to turn us into journal-keepers. He came to make us right with God. But once we are right with God through repentance and faith in who Jesus is and what He has done, a journal can be, as millions of those right with God throughout history have found, a great tool for thinking about and applying the life and death of Jesus. Specifically, your journal is a place to reflect upon God’s Word and the riches of God’s grace to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and how we move forward in enjoying those riches.

As you read this chapter, consider the biblical and historical reasons for joining those of God’s people who have taken up the Discipline of journaling[2] “for the purpose of godliness.” Remember, the goal of becoming more like Jesus should be the main reason for beginning any Spiritual Discipline, including this one. With that fresh in mind, consider the words of the United Kingdom’s Maurice Roberts about journaling.

The logic of this practice is inevitable once men have felt the urge to become molded in heart and life to the pattern of Christ. No one will keep a record of his inward groans, fears, sins, experiences, providences and aspirations unless he is convinced of the value of the practice for his own spiritual progress. It was this very conviction which made it a commonplace practice in earlier times. We suggest the practice should be revived and something needs to be said in its defense.[3]

## VALUE OF JOURNALING

Keeping a journal not only promotes spiritual growth by means of its own virtues, but it’s a valuable aid to many other aspects of the spiritual life as well.

### *Help in Self-Understanding and Evaluation*

In Romans 12:3, each Christian is exhorted “not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.” Keeping a journal certainly does not guarantee protection against either conceit or self-abasement. But the simple discipline of recording significant events in my life and noting my reactions to them does cause me to examine myself in light of Scripture much more thoroughly than I would without such a pause.

This is no minor point or small need in our lives. A more God-centered theologian never lived than John Calvin, yet even he wrote on the first page of his monumental *Institutes*: “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God.”[4] Through the knowledge of ourselves and our condition, he explained, we are aroused to seek God. A journal can be the means by which the Holy Spirit shows us areas of sin or weakness, the emptiness of a path we have chosen, insight into our motives, or other things that can transform the journal page into an altar of seeking God.

At an 1803 meeting of the “Eclectic Society,” where evangelical ministers of London gathered each week to sharpen their minds and deepen their fellowship by discussing theological issues, Josiah Pratt noted the value of a journal in self-examination.

The practice of keeping a diary would promote vigilance. The lives of many are spent at a sort of hazard. They fall into certain religious habits: and are perhaps under no strong temptations.



They are regular at church and sacrament, and in [family worship]. They read the Bible and pray daily in secret. But here it ends. They know little of the progress or decline of the inner man. They are Christians, therefore, of very low attainments. The workings of sin are not noticed, as they should be, and therefore grace is not sought against them: and the genial emotions of grace are not noticed, and therefore not fostered and cultivated. Now, a diary would have a tendency to raise the standard to such persons by exciting vigilance.<sup>[5]</sup>

One of the ways the “progress or decline of the inner man” can be noted through journaling is by the observation of previously undetected patterns in your life. When I review my journal entries for a month, six months, or a year, I usually see myself and events more objectively. I can analyze my thoughts and actions apart from the feelings I had at the time. From that perspective it’s easier to observe whether I’ve made spiritual progress or have backslidden in a particular area.

Journaling is not a time for navel gazing, however. Nor is it an excuse for becoming self-centered at the expense of a needy world. Writing on the Puritans and their relationship to society, Edmund S. Morgan cites an entry from the journal of a godly young man during an illness from which he died in the late 1600s. In it the young man evaluated whether he had shown sufficient love to others. Then says Morgan,

The fact that many Puritans kept diaries of this kind helps to explain their pursuit of social virtue: diaries were the reckoning books in which they checked the assets and liabilities of their souls in faith. When they opened these books, they set down lapses of morality with appropriate expressions of repentance and balanced them against the evidences of faith. Cotton Mather made a point of having at least one good action to set down in his diary on every day of the week.<sup>[6]</sup>

Used appropriately, instead of drawing us more into ourselves, a journal can actually become a means of propelling us into action for others.

The journal can be a mirror in which we see more clearly our attitudes, thoughts, words, and actions. Since we will be held accountable for each of these at the Judgment, evaluating them by *any* means is wisdom.

### ***Help in Meditation***

As I mentioned in chapter 3, I believe meditation on Scripture is the single greatest devotional need of most Christians (compare Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:1-3; 2 Timothy 2:7). However, meaningful meditation requires a concentration not often developed in our fast-paced, media-distracted society. Perhaps the most valuable contribution the Discipline of journaling makes to the pursuit of godliness is how it facilitates meditation on Scripture, especially the ability to intensify attention on the text.

I read the tale of a New England man convinced that nowhere in the world was fog any thicker than at his coastal home. Once while roofing his house, he claimed to be in a cloud so dense that he unknowingly continued on past the edge of the roof, “shingling off into the fog.” Without pen in hand or fingers on the keyboard, I can get so distracted in meditation that I begin tacking one unrelated thought to another until I’m shingling off into the fog of daydreams instead of thinking in the light of Scripture. The discipline of writing down my meditations in my journal helps me concentrate.

Sitting with pen and paper or fingers floating above the keys also heightens my sense of expectation as I think on God and His words in the passage before me. I always listened better in school when I was taking notes. I’m the same way with hearing a sermon; I listen more attentively when I’m writing down the more significant thoughts of the message. The same principle transfers to journaling. When I record in a journal my meditations on a passage of Scripture, I simply focus on the text better and find meditation more fruitful.

### ***Help in Expressing Thoughts and Feelings to the Lord***

No matter how close the friendship or how intimate the marriage, we can’t always tell others what we think. And yet sometimes our feelings are so strong and our thoughts so dominant that we must find some way to give them expression. Our Father is always available and willing to listen. “Pour out your



heart before him,” says Psalm 62:8. A journal is a place where we can give expression to the fountain of our heart, where we can unreservedly pour out our passion before the Lord.

Since human thoughts and emotions range between the extremes of exhilaration and despondency, we can expect to find both within the pages of our journal. That’s true in all the well-known journals of church history. Notice the depths in which David Brainerd found himself in this entry:

Lord’s Day, December 16, 1744. Was so overwhelmed with dejection that I knew not how to live. I longed for death exceedingly; my soul was sunk into deep waters and the floods were ready to drown me. I was so much oppressed that my soul was in a kind of horror. I could not keep my thoughts fixed in prayer for the space of one minute, without fluttering and distraction. It made me exceedingly ashamed that I did not live to God. I had no distressing doubt about my own state, but I would have cheerfully ventured (as far as I could possibly know) into eternity. While I was going to preach to the Indians, my soul was in anguish. I was so overborne with discouragement that I despaired of doing any good, and was driven to my wit’s end. I knew nothing what to say, nor what course to take.<sup>[7]</sup>

Conversely, a short time later, Brainerd’s journal reveals this profound expression of joy:

Lord’s Day, February 17, 1745. I think, I was scarce ever enabled to offer the free grace of God to perishing sinners with more freedom and plainness in my life. Afterwards, I was enabled earnestly to invite the children of God to come renewedly and drink of this fountain of water of life, from whence they have heretofore derived unspeakable satisfaction. It was a very comfortable time to me. There were many tears in the assembly and I doubt not but that the Spirit of God was there, convincing poor sinners of their need of Christ. In the evening I felt composed and comfortable, though much tired. I had some sweet sense of the excellency and glory of God; and my soul rejoiced that He was “God over all, blessed forever”; but was too much crowded with company and conversation and longed to be more alone with God. Oh, that I could forever bless God for the mercy of this day, who “answered me in the joy of my heart.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Perhaps you read Brainerd’s words with the same sense of distance from your own experience as I do. Was he odd? Did he live on some higher spiritual plane inaccessible to Christians like me? Can the difference between his experiences with God and mine be explained exclusively by the difference in our times? Because I am unable to express in writing the kinds of emotions toward God that he did, am I the one who is strange?

I think every child of God can indeed experience more of what Brainerd expresses here, and a journal can help with the pursuit. Maurice Roberts explains,

A spiritual diary will tend to deepen and sanctify the emotional life of a child of God. There is great value to us of becoming more deeply emotional over the great issues of our faith. Our age is not deep enough in feelings. Biblical men are depicted as weeping copious tears, as sighing and groaning, as on occasion rejoicing with ecstasy. They were ravished by the very idea of God. They had a passion for Jesus Christ—His person, offices, names, titles, words and works. It is our shame to be so cold, unfeeling and unemotional in spite of all that God has done to us and for us in Christ. . . . The keeping of a diary might help to put us right in this respect also.<sup>[9]</sup>

We tend to *feel* most deeply about what we *think* most deeply about. By slowing us down and prompting us to think more deeply about the things of God, journaling helps us feel more deeply about them. Writing in a journal provides an opportunity for the intangible grays of mind-work and heart-work to distill clearly into black and white. Then we’re better able to express those thoughts and feelings to the Lord.

### ***Help in Remembering the Lord’s Works***

Many people think God has not blessed them with much until they have to move it all to a new address. In the same way, we tend to forget just how many times God has answered specific prayers, made timely



provision, and done marvelous things in our lives. But having a place to collect all these memories prevents their being forgotten.

A journal helps us to be like Asaph in Psalm 77:11-12, who said, “I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.” Even the kings of Israel were required by the Lord to write for themselves a copy of the Law of Moses to help them remember what God had said and done in the lives of the patriarchs (see Deuteronomy 17:18).<sup>[10]</sup>

The testimony of Luci Shaw, widow of Christian publisher Harold Shaw, illustrates how a journal is not only helpful but *essential* for remembering the works of God’s providence in your life.

All my life long I’ve thought I should keep a journal. But I never did until a few years ago, when the discovery that my husband, Harold, had cancer suddenly plunged us into the middle of an intense learning experience, facing things we’d never faced before. Confronted with agonizing decisions, we would cry out to the Lord, “Where are you in the middle of this?” It suddenly occurred to me that unless I made a record of what was going on, I would forget. The events, details, and people of those painful days could easily become a blur. So I started to write it all down.<sup>[11]</sup>

Francis Bacon put it bluntly, “If a man write little, he had need have a great memory.”<sup>[12]</sup>

One of the greatest benefits of keeping a record of the works of the Lord is the encouragement it can be to faith and prayer. C. H. Spurgeon, the lionhearted British Baptist preacher in the last half of the 1800s, said, “I have sometimes said, when I have become the prey of doubting thoughts, ‘Well, now, I dare not doubt whether there be a God, for I can look back in my Diary, and say, On such a day, in the depths of trouble, I bent my knee to God, and or ever I had risen from my knees, the answer was given me.’”<sup>[13]</sup>

“How worthy it is to remember former benefits,” said Stephen Charnock, author of the classic *The Existence and Attributes of God*, “when we come to beg for new.”<sup>[14]</sup> A journal is one of the best ways to keep fresh the memory of the Lord’s “former benefits.”

### ***Help in Creating and Preserving a Spiritual Heritage***

Journaling is an effective way of teaching the things of God to our children and grandchildren, and of transmitting our faith into the future (compare Deuteronomy 6:4-7; 2 Timothy 1:5).

There could be an unimaginable future spiritual impact in something we write today. My dad died suddenly on August 20, 1985. He was the manager of a small-town radio station. Each morning he hosted a folksy, thirty-minute program of music and local news. On his desk I found the devotional material he had used to begin his final broadcast. He had read the words to William Cowper’s hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.” Finding his initials and “8/19/85” written beside these lines of faith provided me with more comfort and spiritual strength than anything said to me by anyone else. After his death his old guitar became one of my most cherished possessions. His early days as a radio announcer came during the time when much of the programming was broadcast live. He had a popular show of his own in which he played this guitar and sang. On my first Thanksgiving Day without a dad I was rummaging around in the guitar case. In it I found more than a dozen old letters postmarked within a few days after my birth. All were from his listeners who had written to rejoice with him that my mother and I had survived a difficult birth. They noted that it was obvious he was very proud of me and many referred to remarks he had made on the air about his gratitude to the Lord for my safe arrival. I sat on the floor by the open case with these scraps of my heritage and wept tears of thanksgiving to the Lord for this remnant of his life. How precious it would be if only more of his walk with God were recorded for me in some written form.

For how many of your eight great-grandparents do you know the first and last names? I’ve asked this question of several hundred people, and in my experience only about one in ten knows the names of as many as three of his or her great-grandparents. One hundred years ago—just 1,200 months ago—they were probably as alive and active as you are right now. And yet, despite a lifetime of labor and acquiring



things, not even their direct descendants—the people most likely to have an interest in them—know their names, much less anything else about them. Well, one hundred years from now, that's you. What trace of your life will remain? Except for the pictures you take and the things you write, nothing except legal records and the like may remain of your decades on the earth. And because of the changes in technology, it's questionable whether your descendants will even be able to access your photographs. So what you write, in places like a journal, may be the most enduring legacy of your walk on the earth.

Moreover, the most significant impact you make on your children and future generations spiritually may occur through something like a journal. For instance, is the story of your conversion recorded anywhere? How about dramatic answers to prayer or the major spiritual turning points in your life? These stories of God's grace in the life of your family should be preserved. You may have children or grandchildren who are far from God at present and have no interest in your witness, who yet might be turned to the Lord by means of reading your journal someday. God may be pleased to use the Christ-centered testimony of your salvation, or your meditations on Jesus and the Scriptures, to bring to Himself grandchildren or great-grandchildren you may never hold and who may have parents who do not teach them the things of God—all through their interest in reading some family history. I know that this happens.

Never underestimate the power of a written record of faith acting as a spiritual time capsule. The writer of Psalm 102:18 recognized it when he said of his experience with God: "Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD."

### ***Help in Clarifying and Articulating Insights***

An old adage says that thoughts disentangle themselves when passed through the lips and across the fingertips. While reading makes a full man, and dialogue a ready man, according to Francis Bacon, *writing* makes an *exact* man. I've discovered that if I write down the meditations of my quiet time with the Lord they stay with me much longer. Without journaling, by day's end I usually can remember little from my devotional time.

The great champion of prayer and faith, George Müller, used his journal to articulate insights into Scripture and thoughts about God:

July 22, 1838. This evening I was walking in our little garden, meditating on Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and forever." Whilst meditating on His unchangeable love, power and wisdom, and turning all as I went into prayer respecting myself; and whilst applying also His unchangeable love, power, and wisdom both to my present spiritual and temporal circumstances—all at once the present need of the orphan houses was brought to my mind. Immediately I was led to say to myself, "Jesus in His love and power has hitherto supplied me with what I have needed for the orphans, and in the same unchangeable love and power He will provide me with what I may need for the future." A flow of joy came into my soul whilst realising thus the unchangeableness of our adorable Lord. About one minute after, a letter was brought me enclosing a cheque for twenty pounds. In it was written: "Will you apply the amount of the enclosed cheque to the objects of your Scriptural Knowledge Society, or of your Orphan Establishment, or in the work and cause of our Master in any way that He Himself, on your application to Him, may point out to you. It is not a great sum, but it is a sufficient provision for the exigency of today; and it is for today's exigencies that ordinarily the Lord provides. Tomorrow, as it brings its demands, will find its supply."[\[15\]](#)

When insights from my quiet time are clearly fixed in my mind through journaling, I've also found them ready to use later in conversation, counseling, encouraging, and witnessing (see 1 Peter 3:15).

### ***Help in Monitoring Goals and Priorities***

A journal is a good way to keep before us the things we want to do and emphasize. Some put a list of goals and priorities in their journal and review it every day. For many years (until I began to use digital reminders), I would draw a small rectangle at the beginning of each journal entry. With one horizontal



line and two vertical ones I divided the box into six tiny squares. Each square represented a particular spiritual goal I wanted to accomplish every day, such as encouraging at least one person. Before I made a journal entry for a day, I turned to the entry for the previous day and colored in the appropriate squares for the daily goals I accomplished. This isn't legalism, for I had no internal or external requirement to do those things. I wanted to develop these habits and character qualities as part of pressing on toward the goal of Christlikeness (see Philippians 3:12-16), and I utilized reminders in my journal to help me.

The resolutions made by young Jonathan Edwards are still well known to many Christians today. They included the resolve of his soul concerning the use of time, temperance in eating, growth in grace, self-denial, and other matters dealt with in seventy resolutions.<sup>[16]</sup> These were much more than today's halfhearted New Year's resolutions. They became Edwards' lifelong spiritual goals and priorities. What isn't so well known is how he evaluated his conduct daily by these resolutions and recorded the results in his journal. On Christmas Eve, 1722, he wrote, "Higher thoughts than usual of the excellency of Christ and his kingdom. Concluded to observe, at the end of every month, the number of breaches of resolutions, to see whether they increase or diminish, to begin from this day, and to compute from that the weekly account my monthly increase, and out of the whole, my yearly increase, beginning from new-year days."<sup>[17]</sup> Another example of this use of his journal is found in the entry of the following January 5: "A little redeemed from a long dreadful dullness, about reading the Scriptures. This week, have been unhappily low in the weekly account: and what are the reasons of it? abundance of listlessness and sloth; and, if this should continue much longer, I perceive that other sins will begin to discover themselves."<sup>[18]</sup> Years later, Edwards came to believe that he was too self-reliant in some of his efforts to keep his resolutions. That awareness did not cause him to change his mind about keeping them, nor did he forsake any Disciplines related to them, especially those involving his pen. As award-winning Edwards biographer George Marsden put it, "The mature Edwards looked back on this rigor as involving 'too great a dependence on my own strength; which afterward proved a great damage to me.' Yet he never abandoned his belief in the value of strict spiritual disciplines, as his later *Life of Brainerd* would reveal."<sup>[19]</sup> The change Edwards did make was to seek and rely more on the power of the Holy Spirit upon his practice of the Disciplines to bring about greater conformity to Christ.

The ocean-hopping evangelist of the First Great Awakening, George Whitefield, is best remembered for his inimitable, passionate preaching. Like his contemporary Edwards, Whitefield's *Diary* reveals that his spirituality was at least as deep as his influence was wide. The book begins with a list of criteria that he used each night as a basis of self-examination.

Have I,

1. Been fervent in prayer?
2. Used stated hours of prayer?
3. Used ejaculatory prayer each hour?
4. After or before every deliberate conversation or action, considered how it might tend to God's glory?
5. After any pleasure, immediately given thanks?
6. Planned business for the day?
7. Been simple and recollected in everything?
8. Been zealous in undertaking and active in doing what good I could?
9. Been meek, cheerful, affable in everything I said or did?
10. Been proud, vain, unchaste, or enviable of others?
11. Recollected in eating and drinking? Thankful? Temperate in sleep?
12. Taken time for giving thanks according to (William) Law's rules?
13. Been diligent in studies?
14. Thought or spoken unkindly of anyone?
15. Confessed all sins?<sup>[20]</sup>



Each day's entry in Whitefield's *Diary* is in two parts, one page per part. On the first page he listed the specific activities of his day, then he evaluated each on the basis of his fifteen questions. On the second page, according to his biographer, Arnold Dallimore, "He records any unusual activity throughout the day, but above all, gives expression to his inner self. The longings of his soul, a searching of his motives, severe self-reproach for the slightest wrong and bursts of praise to God, are all recorded without inhibition."<sup>[21]</sup>

How did men like Edwards and Whitefield become so unusually conformed to the image of Christ? Part of their secret was their use of the Spiritual Discipline of journaling to maintain self-accountability for their spiritual goals and priorities. Before we give all the reasons why we cannot be as godly as they were, let us first try doing what they did.

### ***Help in Maintaining the Other Spiritual Disciplines***

My journal is the place where I record my progress with all the Spiritual Disciplines. For instance, I also used some of the small squares mentioned above to keep myself accountable with Disciplines like Scripture memory. It's very easy for me to become lazy and slip away from memorizing God's Word, which the Bible says is so helpful to holiness (see Psalm 119:11). Whenever I return to the habit of *not* memorizing Scripture, momentum keeps me there. However, when I have a daily prompter such as my journal, where I find a reminder to "discipline myself for the purpose of godliness," I can more easily reverse the negative momentum.

The flesh, our natural inclination toward sin, does not contribute to our spiritual growth. Unless "by the Spirit" we *labor* to "put to death the deeds of the body" (Romans 8:13), our progress in godliness will be very slow. Unless we find *practical* ways to fight against our congenital tendency toward spiritual sloth, and pray for the Holy Spirit's power upon those practical ways, we will not build ourselves up in the faith (see Jude 20); we will drift toward spiritual entropy instead.

This fact was affirmed by Maurice Roberts in an article, "Where Have the Saints Gone?"

There will be no marked growth in Christian holiness if we do not labor to overcome our natural disinclination towards secret spiritual exercises. Our forefathers kept honest diaries where the soul's battles were recorded. Thomas Shepherd, Pilgrim Father and founder of Harvard, wrote in his private papers, "It is sometimes so with me that I will rather die than pray." So is it with us all. But this honesty is not commonplace. Such men climbed high only as they labored with sweat and tears to cultivate the soul. We, too, must "exercise ourselves unto godliness" (1 TIMOTHY 4:7).<sup>[22]</sup>

Missionary Jim Elliot used his now-famous journal to irrigate the practice of the Disciplines in his life when the tide of zeal for them ran low. On November 20, 1955, less than two months before he was killed by Auca Indians in Ecuador, he wrote,

Also read parts of *Behind the Ranges* and am resolute to do something about it in my private devotional and prayer life. In studying Spanish I left off English Bible reading, and my devotional reading pattern was broken. I have never restored it. Translation and preparation for daily Bible lessons is not sufficient to empower my soul. Prayer as a single man was difficult, I remember, because my mind always reverted to Betty. Now it's too hard to get out of bed in the morning. I have made resolutions on this score before now but not followed them up. Tomorrow it's to be—dressed by 6:00 a.m. and study in the Epistles before breakfast. So help me, God.<sup>[23]</sup>

Apparently the desire to revitalize his devotional life had surged through Elliot's mind and emotions many times before. Transferring that desire to paper, however, seemed to channel it like water into a turbine, so that what was once mere fluid desire, by God's help, began producing power.

Recording the joys and freedom I experience through the Spiritual Disciplines is another way journaling helps maintain my involvement with them. When I review my journal and read in my own handwriting of my inexpressible delight in sharing the gospel with elderly people in the bush of Kenya who have never heard of Jesus, or of preaching and seeing Brazilian teenagers repent of involvement in



spiritism, I am resolved to maintain the Discipline of evangelism in overseas missions projects regardless of the cost. Reviewing the sense of victory I recorded during a day of fasting creates in me a hunger for another such day of spiritual feasting.

The Christian life is, by definition, a living thing. If we can think of the Discipline of Bible intake as its food and prayer as its breath, many Christians have made journaling its heart. For them it pumps life-maintaining blood into every Discipline connected with it.

## WAYS OF JOURNALING

How is it done? “Your way of keeping a journal is the right way. . . . There are no rules for keeping a journal!”<sup>[24]</sup> In other words, the method you find most edifying and useful in your pursuit of godliness is the way you should keep a journal. This goes for content, format, length, and frequency. So whereas one Christian usually journals on a computer two or three times per week, entering only brief meditations on Scripture, and another disciple of Jesus typically writes prayers at great length and does so with a fountain pen in a leather-bound volume almost every day, both are valid insofar as they help the person draw closer to God and conform biblically to Christlikeness.

Today I was in a local Christian bookstore and noticed at least a dozen books to be used as journals. There were cloth-covered volumes and paperbacks. Some posted devotional thoughts or inspirational quotes on each page. Others simply provided blank pages with headings like “Prayer Requests” and “Insights from Scripture” at the top. Many mainstream bookstores sell beautifully bound, gilt-edged books of empty pages, as well as nontraditional, edgier styles, all of which work well as journals.

Many Christians find that the most practical approach is to use an everyday notebook or common printer paper. While some prefer a spiral-bound notebook, I find loose-leaf pages more workable. Besides being less expensive, using plain paper also does not force you to confine your entries to the designated space of a professionally bound journal. On the other hand, some find that writing in an attractive book gives their journaling a special appeal that stimulates their faithfulness in the Discipline. (This motivation backfires on some people when they begin to feel as though their entries are rather mundane for such a fine depository. They start writing less frequently and soon stop altogether.)

Another reason I prefer the loose-leaf format is convenience. Although it is handy to carry around a book or spiral-bound notebook, it’s even handier to carry only a few pages of paper. My journal pages are 8½" x 5½"<sup>[25]</sup> and fit easily into my Bible, briefcase, a book, or almost anything I take with me. Such convenient access means I can immediately record any sudden flash of insight, important thought, conversation, quotation, and so on. This leads to another advantage over the bound volume or spiral notebook method: I can more easily go back and insert new pages, photocopies, printouts, and more. Besides, the loose-leaf approach permits the flexibility of typing my entries and printing hard copies if desired. But having said that, I return to this maxim: “Your way of keeping a journal is the right way.” Use the method that works best for you.

The means you use to actually put the words on paper will also affect the format you choose. I like to make my journal entries on a word processor. That’s because I can type faster than I can write, and also because it’s easier to read when it’s printed. Frequently, however, my journaling time occurs when I cannot or prefer not to use a digital device, and so I’ll enjoy writing by hand with a good fountain pen and ink from a bottle.<sup>[26]</sup> Some feel strongly about journaling only by hand, that it’s more spontaneous and expressive. While I’m a big fan of fountain pens and use one every day, I find that the speed and other advantages of a digital method normally tip the scale for me to journal by that means more often than not.

The ever-increasing development of technology will certainly see a corresponding increase in the use of its capabilities for journaling. Already the Internet and personal technologies provide countless resources for journal-keeping. If you find that some of them can help you grow in grace and godliness, use them. If they don’t appeal to you, feel no pressure to conform. Regardless of the pace or number of technological advances related to this Discipline, there will always be a place for journaling with the simplest of tools—pen and paper.



As a starting entry for each day, try listing the one verse or idea from your Bible reading that impressed you most. Meditate on that for a few minutes, then record your thoughts and insights. From there consider adding recent events in your life and your feelings and responses to them, brief prayers, joys, successes, failures, quotations, and so on.

Don't think that "official journaling" (there is no such thing!) means you have to write a certain number of lines every day or a certain number of days per week. Whenever I fall into needlessly long lapses between entries, I discipline myself to write at least one sentence per day. Inevitably, that one sentence turns willingly into a paragraph or a page, for my biggest problem is just getting started. Once I do that, I'm glad I'm there and usually experience no problem in writing a few additional lines, if not many more.

Don't worry about trying to get "caught up." Major life events—the kinds of experiences we always want to journal about—often require an unreasonable amount of time to record in a journal. The events last so long or consist of so many details that trying to journal about them can feel burdensome. The Discipline of journaling is not a burden from God to document your entire life; rather it is meant to bless you and be a means to joy and godliness.

## MORE APPLICATION

*As with all the Disciplines, journaling can be fruitful at any level of involvement.* Journaling is profitable regardless of how well you think you write, compose, or spell. Whether or not you write every day, whether you write little or much, whether your soul soars like a psalmist's or plods from thought to thought, journaling can help you grow in grace.

*As with all the Disciplines, journaling requires persistence through the dry times.* The novelty of journaling soon wears off. There will be days when you will have a spiritual version of "writer's block." At other times you just won't have any insights from either the Scriptures or your experience with God that seem noteworthy. While it's okay to write little or nothing on a given day or during a longer stretch of time, remember that you must eventually push through this barrier in order to enjoy the long-term benefits of journaling. In other words, don't quit the Discipline entirely just because the excitement of the first day eventually erodes. That will happen. Plan on it. But also plan for persistence.[\[27\]](#)

*As with all the Disciplines, you must start journaling before you can experience its value.* Irishman Thomas Houston was pastor of a Presbyterian church in Knockbracken, County Down (near modern Belfast), for fifty-four years during the 1800s. At the beginning of his ministry there he began keeping a journal, which he called "A Diary of God's Dealings and Providences with a Most Unworthy Sinner." In his entry for April 8, 1828, he revealed the inward struggle that ultimately resulted in the birth of his Spiritual Discipline of journaling:

For a considerable period I have been resolved on keeping a register of the dealings and providences of my Heavenly Father towards me, but, what through want of what I considered a fit opportunity, and through what was, I fear, a greater cause, spiritual sloth, I have hitherto neglected it. When I first began to think of this subject, various objections appeared to me to lie against diary writing altogether. It would give room for spiritual pride; it led persons to measure themselves by themselves; and as it is not easy to determine between the motions of the spirit and the natural outworkings of the unrenewed conscience or the artifices of the Deceiver, there is a danger of forming incorrect judgments. These and other reasons kept me a length of time from determining for the thing. Of late I have got over these objections entirely, and am now of the opinion that such a record may be of much service to an individual to furnish him with matter for prayer and self-examination, and to be a monument to God's faithfulness.[\[28\]](#)

Perhaps you can identify with Houston's struggle. As millions want to begin walking, jogging, biking, or some other form of exercise but never do, so there are many who have wanted to begin the spiritual exercise of journaling but have never done so. It sounds interesting, and you are convinced of its value, but the words never find their way onto paper or the computer screen. There just never seems to be the time, a "fit opportunity" as Houston called it. But in our heart of hearts we know that the



“greater cause” is probably the same “spiritual sloth” that clung drowsily to the will of this Irish pastor. Consider journaling, not only as a way to raise up a “monument to God’s faithfulness” in your life, but more importantly “for the purpose of godliness.”



CHAPTER 12

## LEARNING . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

*We must face the fact that many today are notoriously careless in their living. This attitude finds its way into the church. We have liberty, we have money, we live in comparative luxury. As a result, discipline practically has disappeared. What would a violin solo sound like if the strings on the musician's instrument were all hanging loose, not stretched tight, not "disciplined"?*

A. W. TOZER

Years ago I pastored a church near a county seat town with two small universities. One school was the main educational institution of the largest evangelical denomination in the state. Known for producing students zealous for Christ's kingdom, this university often led the dozens of other schools in its denomination in numbers of alumni on the mission field. One complaint I frequently heard from students in the religion department, however, related to the apparent lack of spiritual zeal among some of the professors. To many students, these men paired enlarged theological brains with pygmy-like, passionless hearts. We've all heard teachers or preachers who could anchor a theological Mensa Club but whose lack of zeal made their Christianity seem as dry and stale as the inside of a basketball. But that just doesn't sound like the Lord Jesus, or even the apostle Paul, does it?

In this same pastorate a man who was a deacon in his church once said to me, "I never liked school, and I don't want to learn anything when I come to church." Somehow there's something unlike Jesus in that attitude as well, isn't there?

Why do we seem to think we must choose between the two? Why do many Christians live as though they've been told, "Choose you this day whom you will serve: scholarship or devotion"? I maintain that the more Christlike we grow, the more we will pursue both a full head and a full heart, and the more we will radiate both spiritual light and heat.

If absolutely forced to allow one to predominate over the other, we must choose the burning heart. If people have the truth in their heads but not in their hearts (that is, they know the truth but do not believe it and experience its power) then they are not right with God. Like the Pharisees, apart from faith an awareness of the truth will only magnify our guilt before God at the Judgment. But if we have understood and properly responded to the gospel from the heart, in the end we shall be saved even though the rest of our doctrinal understanding is shallow or muddy. Not only would I choose the latter option for myself, but I would also prefer that for those to whom I minister. It's much harder to get a ship out of the harbor than to correct one on the sea that has drifted off course.

But let us be both out of the harbor *and* on course. Christians must realize that just as a fire cannot blaze without fuel, so burning hearts are not kindled by brainless heads. We must not content ourselves to be like those the Bible condemns as having "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2).

Does this mean we must be brilliant to be Christians? Absolutely not. But it does mean that to be like Jesus we must be learners, even as He was at only age twelve, "sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:46-47). Does this mean we must have several diplomas hanging on the wall to be first-rate Christians? It certainly does not. But it does mean we should discipline ourselves to be intentional learners like Jesus. He learned the Scriptures so well on His own apart from the formal training of the rabbis that He caused His adversaries to marvel, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" (John 7:15).



An examination of the New Testament word *disciple* reveals that it means to be not only “a follower” of Christ but also “a learner.” Are you a disciple of Jesus? To follow Christ and become more like Him, we must engage in the Spiritual Discipline of learning.

## LEARNING CHARACTERIZES THE WISE PERSON

According to a book of the Bible written specifically to give us practical wisdom, one of the characteristics of a wise man or woman is a desire for learning. We read in Proverbs 9:9, “Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.” Wise and righteous people can never get enough wisdom or knowledge. Unteachable people or those prideful about their learning only expose how shallow they really are. The truly wise are humble because they know they still have so much to learn. And according to this verse, wise and righteous people remain teachable. They can learn from anybody, regardless of age or background. Give one of them instruction, and “he will be still wiser . . . and he will increase in learning.” The biblically wise are always looking to learn.

In Proverbs 10:14, we’re told, “The wise lay up knowledge.” The Hebrew word here means “to store up like a treasure.” Wise men and women love to learn because they realize that knowledge is like a precious treasure.

I met a man who treasured knowledge despite living in a place where it was scarce as diamonds. During the mission trip to Kenya I mentioned in chapter 2, my interpreter was a schoolteacher in his early thirties named Bernard. He lived in the back of a store that was one of four buildings in the Kilema community. He walked several miles even farther into the bush country each day to the mud-brick elementary school where he taught. He returned home to his “cube,” an eight-foot-by-eight-foot-by-eight-foot room where he lived with his wife and infant son. A twin bed was against the back wall with a sheet hanging from the ceiling to separate the “bedroom” from the rest of the cube. Only a small table with one chair occupied the front half. What interested me most was on the cement walls. Taped on every wall were several pages from long-outdated magazines or pictures from old calendars. They were all Bernard had to read. Though he’d been a Christian for many years, he was too poor even to own a Bible. The only books that ever came into his hands were a few secondhand textbooks kept at the school. So as he paced with his son in his arms, trying to get him to sleep, he read the words on the magazines for the umpteenth time. While he ate at his table or lay on his bed, he looked at the pictures of far-off people and places and pondered them.

As I stood in that concrete cube, looking at a couple of dozen faded pictures and yellowing pages, I realized that before me stood a wise man. Bernard understood that knowledge really is like a rare treasure. Though it is more scarce than gold, he had stored up all he could. That’s the attitude all who are wise will have, for “the wise lay up knowledge.” (Incidentally, some people in our church sent Bernard boxes of books and subscribed to a couple of magazines for him.)

Notice Proverbs 18:15: “An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.” A wise person not only “acquires” knowledge, he or she “seeks” it. Wise ones desire to learn and will discipline themselves to seek opportunities for learning.

One other verse in Proverbs deserves our attention. In 23:12 we’re commanded, “Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge.” No matter how much previous instruction you have received or how extensive your knowledge—especially about God, Christ, the Bible, and the Christian life—and regardless of how intelligent or slow you consider yourself, you still need to apply your heart and ears to learn, for you haven’t learned it all.

Learning is a lifelong Discipline, a Spiritual Discipline that characterizes the wise person. Samuel Hopkins, one of the early biographers of Jonathan Edwards, said that when he met Edwards he was impressed by the fact that a man already twenty years in the ministry still had “an uncommon thirst for knowledge, in the pursuit of which he spared no cost nor pains. He read all the books, especially books of divinity, that he could come at, from which he could hope to get any help in his pursuit of knowledge.”<sup>[1]</sup> Edwards had an undeniably superior mind, but he never stopped applying it to learn. It



was that, blended with an equally strong devotional zeal, that made him wise and great in the kingdom of God.

A durable yearning for learning characterizes all those who are truly wise.

## FULFILLING THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Part of God's greatest commandment, said Jesus, is "Love the Lord your God . . . with all your mind" (Mark 12:30). What God wants most from you is your love. And one of the ways He wants you to show love and obedience to Him is by godly learning. God is glorified when we use the mind He made to learn of Him, His Word, His ways, and His world.

Lamentably, many Christians do not associate learning with loving God. In fact, we live in a very anti-intellectual age. That may sound strange in light of the infinite storehouse of information accessible through the Internet; the widespread availability and growth of online education; the almost daily, dazzling advances in technology; and the fact that there are more advanced academic degrees being awarded today than ever before. Perhaps it is precisely because of such things that people—including Christian people—are more averse to things intellectual. Kids who are smart may be unpopular just because they are smart. They're dismissed as "nerds," and the social attention goes to the "underachievers." Our culture glorifies the physical much more than the mental. Nobody sells posters of the top software engineers or architects, much less the leading theologians. Instead we sell posters of athletes, some of whom can do everything with a ball except autograph it and read its label. Some political candidates are described as too intellectual to be electable, as though we don't want thinkers running the government. In the church, everything must be "relevant," and we tend to disregard doctrine and theology as very irrelevant.

There is an intellectualism that is wrong, but it is also wrong to be anti-intellectual. We should love God just as much with our mind as with our heart and soul and strength. How can it all fit together? As contemporary Christian thinker R. C. Sproul wrote, "God has made us with a harmony of heart and head, of thought and action. . . . The more we know Him the more we are able to love Him. The more we love Him the more we seek to know Him. To be central in our hearts He must be foremost in our minds. Religious thought is the prerequisite to religious affection and obedient action." [2]

Unless we love God with a growing mind, we will be Christian versions of the Samaritans to whom Jesus said, "You worship what you do not know" (John 4:22).

## LEARNING—ESSENTIAL FOR INCREASED GODLINESS

The Christian life begins with learning—learning the gospel. No one is made right with the God about whom he knows nothing. No one is made right with God unless he or she learns about Him and His message to the world, a message of good news called the gospel. To know God, people must learn that there is a God (see Hebrews 11:6), that they have broken His law, and that they need to be reconciled to Him. They must learn that Jesus, God's Son, came to accomplish that reconciliation, and that He did so by means of His sinless life and His death on the cross as a substitute for sinners. They must learn of His bodily resurrection and their need to repent of their sin, and to believe in Jesus and what He has done. For apart from people learning these things, "how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" (Romans 10:14).

No one believes in Jesus unless he or she has heard the story of Jesus and has at least a minimal understanding of it. No one loves Jesus unless he or she knows about Jesus. And just as we cannot *believe* and *love* Him about whom we've *learned nothing*, so we cannot *grow* in our faith and love of Him unless we *learn more* about Him. We will not *grow* much in godliness if we do not *know* much of what it means to be godly. We will not grow more like Christ if we don't know more about Christ.

The twentieth-century London preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones reminded us, "Let us never forget that the message of the Bible is addressed primarily to the mind, to the understanding." [3] God's truth must be understood before it can be applied. The Word of God must first go through your head if it's going to change your heart and your life. That's why the apostle Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewal of your *mind*" (Romans 12:2, emphasis added). Christlike



transformation of the heart and life—growth in godliness—involves a mental renewal that cannot happen without learning.

Suppose someone gave you a book about prayer and said, “This will change your life!” But when you looked, you realized that the book was written in a language you could not read. You might be holding the best book on prayer ever written, but if you could not understand the contents it would do you no good. Without the knowledge of that language, you couldn’t learn about prayer and grow in Christlikeness from that book. There’s little difference, however, between failing to grow in godliness because you *can’t* read a book on prayer and failing to grow because you *don’t* read one. Without a disciplined commitment to learning, the lack of growth is the same in both cases.

No one will grow into and enjoy the blessings of any teaching of Scripture if he or she hasn’t learned it. Jonathan Edwards said it plainly: “It is impossible that anyone should see the truth or excellency of any doctrine of the gospel, who knows not what that doctrine is. A man cannot see the wonderful excellency and love of Christ in doing such and such things for sinners, unless his understanding be first informed.” [4]

People may attend church worship faithfully, serve the Lord in and through the church eagerly, give to the work of Christ’s kingdom generously, and desire to live Christianly in every aspect of their lives—and yet, year after year, demonstrate little evident growth in godliness. How can this be for people who love Jesus Christ and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God? In many cases it’s because they devote so little mental energy to the most important kind of learning—learning about God and the things of God. No one grows into Christlikeness without learning about it—what Christlikeness looks like, how they should cultivate it, why it’s necessary, where it leads, and more. No one experiences the sweetness of growing closer to and more like Christ unless he or she is first introduced to such things. Edwards is concise and clear: “He cannot have a taste of the sweetness and divine excellency of such and such things contained in divinity, unless he first have a notion that there are such and such things.” [5]

If you know little *about* godliness, you will grow little *in* godliness. To know it requires the Discipline of learning.

## LEARNING IS MOSTLY BY DISCIPLINE, NOT BY ACCIDENT

As every dust ball gets bigger the longer it rolls around under the bed, so every mind picks up at least a little knowledge the longer it rolls around on the earth. But we must not assume that we have learned true wisdom just by growing older. The observation found in Job 32:9 is, “The abundant in years may not be wise” (NASB). Haven’t you heard of an “old fool”? Age and experience by themselves don’t increase your spiritual maturity. Becoming like Jesus doesn’t happen incidentally or automatically with the passing of birthdays. Godliness, as 1 Timothy 4:7 says, requires a deliberate discipline.

Those who are not *trying* to learn will only get spiritual and biblical knowledge by accident or convenience. Occasionally they will hear a biblical fact or principle from someone else and profit from it. Once in a while they will display a brief burst of interest in a subject. But this is not the way to godliness. The Discipline of learning transforms accidental learners into *intentional* learners.

Of course, it’s a lot easier to be an accidental learner and a convenience learner than an intentional learner. We’re born that way. And television spoon-feeds that inclination in megadoses. Watching TV or video is so much easier than choosing a good book, reading words, creating your own mental images, and relating it to your life. Television decides for you what will be presented, speaks the words to you, shows you its own images, and tells you what impact it wants to have on your life, if any. Compared to that, books often appear too demanding for the contemporary mind. Alas, it takes *discipline* to become an intentional learner.

Without the discipline of an intentional learner, not only will we fail to learn the things that promote godliness, but what we will learn by accident will be of little or no real benefit. For instance, without discipline no one will learn the books of the Bible. Sure, most who have been in church for a while can name quite a few, but those only randomly. So most churchgoers couldn’t even list the names of the books God inspired, much less say anything about the contents of them. On the other hand, they—and their children—likely could name as many brands of beer, wine, and whiskey as they could books



of the Bible. Is it because they tried to learn them? Probably not. Many Christians, without ever having had a single drink of any of these products, could not only name lots of them, but could also recall where some are manufactured or other details about them. How? Merely by accident, because advertising made it convenient to learn them. If you doubt this, try it on your small group at church. Try it with your young children, who presumably have never had a drink. How would *you* do? Learning that's mostly by accident does not lead to godliness. We must become disciplined, intentional learners if we're going to become like Jesus.

Speaking of children, in *What Every Christian Should Know: Combating the Erosion of Christian Knowledge in our Generation*, Jo Lewis and Gordon Palmer show that the reason young people are not intentional learners is because their parents aren't.

Young people are not readers. This is not surprising since their parents rarely prize reading. At one Christian college, a fifth of the students said their parents had never read to them. The lack of reading is partly the result of the strong vocational orientation of Americans: Parents don't read because it doesn't seem practical. They are more concerned with "Can my kid operate computers and get a job?" It fits the American obsession with the bottom line. These parents have never learned for the sake of learning, so neither have their children. In this way the value of education has become attenuated and relativized by the marketplace. So it follows that young people who read little of anything do not read their Bibles. One researcher found that "in the liveliest evangelical churches, people strongly feel they should read their Bible daily, but only around fifteen percent do so." Adults, we should also point out, are affected by many of the same pressures as the youth. If they watch television, listen to pop radio, and go to popular movies, they will imbibe these values that are targeted at teens. The result is that many younger adults in their twenties and thirties are, like their younger counterparts, to some extent dulled in their ability to read and understand the Bible.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Bible says, "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature" (1 Corinthians 14:20). For this to occur, accidental and convenience learners must become disciplined, intentional learners.

## LEARNING IN A VARIETY OF WAYS

Since some people have legitimate difficulties with reading, here's a list of some other methods of learning, methods that learners who do thrive on reading will enjoy also. First, I strongly commend listening to recorded books. It's so easy to listen while getting ready for the day, commuting, driving around town, traveling long-distance, exercising, or working around the house. Much the same is true for audio and video recordings via the Internet as well as Bible teaching programs on Christian radio. Just make sure you're listening to a reputable ministry, not just to someone whose speaking style you enjoy. Don't forget the use of study guides. These are available from your Christian book sources and can direct you into an investigation of any book of the Bible, many doctrinal and practical topics, or help you go deeper into a book by a Christian author.<sup>[7]</sup>

One of my favorite ways of learning is to plan for meaningful dialogue with, and ask prepared questions of, spiritually mature Christians. Twice in recent weeks I had the privilege of an all-day car ride with some godly and experienced men whom I admired. In anticipation of each trip I prepared a list of questions to discuss. On both excursions I learned some valuable lessons and felt confident that I was "making the best use of the time" (Ephesians 5:16). With me always are several lists of questions to which I am frequently adding. This includes lists of questions for use when meeting new people, as well as when talking with fellow church members, children, youth, the elderly, students, and more. These questions have served me well in both anticipated and serendipitous conversations, and minimized the number of times when afterward I feel like I squandered an opportunity.<sup>[8]</sup>

While this is a book on *personal* spiritual disciplines, I can't neglect to mention the multiple opportunities for learning likely available to you by means of *interpersonal* spiritual disciplines in your local church, especially through classes and small groups. If this chapter stimulates you to further



discipline yourself in intentional learning, be sure to speak with your pastor about the role your church could play in helping you learn “for the purpose of godliness.”

Having said all that, I still want to return to the emphasis on learning by reading. I’ve always found it true that growing Christians are reading Christians. For some it’s a habit they find hard to develop. Others love to read, but because of the demands of their jobs or because they have small children in perpetual motion, they can’t seem to find the time for it. But let me encourage you to make time to read, even if it’s no more than *one page per day*.<sup>[9]</sup> Jean Fleming, author of *Finding Focus in a Whirlwind World* and mother of three adult children and several grandchildren, told me she has observed that women who don’t make at least some space in their lives for devotional disciplines—including reading—when they have young children, rarely develop them once they do have more time.<sup>[10]</sup> I can think of four women I have pastored who had at least four small children each and who were readers. One of them determined to read at least one page per day, and though it took several weeks, finished a major book on Christlike living with much profit to her pursuit of godliness. Another read a two-volume, nine-hundred-page Christian biography in a matter of months. A third read a steady stream of worthy books every year and even wrote a manual for our vacation Bible school workers on sharing the gospel with children in a God-centered way. When you consider that each woman made the time-consuming commitment to homeschool her children, you realize that with the necessary discipline almost anyone can make spiritual progress through reading.

Yet increasingly, with the lure of ubiquitous entertainment and video, fewer people are book readers, regardless of the format. I have a theory why this is the case for many people. For them, “reading” always conjures up memories of being forced to read poorly written textbooks about subjects that did not interest them. In other words, for them the definition of “reading” involves forcing yourself to pore over dull or difficult material that has no real appeal to you. When that’s what “reading” means, it’s no wonder many have no appetite for it. How would you like to have to read your seventh-grade science textbook again? For many, such is the image that always comes to mind when people speak of reading, and they believe some people enjoy that sort of thing and others—like themselves—do not. This means, of course, that they’ve never enjoyed the pleasure of what readers call a “page-turner.” They’ve never read a book that’s (1) well written and (2) about a subject that fascinates them. The starting place with these folks is to help them find that page-turner about a subject they love to discuss, including sports, hobbies, and other special interests. As they begin to discover the pleasure of reading, help them get as soon as possible to well-written books more closely connected with the Word of God and the Christian life. Another effective approach is to adapt something I’ve seen at one church that has interested hundreds in reading Christian books. They gather in small groups to read through books aloud together, stopping after each paragraph to discuss it. You have too much to lose by not reading, and too much to gain by disciplined reading.

Discipline yourself to learn by reading, and choose your books well. You will be able to read relatively few books in your lifetime, so read the best books. Suppose you were to read ten books every year between now and when you died. If you lived to be eighty, how many books would you read? Even if you read a few more or a few less than that, it still doesn’t amount to very many, especially when you consider that hundreds of books are published in America every day. In other words, many times more books are published every single day in the United States than you’re likely to read before you die. So don’t waste your time on books you’ll regret reading when you look back upon them from the perspective of eternity. I believe in recreational reading. Not every volume must be didactic or even theological. Some books are just for relaxation and refreshment. But even these should be edifying and help you in some sense to love God with your mind.

## MORE APPLICATION

***Will you discipline yourself to become an intentional learner?*** I read a short account of the famous Greek mathematician Euclid, author of a formidable thirteen-volume text for the study of geometry. “But Ptolemy I, King of Egypt, wished to learn the subject without laboring through so many books. As a



king, he was accustomed to having his way made easy by servants, so he asked if there was a shortcut to mastering geometry. Euclid's reply to the throne was terse: "There is no royal road to learning."<sup>[11]</sup>

The same is true with godliness. It requires discipline, the discipline of an intentional learner. Are you willing to pray for the grace and to make the effort necessary to break the habits of an accidental and convenience learner?

**Where will you start?** How will you begin to "apply your heart to instruction" and to store up knowledge? What habit will you stop and what habit will you begin? Is there a place in your life for a method of learning you have previously overlooked? What about your reading? Is there something you should *stop* reading because it doesn't build up your life or because it doesn't deserve a place on your life's reading list? Do you need to make the "one page per day" commitment so that you don't lose the Discipline of learning?

**When will you start?** When does your plan begin? Let's apply the principle of Proverbs 13:4 here: "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied." This says that all people crave something, but only the souls of the diligent are satisfied because they discipline themselves to do something while sluggards do not. There is a sense in which everybody "craves" to learn something and every Christian wants to be more like Jesus. But only those who diligently discipline themselves to learn will satisfy those desires.

Above all, remember that learning has a goal. The goal is Christlikeness. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-29, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and *learn from me*" (emphasis added). There is a false or superficial knowledge that "puffs up" (1 Corinthians 8:1), but godly learning leads to godly living. John Milton, the Englishman who penned the classic poem *Paradise Lost*, wrote, "The end of learning is to know God, and out of that knowledge to love Him and to imitate Him."<sup>[12]</sup> May God give us an unquenchable desire for the knowledge that leads us to love Him more and that makes us more like Jesus Christ.



CHAPTER 13

# PERSEVERANCE IN THE DISCIPLINES . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

*We must discipline our lives, but we must do so all the year round, and not merely at stated periods. I must discipline myself at all times.*

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

As usual, the workweek begins early on Monday. Very little flex time is built into the schedule of showering, dressing, eating, getting the kids ready, and heading out the door. From then on, you sprint through most of the day. You take the kids to school, run errands, and work around the house until the very minute you have to pick up the kids. Or else you battle the traffic to work where you make it just at starting time and plug away relentlessly until deep in the day, when you merge wearily into the traffic again.

Once home, often after a hasty but necessary stop or two on the way, you find it's more and more common to shove a meal in the microwave while you hurriedly change clothes for your evening responsibilities. One or two nights a week it's a school-related function with the kids. Another evening might find the entire family at a midweek event at church. Still another night holds a committee responsibility for someone. Next, throw in an occasional evening of working late or doing work at home, work-related travel, or work around the house. Don't forget the nights of helping with homework, getting involved in the community, taking classes, shopping, and socializing.

Complicating all this may come the pressures of single-parenting, family conflict, illness, job stress, a second job, financial tension, and so on.

Sound familiar? Is your life a testimony to the surveys that tell us—despite all our labor-saving devices and technological advancements—that our enjoyment of leisure has decreased dramatically in the last generation?

Then you read this book, which encourages you to practice all these Spiritual Disciplines. And it makes you feel like an exhausted, staggering juggler on a high wire, trying to keep a dozen heirloom crystal goblets in the air with someone else wanting to throw you a half dozen more.

For starters, it should relieve some anxiety to realize that most of the Disciplines advocated in this book can be practiced in the same devotional episode. For example, while you are alone with God (silence and solitude), you can enjoy one or more forms of Bible intake, as well as prayer and worship. On this same occasion you might write in a journal and read in a Christian book. And all this might occur during a time of fasting and represent a good stewardship of time. The only categories of personal Spiritual Disciplines expounded in this book *not* being practiced in this single event are evangelism and serving.

I've come to the conclusion that, with rare exceptions, the godly person is a busy person. The godly person is devoted to God and to people, and that leads to a full life. Though never frantic in pace, Jesus was a busy man. Read Mark's gospel, and notice how often the word *immediately* describes the transition from one event in Jesus' life to the next. We read of Him sometimes ministering all day and even after dark, then getting up before dawn to pray and travel to the next ministry venue. The Gospels tell of occasional nights when He did not sleep at all. They tell us He got tired, so tired that He could sleep in the stern of a storm-tossed ship. Crowds of people pressed upon Him almost daily. Everyone wanted time with Jesus and clamored for His attention. None of us knows job-related stress like the kind He continually experienced. If Jesus' life, as well as that of Paul, were measured against the "balanced life"



envisioned by many Christians today, the Savior and the apostle would be considered workaholics who sinfully neglected their bodies. Scripture confirms what observation perceives: Laziness never leads to godliness.

All this is to say that God makes Christlike people out of busy people, and He does so through the biblical Spiritual Disciplines. These Disciplines are not intended only for Christians with lots of spare time on their hands (where are they?). Rather they are *the* God-given means by which busy believers become like Christ. God offers His life-changing grace to taxi-driving, errand-running moms; to hardworking, overcommitted dads; to homework-heavy, extracurricular-busy students; to schedule-packed singles; to responsibility-overloaded single parents—in short, to every believer—*through* the Spiritual Disciplines.

But how can we maintain the pace? For one thing, conflicting priorities often clarify while we practice the Spiritual Disciplines. The older you grow, the more you tend to accumulate responsibilities like barnacles. The addition and growth of children requires an increase in attention to their lives in church, school, sports, lessons, and transportation. Job advancement brings with it more commitments as well as opportunities. The accumulation of goods and property over the years tends to escalate the time required for their maintenance. Consequently, your life will periodically call for an evaluation of priorities. Perhaps through the Discipline of Bible intake, or prayer, or worship, or silence, or solitude, or journaling, the Holy Spirit might identify which activities are “barnacles” to cut away. Instead of adding additional weight, the Spiritual Disciplines are actually one of the ways God lightens your load and gives you smoother sailing.

Even with the consistent evaluation of priorities, the godly person will remain a busy person. And the busy person is also the one most severely tempted to lapse in the practice of the Disciplines that lead to godliness. Without practicing the Spiritual Disciplines we will not be godly; but neither will we be godly without *perseverance* in practicing the Disciplines. Even the “tortoise” of a slow, plodding perseverance in the Spiritual Disciplines makes progress better than the “hare” of a sometimes spectacular, but generally inconsistent practice.

How can we persevere more faithfully in the Disciplines of godliness? When the emotions that usually accompany the beginning of a Spiritual Discipline have ebbed, how can we stay faithful? There are three matters referenced briefly until now that are indispensable in helping you persevere in the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines: the role of the Holy Spirit, the role of fellowship, and the role of struggle in Christian living.

## THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We must perpetually remind ourselves that despite the most fervent diligence to our responsibility to discipline ourselves “for the purpose of godliness,” we cannot make ourselves more like Jesus. The Holy Spirit does that, working through the Disciplines to bring us closer to Jesus and making us more like Him. Any emphasis on the Spiritual Disciplines runs the risk of overlooking this important fact. As D. A. Carson warns, “What is universally presupposed by the expression ‘spiritual discipline’ is that such disciplines are intended to increase our spirituality. From a Christian perspective, however, it is simply not possible to increase one’s spirituality without possessing the Holy Spirit and submitting to his transforming instruction and power.”<sup>[1]</sup>

In *The Discipline of Grace*, Jerry Bridges concurs:

A major temptation in the self-discipline approach to holiness, however, is to rely on a regiment of spiritual disciplines instead of on the Holy Spirit. I believe in spiritual disciplines. I seek to practice them. . . . But those disciplines are not the source of our spiritual strength. The Lord Jesus Christ is, and it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to apply His strength to our lives.<sup>[2]</sup>

Wherever the Holy Spirit dwells, His holy presence creates a hunger for holiness. His primary task is to magnify Christ (see John 16:14-15), and it is He who gives the believer a desire to be like Christ. In our natural condition we have no such passion. But in the Christian, the Spirit of God begins to carry out the will of God to make the child of God like the Son of God (see Romans 8:29). And He who began



this good work in the life of the believer “will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

So it is the role of the Holy Spirit to produce within us the desire and the power for the Disciplines that lead to godliness. That He develops this in every believer is evident from 2 Timothy 1:7: “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (NASB). Therefore, whether or not your natural temperament or personality inclines toward orderly and disciplined habits, the supernatural presence of the Holy Spirit equips you with enough of a supernatural “spirit of . . . discipline” for you to obey the command to “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.”

That’s why on the days when you are tempted to quit Christianity altogether, or to give up on the people of God, or to abandon the Spiritual Disciplines as a waste of time, you just can’t allow yourself to do it. Ultimately, that’s not simply the result of your spiritual grit or determination; that’s the work of the Holy Spirit causing you to persevere. In those times when laziness overtakes you and you feel no enthusiasm for any Spiritual Discipline, or when you consistently fail to practice a once-habitual Discipline, it is the Holy Spirit who prompts you to pick it up in spite of your feelings. Left to yourself you would have forsaken these means of God’s sustaining grace long ago, but the Holy Spirit preserves you in faithfulness by giving you the grace to persevere in them.

Self-control, according to Galatians 5:23, is a direct product, or “fruit,” of the Spirit’s control in the believer’s life. And when the Christian expresses this Spirit-produced self-control by practicing the Spiritual Disciplines, the result is progress in godliness.

To illustrate the role of the Holy Spirit in helping the child of God to persevere in the Disciplines of godliness, one contemporary writer tells of his struggle and success with the Discipline of prayer.

Recently I read again of a woman who simply decided one day to make such a commitment to pray, and my conscience was pricked. But I knew myself well enough to know that something other than resolve was being called for. I began to pray about praying. I expressed to God my frustrated longings, my jaded sense of caution about trying again, my sense of failure over working at being more disciplined and regular. I discovered something surprising happening from such simple praying: I was drawn into the presence of One who had, far more than I did, the power to keep me close. I found my focus subtly shifting away from my efforts to God’s, from rigor to grace, from rigidity to relationship. I soon realized that this was happening regularly. I was praying much more. I became less worried about the mechanics and methods, and in turn I was more motivated. And God so cares for us, I realized anew, that He Himself helps us pray. When we “do not know what we ought to pray for . . . the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Rom. 8:26).[\[3\]](#)

The Bible doesn’t explain the mechanics of the mystery of the Spirit’s ministry to us. How prayer (or the practice of any other Spiritual Discipline) is prompted and produced by Him on the one hand, and yet on the other hand is our responsibility, is unfathomable. But these two things are clear: (1) the Holy Spirit will be ever faithful to help each of God’s elect to persevere to the end in those things that will make us like Christ, and (2) we must not harden our hearts, but instead respond to His promptings if we would be godly.

## THE ROLE OF FELLOWSHIP

No one should read of these Disciplines and imagine that by practicing them in isolation from other believers he or she can be as Christlike—perhaps even more so—than Christians who are active members of a local body of Christ. Thinking of the Spiritual Disciplines as a part of the Christian life unrelated to the fellowship of believers is unbiblical thinking.

Anyone who measures progress in Christlikeness only in terms of growth in his or her fellowship with God takes an incomplete measurement. Spiritual maturity also includes growth in fellowship with the children of God. The apostle John juxtaposed these two in 1 John 1:3: “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” New Testament fellowship is with both the triune



God and with His people. Just as the human maturity of Jesus included growth in favor with both God and man (see Luke 2:52), so will the spiritual maturity of those who seek to be like Jesus.

One obvious reason we can't take the Spiritual Disciplines and become spiritual recluses is that many biblical Disciplines—public worship, united prayer, participation in the Lord's Supper, serving other disciples, and more—cannot be practiced without other Christians. Furthermore, one of God's purposes of fellowship is to complement the personal Spiritual Disciplines and to stimulate our growth in godliness through them. For example, as studying the Word alone is one God-given Discipline for growing in grace, so is studying the Word with other believers. The Spiritual Disciplines definitely have some nonpublic applications, but they were never meant to be practiced apart from fellowship[4] in the New Covenant community.

One reason for our susceptibility to mentally disconnect our practice of the Disciplines from life in the local church is the common Christian failure to distinguish between socializing and fellowship. Although socializing is both a part of and the context of fellowship, it is possible to socialize without having fellowship. Socializing involves the sharing of human and earthly life in ways common to both believers and unbelievers. Christian fellowship—New Testament *koinonia*[5]—involves talking about God, the things of God, and life from a uniquely Christian perspective. Don't misunderstand: Socializing is a gift of God, a valuable asset to the church, and necessary for a healthy spiritual life. But it's my observation that we engage in true fellowship far less than we believe we do—even at church. Far too often socializing becomes a *substitute* for fellowship. When this happens, our practice of the Spiritual Disciplines suffers and our growth in grace is stunted.

It looks like this: Two or more Christians can sit together for hours, talking only of the news, weather, sports, work, and family (that is, socializing) while completely neglecting any discussion of expressly spiritual matters. I'm not saying that every conversation between Christians must include references to Bible verses, recent answers to prayer, or insights from today's devotional time. But I've observed that many otherwise committed Christians are so independent in their practice of the Spiritual Disciplines that they almost never talk about such things with other believers. And without personal interaction about the mutual interests, problems, and aspirations of discipleship, our spiritual lives are impoverished. Then at the end of the conversation, having merely socialized, we say we've had good fellowship. Only those indwelt by the Spirit of God can have the rich banquet of *koinonia*, but too often we settle for little more than the fast-food kind of socializing that even the world can experience.

Just as we should practice the Discipline of modeling Christ and talking of Him with *unbelievers*, so we should engage in a similar Discipline with *believers*. Unlike the Discipline of evangelism, where sharing the life of Christ is unidirectional, fellowship involves a bidirectional communication of spiritual life. J. I. Packer defines fellowship as “a seeking to share in what God has made known of Himself to others, as a means to finding strength, refreshment, and instruction for one's own soul.”[6] We can enjoy these fruits of fellowship in any context where Christians gather—worshiping, serving, eating, recreating, shopping, commuting, praying, and so on. As we live like Christ when together, we encourage each other in Christian living. As we talk like Christ and about spiritual matters, we also stimulate each other toward godliness.

This mutual edification is described in Ephesians 4:16, which speaks of “the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” As we grow in grace we can properly contribute to “each part . . . working properly.” As the body of believers “builds itself up in love,” each individual Christian is built up in godliness as well. Put directly, as each believer disciplines himself “for the purpose of godliness,” his or her individual spiritual growth helps to build up the local body of believers—but only insofar as that believer is in fellowship with them. As that body of Christians is built up collectively, the increased strength of this fellowship also contributes to the spiritual growth of the individual and encourages his or her pursuit of godliness through the Spiritual Disciplines. Practicing the personal Spiritual Disciplines biblically will strengthen the fellowship of believers. Biblical fellowship will strengthen the practice of the personal Spiritual Disciplines.



But without true fellowship, even the Christian who is ardently practicing the personal Spiritual Disciplines will not develop in a biblically proportioned way. The writer of Hebrews 3:13 warned, “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Fellowship is required to “exhort one another.” When we withdraw from the spiritual protection God provides for us within fellowship, we are more easily deceived by sin. Some of the most sin-deceived people rigidly practice many of the personal Disciplines. I’ve known people who studied the Bible and prayed so much on their own that they believed they didn’t need any of the “unspiritual” people in the church. Without the tempering influence of believers with differing gifts, insights, and experiences, these isolationists confidently asserted twisted views of Scripture, delivered “words from God” for everybody, and attempted to justify even gross sin because of their supposed spirituality. Obviously, these are extreme cases, but they illustrate how even those most rigorously exercised in the personal Spiritual Disciplines need the grace God intends for them to receive only through local church life.

“Associate with sanctified persons” was the recommendation of the Puritan Thomas Watson. “They may, by their counsel, prayers, and holy example, be a means to make you holy.”<sup>[7]</sup>

## THE ROLE OF STRUGGLE

Although “trust” and “rest” are core values of the Christian life, so are “discipline” and “struggle.” Many forces combat the spiritual progress of those still on this side of heaven. Now, the way of Christ is not always an inner struggle or every moment a battle, but neither is it without lifelong opposition. Therefore, don’t be misled into thinking that if you drink of the grace God offers through the Spiritual Disciplines then living the Christian life will be easy.

Strange as it may sound, I want to alert you to the reality of struggle in the Christian life in order to encourage you, especially when it’s difficult for you to practice the Spiritual Disciplines. While writing the previous paragraph I received a call from a young woman who has been a Christian for about three years. She expressed frustration over a recent spiritual failure and wondered if others at church who appeared so spiritually mature fought any of the battles that had bloodied her. A fresh and timely reminder that *all* Christians struggle in most of the same ways she does brought both comfort and hope. May this chapter do the same for you.

So avoid those who teach that if you follow certain steps or have a particular experience, you can be freed from all struggle against the sins that hinder your holiness. Such promises are a spiritual carrot-on-a-stick, always leading you on but never giving fulfillment.

Instead, we can see in the theme verse for this book that practicing the Spiritual Disciplines and progressing in godliness will be accompanied by struggle. Referring to the godliness mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:7-8, the apostle Paul wrote in verse 10, “For to this end we toil and strive.” The words *toil* and *strive* tell us that becoming like Christ involves something different than “let go and let God,” as some claim. The Greek word translated *toil* means “to work until one is weary.” We get our English word *agonize* from the term rendered here as *strive*. It literally means “to struggle.” Does this sound like a theology of works instead of grace? Am I saying that though we begin the Christian life by the Spirit we must become holy by works of the flesh (see Galatians 3:3)? Nonsense! This is the same equilibrium found throughout the New Testament’s teaching on spiritual growth. Advance in the Christian life comes not by the work of the Holy Spirit alone, nor by our work alone, but by our responding to the grace the Holy Spirit initiates and sustains. As mentioned in chapter 1, our experience in Christlike development will happen as it did with Paul, who said, “I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29). It was Paul who toiled, but his “struggling” was according to the power of the Holy Spirit working (literally, “agonizing”) within him. The first part of this chapter dealt with the role of the Holy Spirit keeping us faithful in the Disciplines and producing Christ’s character in us through them. But we must keep this truth in tension with the reality of struggle that a forgiven, yet sin-tainted man or woman will experience in becoming like Jesus Christ.

This is trenchant New Testament teaching. It warns us of the world, the flesh, and the Devil and how they constantly war against us. The Bible says that because of this triumvirate of opposition we will



experience a struggle to overcome sin as long as we live in this body.

While we live in it, the *world* will put its unending pressure on us. Jesus reminded us that the world hated Him, and it will hate us if we discipline ourselves to follow Him (see John 15:18-19). John further exhorted us, “Do not love the world” (1 John 2:15). Then he proceeded to warn about the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life as part of the world. And there is no experience that can provide a lasting escape from all these worldly temptations except the experience of leaving the world.

One of the more obvious New Testament passages on the reality of spiritual struggle relates to our war against the *flesh*, that indwelling tendency we feel toward sin. The stark reality of Galatians 5:17 is that “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” Sometimes it’s no problem at all to obey God. There are moments when your greatest joy is to get into the Word of God. Occasionally you have experiences in prayer that you wish would never end. Still, many times it’s a battle to engage in any Spiritual Discipline. The Spirit will prompt you toward Christlikeness and to practice the Disciplines, and your flesh will rise in defiance. That’s because “these are opposed to each other.” But even though disciplining yourself is often difficult and involves struggle, self-discipline is not self-punishment. It is instead an attempt to do what, prompted by the Spirit, you actually want to do. The struggle comes when “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit . . . to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” But rather than thinking of entering this battle as a form of self-punishment, it is more scriptural to see the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines as one way of “[sowing] to the Spirit” as Galatians 6:8 encourages. But the biblical fact that the flesh does hurl its desire against the Spirit affirms the reality that while in this body no spiritual experience will permanently free you from the tension of flesh versus Spirit.

In addition to the world and the flesh, you also have a personal Enemy committed to your failure in the Disciplines—the *Devil*. The apostle Peter reminded us, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). If we can have an experience whereby we can permanently avoid all spiritual warfare, why didn’t Peter tell us about it rather than exhorting us to be alert? Why did Paul command us in Ephesians 6 to put on the armor of God? It’s because we are in a battle, a conflict, a struggle. And there is no vacation from the struggle.

Where, then, is the victory? The victory over the world, the flesh, and the Devil was long ago decisively and eternally won by Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. That victory is mediated to us by the Holy Spirit. For His part, He preserves us in the grace of God. But as previously noted, part of this preservation includes granting us the grace to be faithful. For our part, we take up the struggle of our cross and follow Christ, pursuing Christlikeness by means of the Spiritual Disciplines. The victory that we actually experience in daily life over the forces opposing our progress in the Disciplines comes *through the practice of the Disciplines*. In other words, through *perseverance* in the Spiritual Disciplines we will most consistently experience victory over the *enemies* of the practice of the Disciplines. If we surrender to these enemies of our souls and forsake the Disciplines, victory will never come. But if we will utilize these spiritual weapons, God will give the grace and strength to conquer even more. One day, all struggle will end, all the promises will be fulfilled, and the Spiritual Disciplines will no longer be necessary, for at last “we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Therefore let us face this struggle with Spirit-ignited resolve, for it will be for us as it was for the Puritans whose motto was “*Vincit qui patitur*—he who suffers conquers.”<sup>[8]</sup>

“So we need to remember,” advises J. I. Packer, “that any idea of getting beyond conflict, outward or inward, in our pursuit of holiness in this world is an escapist dream that can only have disillusioning and demoralizing effects on us as waking experience daily disproves it. What we must realize, rather, is that any real holiness in us will be under hostile fire all the time, just as our Lord’s was.”<sup>[9]</sup>

The Holy Spirit, true fellowship, and the recognition of the ongoing struggle in the Christian life will help you persevere in the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. Apart from such perseverance, the Disciplines are incomplete and ineffective. Notice in 2 Peter 1:6 how perseverance connects discipline,



or self-control, with godliness: “in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness” (NASB). Without perseverance between the two, the relationship between the self-controlled practice of the Spiritual Disciplines and godliness is like a battery full of power poorly connected to a lightbulb. The light flickers inconsistently and without full benefit. But with a persevering connection between the two, the light shines brightly. In the same way, the light of the life of Christ will shine more steadily through you the more you persevere in the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines.

## MORE APPLICATION

***Would you be godly? Then practice the Spiritual Disciplines in light of eternity.*** I read of a man who would pray: “Oh, God, stamp eternity on my eyeballs!” Imagine how differently we would spend our time and make choices in life if we saw everything from the perspective of eternity. So much that seems critical would suddenly become trivial. And many things relegated to the “when I have more time” column of our priority list would take on a dramatic new importance. The practice of the Spiritual Disciplines, when seen through eyes stamped with eternity, becomes a priceless priority because of its intimate connection with godliness.

Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines with eternity in view has always been God’s plan. The words of 1 Timothy 4:7 upon which this book has been based, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness,” are followed in verse 8 by these: “For bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (NASB). To see the Spiritual Disciplines only from the pragmatic and temporal perspective is shortsighted. We need larger thoughts about the Disciplines than to ask only what they can do for us today or even in this life. Discipline-cultivated godliness “holds promise” worth pursuing in “the present life” to be sure. But the value of godliness, and the practice of its attendant Spiritual Disciplines, is best seen in the blazing light of eternity.

Whether you realize it or not, everything you do is for eternity. Nothing has an impact in this life only. Scripture makes this evident by teaching that we must finally give an account before God of how we spend our lives (see Romans 14:12) and will suffer reward or loss based upon each of our works in this life (see 1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Since the weight of all eternity, in the words of the Puritan Thomas Brooks, hangs upon the thin wire of time, let us use our time in ways that are profitable not only in this life, but that will best prepare us for eternity as well. Nothing provides a better preparation for living on this earth and the new one to come like the faithful practice of the Spiritual Disciplines.

***Would you be godly? There’s no other way but through the Spiritual Disciplines.*** The scriptural path to godliness has been made plain. Would you be godly? Then, said the Lord in 1 Timothy 4:7, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (NASB). That is the way and there is no other.

There are no shortcuts to godliness. But the flesh broods for an easier way than through the Spiritual Disciplines. It protests, “Why can’t the Christian life be more extemporaneous and unstudied? All this talk of disciplining myself sounds legalistic and regimented and harder than I thought being like Christ should be. I just want to be *spontaneous!*”

John Guest responds well to this temptation:

“Discipline” has become a dirty word in our culture. . . . I know I am speaking heresy in many circles, but spontaneity is greatly overvalued. The “spontaneous” person who shrugs off the need for discipline is like the farmer who went out to gather the eggs. As he walked across the farmyard toward the hen house, he noticed the pump was leaking. So he stopped to fix it. It needed a new washer, so he set off to the barn to get one. But on the way he saw that the hayloft needed straightening, so he went to fetch the pitchfork. Hanging next to the pitchfork was a broom with a broken handle. “I must make a note to myself to buy a broom handle the next time I get to town,” he thought. . . .

By now it is clear that the farmer is not going to get his eggs gathered, nor is he likely to accomplish anything else he sets out to do. He is utterly, gloriously spontaneous, but he is hardly free. He is, if anything, a prisoner to his unbridled spontaneity.



The fact of the matter is that discipline is the only way to freedom; it is the necessary context for spontaneity.<sup>[10]</sup>

Does the farmer's day remind you of your spiritual life—spontaneous but sporadic? Do you flitter from one thing to another with apparently little effect or growth in grace? Certainly we want spontaneity, but spontaneity without discipline is superficial. I have several friends who can improvise beautiful melodies on a keyboard or a guitar. But the reason they can play so “spontaneously” is because they spent years devoted to the disciplines of playing musical scales and other fundamental exercises. Jesus could be so spiritually “spontaneous” because He had been the most spiritually disciplined man who ever lived. Do nothing and you will live spontaneously. But if you desire *effective* spontaneity in the Christian life, you must cultivate it with a spiritually disciplined faith.

For many—perhaps most—believers the failure to practice the Spiritual Disciplines is not so much due to the desire for spontaneity as it is a struggle with finding time. But if you desire to be godly, you must face the fact that you will always be busy. To do what God wants most, that is, to love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself (see Mark 12:29-31), can't be done in your spare time. Loving God and others in word and in deed will result in a busy life. This is not to say that God wants us to live hectic lives, but rather to affirm that godly people are never lazy people.

So if you're telling yourself you will practice the Spiritual Disciplines when you have more time, you never will. In a card to my wife and me, Jean Fleming wrote, “I find myself thinking, ‘When life settles down, I'll . . .’ But I should have learned by now that life *never* settles down for long. Whatever I want to accomplish, I must do with life unsettled.” That's a marvelous insight to the mundane. Because life never really settles down, and since we will always feel as though we have more to do than time to do it, if we are ever going to make progress in godliness through the Spiritual Disciplines we must do so when life is like it is now.

During my junior high and high school years, anyone with an interest in basketball wanted to be like Pete Maravich. “Pistol Pete,” as he was known, scored more points than anyone in college history and was the most electrifying basketball player of his time. Before his day, dribbling between the legs and making behind-the-back passes were considered just for show. Maravich made them commonplace. After his pro career he was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, where he was called “perhaps the greatest creative offensive talent in history.”<sup>[11]</sup> He became a Christian in his midthirties, and suddenly died in January 1988 of a heart attack at only age forty.

A year before he died, Maravich said in an interview,

The key to my ability was repetition. I practiced and practiced and practiced again. I gave the sport my total commitment. I tried everything I could in every way I could to perfect my skills. It was like an obsession. It paid off for me as a player. I'm not so sure in life. If I had given that same devotion then to my faith, which is what I do now, I'd have been a better person in the long run.<sup>[12]</sup>

By disciplining himself to practice shooting, passing, and dribbling, Pete Maravich became one of the greatest basketball players ever. Despite all the money and fame brought to him by the sport, he ultimately regretted giving such productive discipline to anything besides his faith in Christ. Are you willing to discipline yourself in the way Maravich wished he had done? Are you willing to “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” as much as he was willing to discipline himself for the purpose of basketball? Does godliness mean as much to you as basketball once meant to Pete Maravich?

Discipline earned Maravich a place in the Hall of Fame, but no amount of discipline will earn anyone a place in heaven. Only Jesus lived a life worthy of that. Because He was willing to receive on the cross what our lives deserve—God's judgment for sin—we can receive the heaven that His life deserved. All the joy, all the forgiveness, all the freedom, all the light, all the love, all of *God* in heaven is promised to those who abandon hope of disciplining themselves into heaven and cling to Christ by faith.

One of the surest signs that someone does cling to Christ is his or her ever-deepening desire to know Him better and to become as much like Him as possible. This is what godliness is, and genuine



## Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life

disciples of Jesus passionately pursue it. And just as the only way to God is through Christ, so the only way to godliness is through the Christ-centered practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. Will you “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness”? Where and when will you begin?